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# Wrestling Gym in Dagestan as a Space for Masculine Socialization

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## Abstract

The paper analyzes the process of sports gender socialization of boys and adolescents in the case of freestyle wrestling in Makhachkala, the capital of the Russian North Caucasus Republic of Dagestan. The methods and practices of educating future men in the wrestling gym are functionally related to the model of hegemonic masculinity rooted in the local gender and social order, which is under pressure from urbanization and modernization. The wrestling gym insulates students from both the "demoralizing" influence of the home environment and the marginalized scripts of masculinity associated with street life. Through training, boys and adolescents acquire a masculine habitus that can later become the basis for their careers in sports and other spheres of social life, as well as the social capital necessary for successful participation in coalition clinches. They internalize the principle of consistency in gender and age stratification and the lifestyle associated with the ideology of "muscular Islam."

**Keywords:** Dagestan, freestyle wrestling, gender socialization, muscular Islam

## Introduction

In the sporting world, Dagestan, a small, multi-ethnic Islamic republic in the Russian North Caucasus, has a reputation of being the "forge of champions" in freestyle wrestling. Dagestanis are the all-time record holders among those who have achieved gold in the Olympic Games and World Championships as part of the Russian Federation's national team. To these champions can be added many who have become champions while competing for other nations but who continue to live and train in Dagestan. In Russia, over 70% of skilled freestyle wrestlers are residents or natives of Dagestan and other North Caucasian republics (North Ossetia, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria); this figure is even higher among the elite, approaching 100% (Brusov, 2012).

The success of Dagestani athletes is largely due to the tremendous competition, which is supported by the mass involvement of boys and teenagers in the sport. In Dagestan, freestyle wrestling and other martial arts are seen as highly valuable institutions of masculine socialization through which every boy who wants to become a "real man" must pass (Solonenko, 2012). The masculinity of young men who have not had even brief experience in sports is under suspicion.

The case of Dagestani freestyle wrestling is important for understanding not only what forms of masculinity are constructed in the context of specific sports, but also how they are linked to the wider societal context, what social and cultural mechanisms outside the gym support them, and how their reproduction as models of male behavior within society as a whole is ensured.

Dagestan is a transforming peripheral society with a complex ethnic and religious composition. In recent decades, the republic has been undergoing an active transition from a traditional society to a more modern form of social organization driven by urbanization and the development of market relations in the post-Soviet period (Sokolov, 2010; Starodubrovskaya & Kazenin, 2014).

Dagestan is one of the most Islamized republics within the Russian Federation. Islam has become the ideological foundation for the so-called conservative turn, which has led to a broad social consensus regarding gender segregation[1] and the dominance of men over women (Starodubrovskaya, 2019).

Another characteristic of Dagestani society is the high potential for conflict and violence and the resulting low level of societal security. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this republic found itself embroiled in an armed conflict that began as a war between separatists and federal forces, but transformed into an armed confrontation between the federal authorities and the jihadist movement throughout the North Caucasus (Markedonov, 2010). This has contributed to the preservation of forms of male dominance that are based on aggressive expressions of force and violence.

## Methods

The work was carried out in a qualitative methodological paradigm using a case study research strategy. The empirical object is the Makhachkala wrestling milieu, comprising children, adolescents, and young men who are involved in freestyle wrestling clubs, as well as their coaches, friends, and relatives. The case study, which was implemented during two expeditions to Makhachkala, combined a semi-structured, in-depth interview method with non-participant observations and unstructured conversations. The interview guide included questions that allow for the reconstruction of the respondents' social background and life trajectory, as well as their perceptions of ideal and normative masculinity. The observation method was used to both verify what was learned in communication with the respondents and capture the poorly reflected and unverbalized aspects of social reality. Observations were made in sports schools and clubs, gyms, and on the public beach in Makhachkala, which transforms into a place of mass training in the summertime. The total empirical basis of the research was 30 in-depth, semi-structured biographical interviews and 68 hours of observations and unstructured conversations with pupils of freestyle wrestling clubs and current and former professional freestyle wrestlers aged 12 to 35 years, as well as their coaches, parents, relatives, and friends.

To process and make sense of the collected data, a strategy was used combining thematic analysis to identify and compare the cross-cutting themes, motifs, and narratives with grounded theory principles and techniques to produce theoretical judgments (low-level theories) about the social meanings shared by participants. The analysis was conducted in NVivo software.

