**Crossing Spaces, Creating a Place: Repositioning Gender and Space Boundaries in Women's Experience of Endurance Sports**

This study integrates the sociology of sport, gender, and space to explore the implications of increasing female participation in endurance sports, which have traditionally been male dominated. Through in-depth interviews with Israeli women competing in marathons, ultramarathons, and triathlons, I examine their experiences in a challenging space that is both androcentric and serves as an arena for the shaping and articulation of masculinity. The research investigates how their participation in this space affects their lives. The findings reveal that the unique characteristics of endurance sports allow for a temporary suspension of social arrangements to which women are typically subject. This suspension leads to a process of investigation and re-positioning through transitions in space. These transitions, both material and symbolic, challenge normative perceptions about gender and space and enable new identity options for female athletes. Furthermore, the women manage to shape a new narrative of femininity, accumulate capital that can be leveraged in various aspects of life, and reshape the space of endurance sports for women in general. A phenomenological examination of the interrelationships between embodied transitions in space and temporal suspensions contributes to the literature on issues of time, gender, and space, as well as to the body of knowledge on sports, space, and identities.

**Key words**: Space, Gender, Embodiment, Material and Symbolic Transitions, Endurance Sports

*Honestly? It was never in my plans or dreams. At most, I would have a gym membership and take a spinning class. But...running? Swimming? The last time I ran was in school, and even then, I always made excuses that I was on my period [laughs]. I cycled a bit with friends here in the community, and then suddenly the women's triathlon thing came up, and there was publicity about it. They organized preparatory training sessions on Herzliya beach with professional trainers, and they kept encouraging us all the time that anyone could do it. So, I said, 'Okay, I don't need to chase after my kids anymore, let's give it a try.' I can handle cycling, although not on a road bike, but they said that in this event, even off-road biking is fine. I know how to swim, although in a pool and not in the sea, and I breaststroke instead of freestyle, but whatever [laughs], I didn't really understand the differences, and maybe it's better that way...and as for running? At most, I'll walk. The rest is history. I can't imagine myself without it anymore.* (Naomi, Ironwoman)

The increase in the number of women participating in endurance sports in Israel, which have traditionally been dominated by men and mostly take place in open spaces, raises questions regarding gender, space, and place. In this article I seek to understand how women experience their participation in an arena from which they were until recently excluded; what social, cultural and political relationships are possible for them in an arena that has made the image of "Iron Man" its symbol, and whether and how this can become a physical, social and symbolic place for women.

The sportive body has been investigated in various ways, including feminist research that has recognized its importance for decoding political, social, and cultural relationships, as well as the potential transformation embedded in it (Hargreaves, 2007; Woodward, 2008; Ben Dori & Kemp, 2020). Feminist research also acknowledges the significance of the phenomenological approach in studying women's lives (Young, 1990; De Bovar, 1949/2001). However, despite recognizing the centrality of the body and experience in understanding women's lives, research on women's embodied experiences in endurance sports, particularly the social spaces they occur in (Allan-Collinson, 2011; 2022), remains scarce.

The spatial turn of the 1990s shed light on the role of "space" in social relationships, emphasizing its relevance to sport research and highlighting the centrality of the human body in producing space (Van Ingen, 2003). Inspired by Foucault (2008), some studies adopted an approach that viewed space as a domain of surveillance and discipline, focusing on the socio-spatial order shaping material spaces (e.g., stadiums, fitness clubs, and changing rooms) as reflections of dominant ideologies (Herzog & Lev, 2019; Bale, 1993; Fusco, 2000; Maguire, 2002). Others, influenced by Henry Lefebvre (1991) and post-structuralist feminism, examined spatial transitions as transgressive crossings that reshape gender relationships and identities (Lahav-Raz & Resnick, 2014; Cronan & Scott, 2008). However, despite acknowledging the significance of the sports arena as a site for examining societal power relations, these studies paid scant attention to the phenomenology of the body and the dynamic interplay of time and space as a lens for analyzing these relationships.

This article seeks to bridge these gaps and highlight the intersection of gender and space in endurance sports. By conducting in-depth interviews with 15 women who are actively engaged in endurance sports, I shift the research focus towards exploring how these women navigate the transition to a physical and symbolic space where their presence is not self-evident. Central to the discussion is the dialectic between the "objective" dimension of space - as a physically and socially constructed place - and the subjective embodied experience of the sportswomen themselves.

I argue that women's transition into the male-dominated space of endurance sports is not solely about crossing physical boundaries. In fact, their inherent peripheral position within this domain, its meritocratic discourse, and the dynamic nature of their bodies and abilities, converge to create an interplay of time and space. Within this interplay, established social orders are temporarily suspended. This suspension provides research participants with an opportunity to redefine their position while engaging in an ongoing dialogue with cultural perceptions and socially constructed norms regarding sports, space, and gender.

