

Decent work challenges and opportunities in professional boxing: a case study analysis

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1. Introduction

This research applies the concept of Decent Work to professional sport in Spain, based on the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 8 (Decent Work and economic growth) and Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). Decent Work aims to eradicate unacceptable working conditions, promoting labour rights, opportunities for dignified work and social protection (Organización Internacional del Trabajo [OIT], 2020). In this study, we utilize the seven dimensions proposed by Ferraro et al. (2018): principles of respect, workload, gratification, remuneration, social protection, professional development, and health and safety. It provides a framework for evaluating and improving working conditions in professional sport.

Athletes represent a case of labour vulnerability, facing precariousness in their employment relationships and lack of legal protection. Professional sport is assuming characteristics of the productive sector, such as the precocious professionalization of athletes (Camilo et al., 2020; Bracht, 2005). Professional boxing in Spain has experienced a complex trajectory, marked by periods of boom and decline (Calle-Molina & Martínez-Gorroño, 2018), suffering a significant decline due to lack of media coverage and institutional support since the 1970s (Sánchez, 2009). Currently, professional boxing in Spain continues to face significant challenges, with boxers often forced to combine their sporting career with other jobs (EFE, 2024).

2. Aims

This research examines the current situation of professional boxers in Spain, with the aim of identifying existing needs of a female and a male boxer in relation to the seven dimensions of Decent Work.

3. Methods

This case study is part of qualitative exploratory research based on semi-structured interviews (Aragaki et al., 2014). The athletes interviewed are characterized as sport professionals. The interview is structured in two parts: a sociometric matrix and semi-structured questions based on the seven dimensions of Decent Work (Ferraro et al.,

2018). To validate it, four experts from different Spanish universities. The interviewees could review, rectify, or ratify the content of the transcribed interviews. Qualitative analysis was carried out using Atlas.ti software. The research complied with ethical standards (Declaration of Helsinki and institutional code).

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of the male boxer's and the female boxers' responses reflects two contrasting perspectives on their professional environment. In terms of principles, he demonstrates absolute confidence in his team and the decision-making process, feeling fully accepted and free to express his opinions. In contrast, she exposes more complex issues, such as the perception of intrusiveness in the sport and the emphasis sometimes placed more on image than athletic performance.

Regarding workload, both acknowledge the high demands of training and the challenges of balancing their personal lives. However, the female boxer emphasizes that her workload intensifies not only due to training but also because of other external demands, such as participation in public events. Moreover, she faces greater difficulties in accessing adequate rest periods. The gender difference is also reflected in family reconciliation: while the male boxer regrets missing important moments in his children's childhood, she expresses a sense of "madness" in her attempt to balance her career with motherhood, with emotional impact.

In terms of job satisfaction, the man appears fully fulfilled with his career and highlights the positive impact he has on young people. On the contrary, the woman experiences more ambivalent feelings. Although she has felt recognition in recent years, has also lived through moments when her achievements were not valued as highly as those of her male colleagues.

Compensation is another aspect where gender differences are evident. While he has managed to diversify his income and considers his compensation relatively decent, she cannot live solely from boxing and depends financially on her partner. The pay gap is notable: while a man can receive between 30,000 and 40,000 euros for a European championship, a woman typically receives significantly lower amounts, which the female boxer perceives as a clear injustice.

In terms of social protection, both face a precarious situation, without traditional labor contracts or long-term security. However, the female boxer's situation is even more vulnerable, as she lacks basic rights such as vacations or sick leave.

Regarding opportunities, the male boxer perceives a favorable outlook and hopes that future achievements will open more doors. The female boxer, on the other hand, recognizes recent improvements for the new generations of women in boxing but emphasizes that she still must work harder to access the same opportunities. Her long-term plans include becoming a coach or referee, showing a more structured vision of her future.

Regarding health and safety, the male boxer shows a limited view of mental health and the risks of his profession, while the woman is more critical and aware of the challenges, such as the lack of training adaptation to the menstrual cycle or the presence of doping. She also acknowledges the psychological and social risks athletes face, especially in the transition to retirement.

5. Conclusions

This study reveals significant differences in the working experiences between male and female professional boxers, highlighting structural gender inequalities in a traditionally male-dominated environment. The female boxer exposes a reality marked by additional challenges: from pressure to meet physical appearance standards to difficulties balancing her career with motherhood, along with a significant pay gap. This disparity is exacerbated by precarious social protections, lacking even basic rights such as vacations or sick leave—a situation that contrasts with the male boxer's relative financial stability, as he has been able to diversify his income.

The key contributions of this study reflect how gender shapes all aspects of a boxing career, from economic opportunities to professional recognition and health. Women face greater physical and emotional demands and must also overcome obstacles invisible to her male counterparts (i.e. specific biological needs). These findings underscore the urgency of implementing gender-sensitive sports policies that address the issue of Decent Work. These results serve as a clear call to action for federations, sponsors, and policymakers.

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