The conceptual framework of the study is the theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connel, 2020; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which postulates hierarchical patterns of masculinity and the existence of a hegemonic pattern of male behavior within society that legitimizes dominance over women and subordinate/marginalized groups of men. This model of masculinity emerges from the intersection between the cultural ideal and institutional power and is constructed at local, regional, and global levels. These days, according to Connell (1998, p. 3), the dominant form of global masculinity is transnational business masculinity, which is institutionally based on multinational corporations and global financial markets.

Hegemonic masculinity is inextricably linked to the notion of social success (Tartakovskaya & Vanke, 2016). At the same time, the set of successful social positions is always quite limited. Bourdieu's categories of social capital and habitus allows for the operationalization of resources that determine the positions of individuals both in sports and masculine fields. According to Bourdieu (2006), the relational positions of social agents are determined by the volume and structure of their capital and are reproduced through a system of dispositions learned during socialization, the *habitus,* that structures their practices and perceptions. The term "masculine capital" (Huppatz, 2012; Anderson, 2010) refers to the material and symbolic signifiers of manhood. The recognition of the male body and its inherent capacities as a form of capital is significant for the analysis of masculinity practices in sport. The endur-

ing bodily dispositions acquired by athletes through intensive training that enable them to succeed and build their sporting careers can be conceptualized as masculine habitus (Wacquant 1995; Coles, 2009).

## Literature Review

A significant body of research highlights the important role of competitive sports in sustaining patriarchal structures in the face of the decline of traditional forms of male employment and the deepening gap between the masculine predilection for risk and violence and the demands of modern workplaces, industries, and outlooks on life (Messner, 1989, 1990; Connell, 2005, 2008). Sports sites, especially of martial arts, continue to be central sites of gender socialization for boys and adolescents, ensuring that they internalize the principles of hegemonic masculinity. Two aspects of this process have been described and discussed. On the one hand, socialization suggests that the qualities most sought after in terms of masculine dominance – readiness for violence and confrontation and tolerance of pain and trauma – are incorporated into the bodies of growing men through systematic training, becoming part of their almost "reflexive" modus operandi (Messner, 1990; Hoberman, 1992; Maguire, 1993; Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Wacquant, 1995). Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus" and "field" in the sociology of sport have been actively synthesized with ideas of hegemonic masculinity to describe the mutual conditioning of the structural factors of masculine socialization, which are determined by the institutional design of particular sports and the individual experiences of athletes (Watch, 1995; Coles, 2009; Thrope, 2010). On the other hand, sport is seen as a site of masculine social learning (Policing of Masculinity [PoM]; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016) that is realized through homophobic or misogynistic discourses of otherness (Waldron, 2015; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016), in particular through *fag discourse* (Pascoe, 2011) and *discourse of penetration* (Fair, 2011).

## Results

**No Choice**

Boys in Dagestan usually start wrestling at the age of 7–10. Some are brought to wrestling by fathers and older brothers; others follow the example of their relatives or school or yard friends. The dominant perception of freestyle wrestling as a school of masculinity that guarantees the status of a real man and "good" friends erases the boundary between parental coercion and social conformism. The unrelenting demand for freestyle wrestling "from below" is supported by a special systemic relationship linking freestyle wrestling with spheres of power and legitimate violence. Athletes who excel on the mat are elected to parliament, appointed to responsible positions in the state apparatus and regional authorities, and invited to work for the police or the Federal Security Bureau.

There are no accurate figures to estimate the number of children, teenagers, and young men involved in freestyle wrestling, but athletes and experts alike claim that the number is huge. In Dagestan in 2010, approximately 30,000 people trained at institutions included in the system of sports training under the jurisdiction of state and municipal agencies for physical culture and sports, such as children's and youth sports schools; specialized schools, which combine high school curriculum and training; and sports boarding schools (Brusov, 2010). There are also private sports schools and numerous wrestling gyms at schools, universities, colleges, fitness clubs, municipal recreational institutions, and mosques. The great demand for wrestling classes prompts many enthusiasts or former wrestlers to informally train groups of children and teenagers in rented rooms adapted as gyms.