**Endurance Sports in Israel**

Endurance sports have grown significantly in Israel in recent decades. Both men and women now actively participate in regular physical training and various events, including triathlons, marathons, ultramarathons, and Ironman competitions. The presence of women in this domain is no longer seen as peculiar.

A recurring theme is that of a woman waking one morning and deciding to take up "running, cycling, or swimming," or a combination of all three. Initially, they start with modest distances, often no more than five or ten kilometers. There are soon improvements in their times, technique, and overall fitness, accompanied by profound lifestyle changes. For a year, they complete dozens of workouts and several competitions until they are ready for major endurance events.

The absence of academic discourse on women’s involvement in endurance sports is striking. What drives their participation? What keeps them there? How do they navigate a domain historically dominated by men? How does their engagement in this sphere impact their lives?

To answer these questions, the following chapter will examine two bodies of research in sports studies: one centered on the intersection of sports and gender, and the other on sociological literature concerning sports and space. Through this examination, it becomes evident that, while feminist scholarship has extensively explored the gendered body, there remains an inadequate focus on endurance sports and women's embodied experiences as an ontological and epistemological category. In contrast, literature addressing sports and space has primarily concentrated on the socio-spatial order manifested in physical locations or on spatial crossings, primarily as border crossings. I seek to critically analyze these two bodies of knowledge, while also enriching the discourse by introducing the dimensions of time and the phenomenology of the body.

**Sport, Gender, and Body**

The high intensity demanded by the body, particularly in endurance sports, calls for a critical scrutiny of the representations, roles, messages, and underlying meanings associated with the embodiment of the physical self. In fact, the acknowledgment of the significance of bodily practices in sports as an ontological source, coupled with the recognition of the body as an epistemic source, has led to critical reflections on the intersection of body, gender, and sports from feminist sources (Markula, 2003; Young, 1990).

The construction of sports as a male-dominated arena, where femininity and athleticism are perceived as opposing elements, underline the feminist claim that sports are a political sphere reflecting hierarchical social orders (Hargreaves, 2007). Moreover, the intersections of gender with social categories such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and age have also been central to research on "doing gender" in sports as a mechanism of inequality (Schultz, 2011; Ben Dori & Kemp, 2020; Sykes, 2006).

With few exceptions, academic engagement with the women’s experiences in endurance sports and the struggles they face within gendered spaces remains limited. This absence obscures the way in which space shapes and determines the social positioning of women, resulting in a liberal depiction of sports in which gender is disregarded.

**Sport and Space**

The spatial turn in social sciences has shed light on the significance of 'space' as an analytical framework for examining the geographical aspects of social relations and their impact on inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and the process of 'Othering.' Critical studies have predominantly adopted a relational approach (Fuller & Low, 2017) in which space is not an isolated entity separate from social relations but a social construct shaped by the human body. Furthermore, space itself is influenced by these social categories. Space is inherently political, and the spatial politics that unfold within it play a vital role in the formation and design of identities within that space.

For Lefebvre (1991), Massey (2005), and Soja (2010), space is a product of ongoing human interactions involved in its construction, transformation, and perpetual production. Space is not merely a framework for specific research topics but rather a central actor with power and influence, mediating and shaping social life and impacting social, political, and historical changes. Hence, to understand spatial politics, and the identities and practices that generate and challenge them, one must emphasize human and political subjectivity, as well as the spatial construction modes it encompasses.

The transformation of space from an absolute to a sociological idea is mediated by the body, which serves as the medium between spatial activities and social structures. Spatial activities extend beyond the physical aspect of space and include daily routines that reflect the relational ties between bodies and the material space. Movement and physical activity are spatial practices that create a social space (De Certeau, 1984). Through routine embodied practices, the act of "making space, taking space" - the claim to belong to a place, experience it, utilize it in diverse ways, determine its nature, express oneself within it, and give it meaning - becomes a political process.

The spatial turn in the sociology of sport was influenced by Bale (1993), who drew upon Foucault's concept of the panopticon (Foucault, 2008) to unravel the role of the modern stadium as a space for exercising disciplinary and regulatory power. According to Bale, transformations in spatial organization within sporting activities are intertwined with the process of "civilizing society," wherein control and surveillance have become more sophisticated, gradually diminishing the explicit use of direct force. In a similar vein, Fusco (2006) explored how the architecture and geography of abjection in sports arenas serve as mechanisms for the surveillance and regulation of gender, desire, and body dimensions, while simultaneously reconstructing material and subjective subjectivities.

Drawing on feminist and post-structuralist geographical approaches, additional research has explored the social construction of space in sports as a shaping mechanism and a challenge to power dynamics related to gender, class, sexuality, and race. These studies have placed considerable attention on the "politics of the body," which manifests itself in social and physical spaces. For example, Johnston's (1998) research on women bodybuilders examines how hegemonic forces operate within gyms, transforming them into sites of discipline, shaping, and cultural regulation of identities. Heim LaFrombois (2019) investigates how the gendered nature of public space has impacted female cyclists' participation in Chicago. Yearwood (2018) explores the intersectionality of space and race in relation to black athletes on predominantly white campuses, revealing entrenched structural racism resulting in expectations of high physicality both within and beyond sports settings. Van Ingen (2004), meanwhile, analyzes emerging forms of resistance within a Toronto homosexual running club and their impact on urban gender, sexuality, and leisure.

**Research Objective**

These studies highlight the centrality of space and the body within space as arenas for the production, change, and reconfiguration of social relations and identities. In this article, I seek to add two underexplored dimensions to this discussion: firstly, by expanding the discussion on the relationship between space and gender in women's sports in Israel, and secondly, by focusing on the phenomenological perspective of female athletes themselves.

**METHOD**

The study draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours. To facilitate systematic content analysis while keeping the interviewees spontaneous, we structured the interviews around common questions relating to why, when and how they began doing endurance sports and what it meant to them, but left room for their own narratives regarding space, identity, difficulties, self-image, body image, work, family ties, relationships, and friendship. The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the author. Based on grounded theory principles (Denzin and Lincoln 1998), our content analysis led to the identification of the central themes and guided our theoretical conceptualization around notions of “transitions,” "material transitions" and "symbolic transitions," “embodied experiences" and “doing and undoing gender.”

Fifteen women aged 40-60 (Table 1), mostly middle-class secular Israeli-Jewish women, participated in the study. To allow for variability, I interviewed women active in different endurance sports, belonging to a variety of training frameworks, and living in different areas across Israel. In addition, I used a filter criterion, which I named the "5x5 rule," defining the participants as women who had been practicing endurance sports for at least five years and trained at least five times a week. The rationale for this is that these requirements characterize endurance sports rather than performance quality.

The author personally knew two of the interviewees. The other participants were identified through a "snowball" method. The research topic was presented to them in advance, by telephone, email, or Facebook messages. The women responded immediately and positively to the interview request and expressed great interest in the topic, often trying to shift their schedules to be available. The participants chose the location of the interview. At the meeting, the author introduced herself and the research, and asked for permission to record the interview and for the participants to choose a pseudonym. The fact that the author also participates in endurance sports made it easier to establish a commonality between researcher and interviewees, creating a relaxed atmosphere. In fact, after the interview, several of the research participants contacted the interviewer and asked to expand or clarify certain points that arose in the conversation. On occasion, the author also contacted some of the participants to elicit more information; all the women responded via e-mail. Most expressed a desire to read the study once completed.

[Table 1 about here]

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A little woman made, the earth, the big ball to her cradle" (Dalia Rabikowitz, 1995)

The most significant finding shows that, while endurance sports present women with challenges that reflect a predetermined spatial and social structure, they also offer a unique opportunity to temporarily suspend and disrupt these norms. This suspension paves the way for exploration and a renewed repositioning of oneself through the embodied practices intrinsic to this domain. Endurance sports practices facilitate embodied transitions, encompassing shifts from anxiety to confidence, loneliness to belonging, feminine to masculine identities, and material to symbolic realms. This chapter will examine these transformations.

**Embodied Transitions through the Material space**

**‘The Best to the Air Force’[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The initial question posed to the research participants dealt with their motivation to embark on the endurance sports journey. The responses encompassed a range of factors, including body image, self-care, health discourse, and environmental influence.

**Ronnie** (long-distance runner)**:** *We lived back then in New York…the New York Marathon is impossible to ignore. For me, running a marathon was something reserved for the "the best to the air force." And I yearned to...experience that wow factor, to show myself that I was capable. I declared it would be my 40th birthday present - I will run a marathon and, along the way, perhaps shed a few kilograms [laughs]****.***

**Erika** (long-distance runner):*Our friend, who just completed an Ironman, said, "...we're forming a beginners’ group, and there are a few women like you (...a bit out of shape...) who are joining. Join us." And I felt it was the perfect opportunity. The kids have grown up, and now I can prioritize self-care, because when I was a mother, I always came last.*

**Naomi** (Iron Women): *Honestly? It was never in my plans or dreams. At most, I would have a gym membership and take a spinning class. But...running? Swimming? The last time I ran was in school, and even then, I always made excuses that I was on my period [laughs]. I cycled a bit with friends here in the community, and then suddenly the women's triathlon came up, and there was publicity about it. They organized preparatory training sessions on Herzliya Beach with professional trainers, and they kept encouraging us all the time that anyone can* *do it. So I said, 'Okay, I don't need to chase after my kids anymore, let's give it a try.' I can handle cycling, although not on a road bike, but they said that, in this event, even off-road biking is fine. I know how to swim, although in a pool and not in the sea, and I breaststroke instead of freestyle, but whatever [laughs], I didn't really understand the differences, and maybe it's better that way...and as for running? At most, I'll walk. The rest is history. I can't imagine myself without it anymore*.