The high status of wrestlers and low entry threshold attracts both people from low-income families and the sons of wealthy and influential parents. However, social background indirectly affects the choice of training location, which has an important impact on the athlete's career. The symbiosis of sports and power that has taken shape in Dagestan in the post-Soviet period has led to the emergence of "center" (e.g., highly prestigious) sports schools that serve as venues for maintaining relationships between regional elite clans. The chance of getting into such schools is higher for people from elite families.

The mass nature of freestyle wrestling ensures the close integration of the norms, behavioral patterns, and symbolic codes of wrestling culture into the everyday life of Dagestan's male youth. The layer of wrestlers (active and former) that has formed in Daghestani society is so large that the wrestling system of cultural meanings penetrates all aspects of public life and is in common use.

Under these circumstances, they often perceive the decision to take up freestyle wrestling as an unavoidable choice taking the form of an acceptance of gender fate, which they label with the phrases "What else is there to do?"

and "There's nothing else to do." Many respondents, including Olympic gold medalists, confessed that they had not considered a wrestling career when they were children and were interested in less militant sports, but were forced to take up wrestling.

> *"When I was a child, I played soccer. I went to Makhachkala to competitions. They chose me, told me to come to the [soccer] academy. I talked to my dad, he said football wouldn't work out. He signed me up for wrestling. I've been going to wrestling since I was 8 years old. As a child I didn't like wrestling, to be honest. But now, over time, I realize that I no longer have a choice"* (No. 1, wrestler, 17 y.o.).

The roots of this compulsion should not be sought in the specific needs of the sporting discipline, but in the tasks of gender (masculine) socialization.

**Doing Real Men**

The first two or three years are critical not only for the formation of the wrestling habitus, but also as a period of controlled transition from childhood to adolescence in which boys acquire the mind and body dispositions of real men. The subjective significance of freestyle wrestling as an institution of male socialization increases in the context of migration, which erodes the structural foundations of traditional masculinity. In the big city, the basic role of the breadwinner in Dagestani rural society is realized outside the home, and this leads to men being alienated from the household (Lytkina, 2013) while women continue to maintain the traditional patterns of the gender division of labor. This situation serves as a source of moral panic around the feminization of growing men due to their upbringing being monopolized by their mothers. Wrestling classes are meant to make up for the lack of paternal upbringing. Respondents often refer to a verbal ritual that formalizes the delegation of parental control from father to coach: "Some come and say, it's your son; they say, do whatever you want with him."

At this stage, violence plays an important socializing role. Slaps and strokes on the buttocks are an integral part of the daily training routine. Through systematic violence, coaches not only maintain discipline in the gym and ensure the unquestioning obedience of students, but also mark, in an exaggerated form, the symbolic boundaries of the gym as an exclusively male space, which is a prerequisite for the primary emancipation of boys from the domestic "female" sphere:

> *"He comes to training and I see by the boy that he is well groomed, I see that he is not, as you would say, stained by the street. He's not a whipped boy. A boy should be beaten like that, yeah. Toothy. Not a chiseled boy, you can see he grew up with women and I tried to make a man out of him"* (No. 2, coach, 42 y.o.).

In the context of the age transition, physical punishment is functional in terms of normalizing violence and aggression as a formative experience. At preschool and primary school ages, children tend to avoid violence: they dislike and shun aggressive peers, thus containing their aggression, so this experience can only be transmitted externally (Kon, 2010). As pupils get older, physical punishment becomes increasingly rare. It is used in exceptional cases – for example, for a lack of initiative in competition:

> *"We were punished if we went out on the mat and just didn't wrestle like a man. ou don't have to just give up the fight like that. Both my father and my coach always scolded me for that. He also scolded me. They could scold me and hit me and tell me why. You should just step on the mat and fight like a man and go all the way to the end. And to not just give the fight away like that"* (No. 3, wrestler and coach, 30 y.o.).

Coaches move from direct implementation of violence to maintaining the necessary balance of peer-to-peer violence. Using psychological techniques (which are often manipulative), they initiate competitiveness among the trainees, but also seek to avoid the overt dominance of some athletes over others.

Typically, the bulk of the trainees have entered the initial phase of adolescence by this point. This is the period of "initial accumulation" of masculine capital, when it is critically important to "prove oneself" and defend the boundaries of the still-forming gender identity to peers. This leads to increased competition within the peer group, both on and off the wrestling mat:

> *"They don't understand anything now, the junior group. When they grow up, they will start proving in every way that they are stronger than others. One will prove that he is stronger than 10 people, let's say, who are here at the same weight. There will be pairs. That's the competition"* (No. 4, coach, 29 y.o.).