It appears that the slogan of women's triathlon, "Every woman can," and the organization's motto "Every woman is a winner," are gendered interpretations of "the best to the Air Force." The discourse of "every woman can" seeks to increase women's participation in sports. Additionally, there is the consumer discourse utilized by commercial entities and various sports groups in targeting women as consumers and trainees. At a time when the demands of motherhood are less prominent, the combination of these three discourses—the 'self,' consumer-driven, and rhetorical—underscores the belief that "every woman can," allowing for the temporary suspension of maternal commitments in favor of self-dedication**.**

**A Man, a Dog, or a Little Red Riding Hood**

Much of the weekly training sessions are conducted early or late in the day and in diverse geographical locations, many of which are open spaces. The recurring motive (theme) for how most of the women feel in these places is centered around anxiety, specifically related to physical security and spatial orientation.

**Mia** (ultra-marathon runner): *There are certain locations that are not safe...the Ben Shemen Forest is the most popular area for long-distance runs. I wouldn't run there by myself, and there are many places where I feel uncomfortable running alone, even during the day...I'm afraid.*

**Yael** (Iron women): *I participated in the Israman competition in Eilat, which is renowned as one of the most challenging "Ironman" competitions. Before the competition, during a vacation with my husband in Eilat...with my trusty bike, of course [laughs], I reached the Netafim peaks, and still had another hour to go. I was all alone...no one crossed my path. Even military vehicles were a rare sight. The border fence stood to my left, and I couldn't help but wonder if someone might be lurking around the bend. That's when I decided it was enough, and made my way back****.***

The fear of physical harm leads them to use protective measures like dogs, chemical defenses, or training with a man.

**Yaeli**: *I mainly run on trails, which are open spaces, but it's not pleasant to run alone there. Various people are wandering around...so I prefer to run with my dog. There have been incidents, [...] I thought to myself, if they catch me now, it could be dangerous since no one knows I'm here. Fortunately, my dog was with me. He doesn't do anything, just looks intimidating. But for me, that provides enough comfort.*

**Ruchama:** ...*In my kibbutz area...we are very close to Bedouin settlements, and my sense of security is not great. So, I run with pepper spray.*

**Ivonne**: *There are places where I won't run alone, even in the city. For instance, near the railway tracks…there are boys that harass…it happens all the time. Car honking, comments: Where are you running? Who is chasing you? It's very problematic*.

While men can move in the space relatively safely, women’s movement creates concerns and requires safety preparations. In addition to the fear of physical harm, there is also anxiety of the "Little Red Riding Hood" phenomenon.

**Ayala** (marathon runner): *Difficult? The first trail running session was a nightmare. I was terrified of getting left behind and not finding my way back, my sense of direction is terrible. There were few women in the group, and none of us were familiar with the terrain. We were dependent on the men, hoping they wouldn't leave us alone.*

**Shira** (triathlon): *In the initial months of off-road running? It took a year, maybe even longer. Every night before [training], I would be plagued by nightmares. What if I couldn't keep up? What if I got lost and couldn't find my way back? What if I finished last? These thoughts would give me stomach aches, and I would go out feeling immense pressure.*

**Michal**, an experienced ultra-marathon runner, suggested that the absence of spatial orientation stems from the organization of public space as predominantly male and due to training practices that have been used men within the context of military service,[[2]](#footnote-2) rather than inherent limitations in women's navigation abilities.

**Michal**: *At the beginning, running in the field was frightening. What am I doing here? How will I find my way back? Was I in a combat unit? I was afraid of becoming Little Red Riding Hood. I relied heavily on male friends to run with me since there were only a few women runners back than, but today I have gained confidence and a sense of control. I am no longer afraid*.

The way women experience the geographical space as unfamiliar and threatening, and their potential lack of skills, such as navigation and map reading, highlight their marginalization, which also serves as the entry point into this male-centric arena, as it allows their activities to go unnoticed.

**Ivonne**: *When I first started running, I was one of the only ones. There were so few women, and I knew them all. It was nothing like it is today, with women runners popping up everywhere. We were true pioneers, and hardly anyone noticed us. I knew nothing about the distance of a marathon, I didn't know it was 42.2 kilometers, and there was nobody to ask. Maybe it's for the best. If I had known what it really entailed, maybe I wouldn't have even started.*

Despite the idea that outdoor spaces are more natural and safe for men, through being present in these spaces, women create new opportunities.