Overt displays of force and aggression outside of fights are forbidden. However, violence is widespread and "hidden" within playful interactions, such as the group games that wrestlers regularly play to develop coordination:

*“Mostly at basketball or when we played rugby. Well, yes, we have games there all the time, at training. Especially at rugby, there was always a fight or scolding or something to do”* (No. 5, former wrestler, 30 y.o.).

A significant axis for structuring power relations in a wrestling gym is age. The older students occupy an intermediate position between the coach and the younger students. If the coach in this quasi-family society fulfils the role of a father, the older students are the “big brothers.” They have a tacit right to “teach” and “test” the younger ones using the same methods of physical and psychological influence:

***Respondent:*** *The old-timers checked the newcomers. It’s never happened without that.*
***Interviewer:*** *So you were checked in what way? Were you trying to fight?*
***Respondent:*** *First, verbally, it must have been intimidating* (No. 6, coach, 32 y.o.).

However, the older pupils have delegated authority and cannot always expect total obedience from the younger ones. On the contrary, it is considered more than appropriate for the juniors to offer moderate resistance to the pressure of the seniors, to “snap back,” thus demonstrating their militant “character.” However, in addition to none of them believing they have the right, they also do not even seriously consider rebelling. The horizon of pretensions to domination is limited to their peers. This principle, which is deeply in tune with Dagestani traditionalist consciousness, ensures that the gender and age stratification systems in the transition from childhood through adolescence and youth to adulthood are harmonized.

**Policing of Masculinity**

Physical and psychological violence is combined with discursive practices of masculinity that label certain behaviors, psychological dispositions, and attributes of the body as non-masculine and therefore to be eliminated. The list of what can be labeled non-masculine can vary greatly depending on the views and preferences of the particular trainer: tears and crying as an expression of excessive emotionality; signs of obesity or, conversely, dystrophy; high-pitched child voices; slowness and timidity; or unreadiness to tolerate hunger and thirst.

According to Messner (2002), misogyny and homophobia are the primary mechanisms of normalization and group substance formation: “one or more members of the male group are made into the symbolic debased and degraded feminized ‘other’ through which the group members bond and feel their status as ‘men’ fully ensured” (Messner, 2002, 35). The discourse of masculinity in Dagestan freestyle wrestling has two distinctive features. Firstly, it explicitly articulates misogyny rather than homophobia:

*“You won’t believe how we got this boy from my village, he’s now 15–16 years old, but pardon my expression, like a “pigeon.” Nuh-uh-uh-uh, that’s the way he talks. Behavior, everything. Get it? No, this guy didn’t smell like a man, just smelled like a girl. A man should always be a man everywhere. I try, I make men out of them”* (No. 4, coach, 29 y.o.).

This rhetoric balances on the edge of acceptability. The word “pigeon” can be used figuratively to mean a soft, non-aggressive person (see the expression “dove of peace”), but it can also be seen as a partial homonym for “blue,” meaning “homosexual.” This liberty can be explained by my status as the external observer, not included in the local system of cultural meanings. In everyday internal communication, neither the trainers nor the trainees, as far as I can tell from many hours of observation in the gym, use language that directly or indirectly evokes associations with homosexuality. Fair (2011) writes about the absence of “fag” discourse in the everyday communication of school wrestlers, in stark contrast to its central meaning in the PoM of other sports and educational settings. In my case, however, it is more a matter of conformity with the dominant moral majority culture in Dagestani society, which is characterized by an aggressively hostile, rather than disparagingly dismissive, homophobia. Implied homosexuality can trigger a collective (family or clan) honor defense mechanism, which in turn threatens prolonged conflict. For the same reason, the PoM of the Dagestani wrestling gym does not use the discourse of penetration common in Western societies, which sexualizes relations between subordinate and dominant masculinities.

**Sport Gym and Street**

The masculinity of rising freestyle wrestlers is shaped in an environment close to a total institution, with the effect of totality increasing as the wrestling career progresses. The training schedule is built in such a way as to occupy as much of the young man’s time as possible that is not already occupied by school, college, or university studies. Beginners train once a day every day of the week, except Sundays. In the case of qualifiers, candidate masters of sport, and masters of sport, the number of training sessions goes up to two per day. When a youngster starts

to show promise, he moves from a children's and youth sports school to a specialized children's and youth sports school of Olympic reserve or School of High Sports Mastery, where the athlete's daily routine is entirely subject to the machinery of sports body production.

From the parents' point of view, the gym is the antithesis of another significant space of adolescent masculine socialization, the "street" (Solonenko, 2011). The "street" (e.g., the street crowd) is problematized as being outside the direct influence of adults and carrying the danger of the "wrong" socialization associated with various forms of high-risk practices such as the use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs, excessive violence, and petty criminality. Urbanization exacerbates moral panic about the corrupting influence of the "street." Unlike rural societies, which have mechanisms of collective community control over the behavior of younger members, urban lifestyles, characterized by increasing individualization and anonymity of social contacts, largely liberate adolescents and young adults from the control of their elders. Their maturation takes place in spaces separated from home and parental attention by both spatial and temporal boundaries.

The "street" and the "gym" are not two social worlds separated by insurmountable dividing walls. Rather, they are a system of communicating vessels. Participants in street and wrestling crowds live on the same territory, attend the same schools, and are in constant interaction with each other. Both in the "gym" and on the "street," violence is the central mechanism of constructing and testing masculinity (Solonenko, 2011). The status obtained in the gym often must be confirmed in street fights, using the skills and competencies acquired in training:

> *"On the street, there are gatherings with guys somewhere. Our town is very hot. Everybody's so hot, they're all hot to trot. There's always a showdown here, there's always a showdown there. You have a fight somewhere, a fight here, we had to grow up in that field"* (No. 5, former wrestler, 30 y.o.).

The non-functional elements of the wrestler's corporeality also have symbolic liquidity on the street (see Solonenko, 2012). They mark a man's involvement in the world of freestyle wrestling and thus reduce his risk of direct confrontation. For example, the falsification of the professional trauma of freestyle wrestlers – broken ears – is widespread in Dagestan:

> *"I went to school, there was a guy who broke his ear on purpose. And you know how he got found out for breaking his ear, not everybody knew that he did it. Well, whoever breaks his ear won't say he broke his ear on purpose. It's just that he broke it so hard it's funny. He took a door jamb and broke it, and his ear didn't break like it was supposed to, like a fighter's, it broke so that his ears were sticking out. His ear became flared. So he broke it in a stupid way"* (No. 7, wrestler, 25 y.o.).

The masculine habitus acquired on the street – embodied readiness for aggression and confrontation – can be utilized in the field of freestyle wrestling, becoming the basis for building a career in sport:

> *"A boy comes to me, walks into the gym. He goes in, "What's up, wrestlers, huh?" I said, why did you come here? "I heard there were tough guys here, so I wanted to check myself." A 12-year-old kid. I said, come here, come on. I gave him my son who was about two years younger than him. I said, look, I'm giving you my kid. He's younger, he'll tear you up. "Who? Him? Come on." He was such an energetic boy, but my son has wrestling skills. My son won, and this guy started to get nervous. I said, you have lost. What did you come here for, pretty boy, what did the kid do to you, two years younger. He told me, 'Now I feel like I'm at home'"* (No. 2, coach, 42 y.o.).

The communicating vessel system also works in the opposite direction. The fierce competition in wrestling leaves a huge number of young men with an established combative habitus and unrealized ambitions about masculine status on the sidelines. The desire to compensate for these losses often activates scenarios of protesting street masculinity:

> ***Respondent:*** *I then at one time became generally spoiled, I started drinking to forget it all. Yes, I am a Muslim, but at that time, I was a young, stupid boy. I started smoking, doing nonsense. There were such moments that were very bad. Started to behave very badly.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *Beating someone up?*
> ***Respondent:*** *I wouldn't call it violence, I just came up, I asked for money. No, I didn't ask. I said: Give me your money, and they gave it to me* (No. 4, coach, 29 y.o.).

However, while sporting violence enables social recognition and success in the long run, street violence has low symbolic value in the eyes of society and leads to stigmatization as an attribute of social disadvantage. Thus, the symbolic opposition of "gym" and "street" structures the hierarchical relationship between hegemonic wrestling

masculinity and "street" masculinity as its marginal "alter ego" and functions as a filter that screens out the disapproving scenarios of gender socialization.