**Yaeli**: *Today, I'm in control, I am not afraid. Except for running alone at night in the forests, I'm totally fine*.

**Aluma**: *I have learned to feel the sea, to read wave height forecasts, wind direction maps... It's important for riding as well...I've become a meteorologist (laughs).*

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) wrote: "The world has always belonged to men, and none of the explanations proposed for this seem satisfactory to us" (p. 93). Movement in space is a movement of curiosity and exploration, aiming to enable new possibilities of growth, knowledge, identity, and freedom.

**Ayla**: *In London, it was my first time running abroad...I was very apprehensive about running in an unfamiliar place...But it was amazing, everyone embraced me and cheered me on, creating a sense of camaraderie among runners. Today, I can confidently run anywhere in the world. I grab a map, leave the hotel, check the directions, and I'm ready to go. I feel content and fulfilled.*

***Michal***: *Whenever I travel, the first thing I check is where I can run or swim. If there's a park nearby or a pool. Only then do I book a hotel...I already know running routes abroad almost as well as in my own country.*

The presence of women and the transformation of space into a 'place' also reflects encounters with nature.

**Ayla**: *Last week, while running in the open field, I encountered a grazing horse standing by the trail - I had the privilege of gently caressing it on the forehead while running. Running in nature gives me moments of pure and rejuvenating happiness—the scent, the blossoms, the earth after rain—it's truly a sensory experience of connecting with nature.*

In addition to crossing spatial boundaries, the presence of women in nature, which is associated with femininity despite being predominantly occupied by men, challenges the dichotomy of nature-culture, woman-man, private-public. It enables women to make their own mark on an experience that was primarily reserved for men.

משפט קישור למרחבים סימבולים ומטאפוריים

**Embodied Transitions through Symbolic Spaces**

The ways in which women experience embodied practices in endurance sports do not simply involve crossing physical spaces, but also result in transitions within symbolic spaces. These constitute an alternative gender and political knowledge that reposition of women in personal-intimate, occupational, and knowledge spheres. These symbolic transitions will be extensively explored and detailed below.

"**My husband waves the flag**"

Women participating in endurance sports are often away from home due to extensive training hours, especially on weekends. This can lead to household conflicts. Once these issues are resolved (Ben Dori & Kemp, 2020), husbands proudly celebrate their wives achievements:

**Rees**: *My husband….he waves the flag; my wife is an Ironman!!! He shares my results and sports events on social media.*

**Ronnie**: *In almost every conversation my husband had, even with people who knew nothing about me...he would first mention that I run marathons. It seemed like there was some sort of benefit for him in having a marathon-running wife...At first, it bothered me, but later I understood that it was important to him, and he even took some pride in me*.

A husband taking pride in his wife's achievements can be interpreted as important and necessary support, and recognition of her accomplishments. However, many husbands who showcase their wives' achievements do so as a social statement. In a society where youthfulness, feminine ideals, achievements, and visibility are status symbols, the husband magnifies his masculinity through his partner’s accomplishments. The woman, in turn, strategically participates in this approach so she will have a voice, both in endurance sports and her marriage.

**"The fact that I'm running it, it's almost like he's running it through me"**

The response of parents is also important. Here, the mother shows concern and the father pride.

**Georgette** (marathon-runner)*: Whenever I tell my mom that I ran 20 kilometers, she says, “Why? It can harm your body! It's dangerous, unhealthy, not good for you. You must take care of yourself.”*

The father’s response was the opposite, characterized by admiration and support:

**Rees**: *I would call my dad every time and talk about it because he was also a runner [...] He takes great pride in me; I've heard from various people that he boasts about my races and trophies*.

**Ivonne**: *My dad is my biggest supporter [...] When we were going on a family vacation, I would arrive for breakfast after my run...nobody else seemed interested. He would refer to the kilometers as "clicks." He always asked me how many clicks I ran that morning. He even joined me at the Boston Marathon to cheer me on. He's genuinely passionate about it.*

**Ronni**: *My dad is incredibly proud of me! [...] He loves to crack jokes; he would ask me how many kilometers I ran, and when I say 30 kilometers, he would say, "What, don't you have money for a car? Need money for fuel?" He's a sportsman himself, in his 70s and he runs, swims...He will never run a marathon, but the fact that I'm running it, it's almost as if he's running it through me*.

The mother's may be adhering to her gender role and acting in a way that is expected of a "good mother" in caring for her daughter. However, the attempt to distinguish between the father's and mother's responses suggests that the mother is unable to offer anything beyond concern:

**Rees**: *And my mum didn't really understand what it was exactly about, and couldn't connect with it, she was just concerned. She would say, "That's nice," but she didn't truly engage with it.*

It appears that the mother lacks the habitus of this domain, making it difficult for her to understand endurance sports and leaving her unable to identify with or support her daughter. In contrast, Georgette portrays her father as someone who is more closely connected to the world of sports:

**Georgette**: *I don't know if it's because he understands more, maybe...or because he has physically experienced more challenging things*.

Thus, regardless of whether the father is involved in sports or not, he becomes a partner, leading to a new dynamic, in which the daughter borrows components associated with male identity and becomes “her father's daughter.” This allows her to carry a legacy of masculinity, enabling them to share a common language. He can transcend the expectations of traditional female gender roles, knowing that there is someone to continue the legacy. As Ronni said, "The fact that I'm doing it, it's almost as if he's doing it through me."

Continuing with this interpretation, in the new connection formed between the father and daughter, the mothers identify the moment when the daughter distances herself from the feminine model the mother embodies. In this moment, there is resentment or a fear of detachment, manifested through the mother's deep. The interviews also reveal that the women spent significantly more time discussing their relationship with their fathers compared to their mothers, and these discussions contained more expressions of closeness and empathy.

One of the questions I asked all the women was: "Did you have any role model in your childhood, adolescence or adulthood?" All the women hesitated with their answer. Most of them responded similarly:

**Michal**: *I don’t know…I never thought of it.*

**Tzila**: *Role model? Interesting question…I don’t know how to answer.*

Two women answered automatically: "My mother is my role model...I think until a certain age, my mother was....but very quickly I realized that actually she...she wasn't enough…., so no, I didn't have someone to look up to."

Against the background of the lack of similar habitus and role model, one can observe the intention to run, ride and swim as a rejection of femininity as embodied by the mother, in favor of an alternative masculine narrative. This choice provides the daughter with appreciation from the father, while changing the traditional mother-daughter dyad.

**"She had the raw material at home"**

The children's response to their mothers’ involvement in sports is depicted as a series of stages, starting with shame, and culminating in acceptance and appreciation, even to the extent of exploiting the lifestyle change. The divergence between their mothers’ appearance and behavior compared to their friends' mothers challenges their perception of a "normative social order" and the expected behaviors and appearance of a mother, leading to a fear of being negatively labeled.

**Ronnie***: My daughters bugged me, please don't come to school wearing your sport clothes and hat.*

**Michal**: *My son told me: "Don’t talk about sports when my friends are over.*"

**Ivonne**: *He [her son] gets very upset when I come back from my run wearing my running clothes, especially when his friends are around. It embarrasses him*.

After completing a marathon, Ironman, or ultra-marathon, there is a transformation in how the children perceive their mother:

**Naomi**: *Mommy, please come to school to talk about your marathon*.

**Aluma**: *My son will proudly announce to everyone that he is accompanying his mother to her 20th marathon...and when it comes to running, he consistently directs his friends' questions to me...When my son had to give a presentation in the officer's course, he chose to share my journey towards the Ironman*.

The fact that the intensity and endurance required for these events do not differ between women and men fosters a sense of "comradeship" and gender equality.

**Ivonne**: *In this sport, there is a certain common denominator. Everyone trains, and it's almost equally challenging for everyone.*

**Ronnie**: *When I run, I become the most exposed, through the sweat's ducts [...] all the secrets come out...It creates a kind of camaraderie among people who run together...Like in the army, like in battle...A kind of bonding [...] An outsider won't understand it...It doesn't matter if it's a man, a woman, young or old, what matters is the shared ability to endure the running together. Often, you run alongside people without knowing their profession; you simply gauge their pace and whether it aligns with your training*.

The way society bestows a sense of prestige upon these leisure activities is intertwined with the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1984) and patriarchal, capitalist ideals of achievement, determination, and task-oriented perseverance. As a result, these factors tend to diminish the significance of gender distinctions in favor of the spectacle of sports. Furthermore, these influences permeate through the responses of children's peers and impact the children themselves:

**Ronnie**: *My daughters' friends adore me...They think I'm the queen of the world.*

**Aluma**: *When their friends come over, they say, "Wow, you're the Ironwoman, right? Respect!" And my son wrote on Facebook, "My mom is the best, [she] just finished Ironman in Germany," and it got 140 likes.*

**Erica**: *My son chose me for his Roots project...Aged 12, he wrote that the woman he admires is his mum. That was the same year I completed the marathon, and he witnessed my dedication, seeing me go out running in the rain and even when it's 200 degrees outside. And you know, children absorb things more than adults do...*

It appears that women are becoming an inspirational force, capable of generating a newfound resilience within themselves in the presence of their children. This subsequently fosters a deeper bond and establishes a fresh avenue of communication with their children.