**"Band of Brothers"**

One consequence of the isolation that characterizes the disciplinary regime of the wrestling gym is that growing boys socialize more with coaches and wrestling partners than with their peers at school or in the yard. The gym becomes the main space for forming friendships and homosocial crowds:

> ***Respondent:*** *Well all my acquaintances, friends almost, I met them in training, on a run somewhere maybe.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *Here?*
> ***Respondent:*** *At Trudy stadium, went to the stadium there. All my friends do sports, on that sports wave, we all started to become friends* (No. 8, wrestler, 18 y.o.).

This contributes to the formation of a social substance, male "brotherhood," which is cemented by discipline, lifestyle, and loyalty to each other and the coaches (Solonenko, 2012):

> *"It doesn't matter who you are, if you are a wrestler, that is one thing, it is a band of brothers. Because we have been through this sweat and blood together, and they understand that this is one and the same. There, when we go to competitions, we are very close friends, comrades"* (No. 2, coach, 42 y.o.).

There is a tendency in the academic literature to romanticize (see Omelchenko, 2010) such male alliances or fraternities as communities that are based on strong emotional ties and trust and convert into mutual support and assistance. Such narratives are also found in my case study, but they tend to come from athletes whose careers have been quite successful. On the contrary, wrestlers who leave the mat early – due to injuries, for example – are often left to themselves and must face the challenges of re-socialization and adaptation to life outside the gym on their own. Only those of them who remain in the sports system – as a coach or assistant, for example – can count on the support of the brotherhood (which can be quite ephemeral, however).

One experience of mutual support stands apart and is mentioned so often that it can be considered formative of group substance. It is the experience of group confrontation in the context of a particular social order that emerged as a response to the increased anomie of urban life with the migration of yesterday's villagers to the cities. Varshaver and Kruglova (2015) call this order "coalition clinch," defining it as "the ongoing competition between coalitions whose members try to strengthen their position and that of their closest coalition members in social structures." Coalition clinch suggests that in a conflict situation, a coalition mobilizes resources to defeat another coalition. In the individual conflict, the position of its participants is determined by their ability to gather a crowd in their support and the social weight of that crowd, which in turn is made up of the individual capital of its members. Depending on the balance of power, coalitions either come to an agreement or go for violent conflict resolution, as in the example below:

> ***Respondent:*** *There are the usual showdowns in the city. One pulls the other one. He has some problems there, so you go with him to solve them. Maybe it's a war of words and you're caught.*
> ***Interviewer:*** *Do friends just invite you?*
> ***Respondent:*** *Yes, it used to happen a lot* (No. 6, coach, 32 y.o.).

In Dagestan, coalition clinch is a universal institution of conflict resolution whose effect extends to all levels of social reality – from everyday life to complex religious, economic, and political issues. Dagestani boys and adolescents gain their first experience of coalition clinch at the age of 12–14, during confrontations between schools. As a rule, the conflict inevitably ends in a mass brawl at this age:

> *"I've had street fights many times, but it was more this school, number 26, that came. Once it gathered 80 people to come to us. We all left the school too, the 11$^{th}$ grade, all gathered and chased them away"* (No. 9, wrestler, 14 y.o.).

The social order described is not a product of the wrestling subculture, but rather the physical and symbolic capital accumulated by wrestlers in the form of strength and social prestige provides them with a privileged position in this order. One look, or even the name of a distinguished Olympic champion, can be enough to turn the tide of the conflict in favor of one of the parties. This is why all the social actors in Dagestan with a claim to power and influence – rural communities (*jamaats*), religious and ethno-political movements, and political clans – have "their" wrestlers.

Engaging in coalition clinches is a norm for teenagers and young men, and the violation of this norm not only entails an accusation of individual cowardice, but also casts a shadow over the collective reputation of the male homosocial community. Therefore, even trainers who talk about the unacceptability of violence outside the gym recognize that in some situations, intervention is necessary and unavoidable. At the group level, this norm is part of a wider system of obligations to reproduce the dominant and hegemonic position of freestyle wrestlers in the local gender order. At the individual level, the social ties that each particular wrestler is able to mobilize in a conflict situation are part of his masculine capital, defining his masculine status not only within the wrestling "brotherhood," but also outside of it, in the context of "all" Dagestani society. From this perspective, the gym turns out to be not only the place where these ties are acquired, but also an effective social mechanism that provides the density and intensity of everyday communication and interactions necessary to maintain the network.