**Michal**: *When my son was preparing to enlist in a special unit and needed to enhance his physical capabilities, he approached me and requested that we run together*. *He knows that I'm not just offering clichéd advice from the comfort of the couch, like "you can do it if you want to." I have firsthand knowledge of what it takes. I understand the intricacies of endurance, different training phases, dealing with injuries, and the process of recovery, among other things.*

**Rees:** *During my daughter's high school finals, she chose to explore the pressures (physical, social, cultural, etc.) experienced by long-distance women runners in Israel. Despite her inability to find relevant literature on the topic, she was undeterred because she had her mother as a firsthand source of information***.** *She had the raw material at home****.***

In addition to practice, knowledge, and authority becoming a new source of power, they also contribute to challenging the territorial boundaries of traditionally masculine roles. This leads to a transformation in women's identity, which now encompasses traditionally patriarchal roles. Like learning to ride a bike, mothers now assume these roles as legitimate authorities.

**My boss admires me**

Achievement, perseverance, goals, overcoming difficulties, and resilience are central values in the labor market, which intersect with similar characteristics in the realm of endurance sports, creating a recurring motif of respect and appreciation:

**Ronnie**: *My boss admires me and thinks that being a marathon runner adds to all my merits. If he had to write my resume, I promise you he would mention it*.

Others noted the tendency of employers to boast about their achievements in sports:

**Yaeli**: *During a job interview, he said, "I'm an early riser," and I replied, "I'm probably even earlier." This was the time I trained for a 100-kilometers run, which came as quite a shock to someone like him. He tends to bring it up when it serves his purpose, like when he wants to impress the board. You know, they initially engage in small talk, and he proudly tells them, "Look at her, she has already run 100 kilometers*.”

**Aluma**: *In a marketing meeting with a client, my boss suddenly says, "She completed an Ironman." I asked him, "What relevance does that have to our work?" Nevertheless, he takes great pride in my achievement.*

Based on the parallel values of the labor market and endurance sports, like the husbands, employers also tend to boast about women's accomplishments in order to convey two messages. The first message implies: "Doing business with us is worthwhile because our workforce, even though they are women, possesses masculine attributes, which makes them praiseworthy and reliable." The second message bestows a sense of glory onto the manager himself: “Look at how I succeeded in surrounding myself with the best employees.”

Furthermore, it can be argued that women's engagement in the realm of endurance sports translates into symbolic capital that can be leveraged in the labor market.

**Mia** (CEO of a tech company): *During my first visit to the offices in the United States, I was asked to give a technical presentation...It was an entirely new field for me. I crafted a presentation based on the "10 lessons I learned about the world of running and startups"... It was very well-received [...] My boss [...] often says: “Just like Mia taught us in her presentation about the marathon,” Or when I discuss an issue with him, he says, "Well, you know, we're here for an ultra-marathon, aren't we?"*

In addition to the recognition and appreciation generated by symbolic capital, it also serves as a status symbol that can enhance job prospects.

**Michal**: *Of course I highlight it in my CV...It always has a positive impact.*

To summarize, the strong resemblance between the values of the labor market and the world of endurance sports enables women to improve their social and economic standing. However, it also results in the workplace appropriating women’s glory.

**Knowledge-Power**

The realms of content to which women are exposed encompass a wide range of areas, which are new and distant from their everyday lives.

**Yael**: *Did I know how to change a punctured tire? No, where would I learn that? If there was a problem with the bike...either my dad or brother would fix the punctures. But when you start taking cycling seriously, there's no choice. You must learn to do it yourself because you spend so many hours and cover such long distances, and sometimes you’re…completely alone. So there's no other option but to learn how to do it*.

This knowledge becomes part of women's heritage, enriching their toolbox and challenging its "natural" association with the male domain. In addition to the knowledge they acquire in various fields of endurance sports, they are also exposed to the principles of sports nutrition, which differ significantly from what they were previously accustomed to.

**Naomi**: *I no longer eat light bread or 0% fat yogurts...I used to be obsessed with calories, but not anymore. For athletes weight is not the key factor, but rather the percentages of fat and muscle in the body. To build muscle, you need to really eat, not lettuce*.

The realization that we need to nourish our bodies instead of depriving them is a transformative experience for most women. For the body to excel, we must fuel it and sometimes even eat abundantly. This is the same body that women are told to restrain, deprive, and manage in pursuit of unattainable feminine ideals. However, women now understand the importance of nurturing their bodies, so they can enjoy the benefits of a well-nourished body. The word "carbohydrates" is no longer a taboo, sparking a shift in the way we think about our bodies.

**Yael**: *I always perceived myself as being overweight... It's not like I became thin...I'm still a big woman. But my body has become very strong...So what if it doesn't look the way I desire...it allows me to do amazing things. I have grown to love my body more than ever...I have made peace with it*.