**We, the Dagestani People…**

In analyzing the relationship between violence and hegemony, Connell writes that violence is part of a system of domination, but is also a measure of its imperfection (Connell, 2005). A carefully concealed hierarchy has no need to resort to direct violence. In the context of Dagestani freestyle wrestling, the moral precariousness of the right of the strong is partially resolved through an appeal to Islam as the ideological foundation of male hegemony. Since the early 2000s, we have witnessed a mass exodus of Dagestani sporting youths into religion, which has led to the Islamization of sporting masculinity.

As a rule, children and teenagers who come to practice freestyle wrestling already know how to perform ablutions and *namaz* and visit the mosque every Friday with their parents. Many of them are also in or already have a religious education:

***Respondent:*** *I finished the Quran a long time ago. I know the Quran by heart.*
***Interviewer:*** *Yes, really?*
***Respondent:*** *I know it.*
***Interviewer:*** *And where did you learn it?*
***Respondent:*** *I have a good teacher, he lived in Egypt for 10 years and taught the Quran there. A good man, a religious man* (No. 10, wrestler, 14 y.o.).

In the gym, however, the spheres penetrate each other so deeply that they are perceived as two aspects of the same phenomenon. Every gym in Dagestan is necessarily equipped with a prayer room and an ablution room. It is common for mosques to be used for wrestling practice during off-prayer hours. Body exercises are interspersed with prayers, either individually or collectively, as part of a single training session.

The image of the professional freestyle wrestler to which boys and teenagers are oriented combines a wrestler's bodily appearance (strong neck, broken ear, slouching gait) with the conventional attributes of a devout Muslim (beard, often without a mustache). This "muscular Islam" (Nauright, 1997; Krawietz, 2018) leads boys and adolescents to adopt a holistic lifestyle in which "being a good man" is not separable from "being a good Muslim." This is critical in terms of the construction of regional identity. In Dagestan, it is Islam that is the universal marker of territorial community, which is opposed to both ethnic particularism within the republic and the Russian "Other." In the eyes of my respondents, Islam is a sign of moral superiority over other value systems. A kind of motto linking masculinity, Islam, and territory are words I have heard repeatedly in interviews and conversations: *We, the Dagestani people, we fear no one but Allah.*

## Discussion

In sum, wrestler masculinity is conceptualized as a local version of hegemonic masculinity. Due to the international recognition of Dagestani freestyle wrestlers and their regular recruitment into structures of power and legitimate violence, wrestling masculinity is associated with social prestige, power, and success.

The basic principles of gender socialization in Dagestani freestyle wrestling focus on the acquisition of bodily and social capital that will enable wrestlers to integrate into dominant positions in the social order of the coalition clinch outside the gym. At a higher level of generalization, with the example of gender socialization, we see an attempt to reconstruct the model of the traditional gender order, which is based on the subordination of women to men and of younger men to older men, in the context of urbanization and the transition to market relations.

Men's desire to use force and violence as a natural basis for their dominance is legitimized by local political culture, characterized by the exclusive role of the power factor in political and economic life. However, in a global gender order where transnational business masculinity is hegemonic, the forms of manhood that rely on physical violence are marginalized and stigmatized as evidence of the disadvantage, backwardness, and potential danger that peripheral non-western communities encompass. The stereotypical image of the Dagestani male – a short-sighted aggressive fighter – that circulates in the discourse of the Russian media and the mass consciousness of Russians living outside the North Caucasus (Khojaliev & Fakhrutdinov, 2018) indirectly confirms this thesis.

## Conclusions

This paper contributes to the debate about the role of competitive sports in the masculine socialization of boys and adolescents. In particular, I discuss the relationship between violent and aggressive "toxic" male behavior on the one hand, and bodily discipline, which is associated with the successful disposition of violence, on the other. In sports such as freestyle wrestling, gender equality policies need a more nuanced view of local sporting cultures and their relationship to "domestic" models of hegemonic masculinity. These models, especially in peripheral and postcolonial societies, are important sources of local (national, ethnic, religious, etc.) pride and sporting inspiration, but they also generate many problems related to the social deprivation and marginalization of young men.

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