The stage at which women began viewing their bodies as allies rather than enemies holds great value in shaping their self-perception. From a feminist perspective, it signifies a significant political shift. The interviews also show that the world of endurance sports was unfamiliar to most women. Their knowledge was limited to stereotypes like "it only suits professionals." All the women mentioned that they acquired knowledge through their sports training and expanded their understanding by reading online and engaging in discussions with the sports community. However, many of them pursued formal education to gain a deeper understanding:

**Mia**: *I decided to pursue certification in long-distance running at Wingate.[[3]](#footnote-4) I didn't intend for it to become a primary profession, but rather to gain knowledge. I felt a lack of scientific understanding about what happens to the body during running*.

**Yael:** *I completed a course for long-distance running coaches...for myself. After I finished, someone approached me and asked for personal coaching. My coach then suggested, "Why not start a running group? You have the qualifications*."

"Knowledge is power" and it enables women to become literate in the field of endurance, opening new employment opportunities and additional sources of income. It is noteworthy that some of the interviewees managed to translate their sports experience and knowledge into paid employment.

Beyond the benefits of gaining knowledge, women's experiences expose them to the fact that existing knowledge is not necessarily applicable to them:

**Ivonne**: *Research on women in sports is limited, particularly regarding carbohydrate loading. Existing studies have been conducted on men, assuming the findings apply to women as well. However, women do not experience the same supercompensation - it varies based on their menstrual cycle timing. Women who engage in carbohydrate loading during a specific phase of their cycle hardly benefit from it. Therefore, the current recommendation for women is a slightly lower "moderate load," since their muscles are not as capable of breaking it down. The unique functioning of women's bodies means that muscles cannot handle such a load, ultimately limiting their performance. It's important to address this lesser-known fact, as coaches often overlook the need for different treatment for the female body.*

**Mia**: *When I started writing in the women's running forum, there was nothing in the media, hardly any coverage of women’s experience in this field... there are very few studies that focus on women. I write about it and raise awareness of what women experience in sports. However, I am also focused on the mental aspect, social support, and the surrounding environment. This writing clearly stems from the fact that what doesn't exist, creates the need to generate knowledge on how to navigate within it.*

Women's involvement dismantles existing knowledge and generates new knowledge. This knowledge enriches the existing understanding of endurance sports and creates a unique space for women in this field. The addition of knowledge and its adaptation to women's needs significantly impacts the lives of many women, allowing them to fully participate in this arena.

**Conclusion**

How do Israeli women navigate the male-dominated arena of endurance sports? How do they experience it and how does it influence their views on gender and space? The research reveals the embodied duality of endurance sports: It is both an androcentric space and a platform for women to participate and to challenge dominant discourses on space, knowledge, and gender.

The central finding of the research is that endurance sports challenge women with spatial and societal gendered norms, yet it also offers their temporary suspension, leading to disruptions in the established social order. These disruptions stem from the discourse of meritocracy and the "self" that characterizes this arena, as well as from the capabilities of the body, which play a crucial role in overcoming marginalization. As a result, female athletes engage in a process of exploration and contestation, striving to redefine their position within the spatial and gendered order.

Moreover, the interviews reveal women's marginalization in endurance sports through their lack of knowledge about this cultural space, the absence of spatial orientation necessary for the activity, and the dearth of inspiring models and collective female narratives to draw upon. These limitations restrict their participation choices, compelling them to adopt the discourse associated with the military and masculinity. At the same time, this situation gives rise to new opportunities for redefining their existence.

The reverberation of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies of success, achievement, and resilience within endurance sports empowers the research participants to surpass boundaries dictated by normative perceptions of spatial belonging and gendered parental roles, ultimately deconstructing the narrow and uniform understanding of gender. These ideologies also validate women’s repositioning within intimate and professional spheres while creating novel realms of knowledge and influence. Furthermore, a distinct narrative of femininity and empowerment emerges, incorporating elements traditionally associated with masculinity and carrying substantial social significance. This narrative elucidates women's capacity to transform their athletic endeavors into accumulated cultural capital, which bears consequences for their social, familial, and occupational placement, thus holding considerable political significance.

The attention given to the material and symbolic space as a constructed framework of meaning, along with the embodied practices viewed through a phenomenological perspective, highlights the active choice made by women as a fundamental aspect of their "personal human agency." This active choice empowers women to become "dwellers of space," shaping these spaces to suit their existence and presence. This profound movement redefines the meaning of space from "their place " to "our place as well," reshaping accepted social categories and emerging identities within the spatial framework. Inverting Young's words (1990) - "the body synthesizes its surroundings, and moreover, it synthesizes itself" (p. 38) - "the body synthesizes itself, and moreover, it synthesizes its surroundings."

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1. A common idiom in Israel regarding the status and prestige that Air Force pilots enjoy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)