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**Queens of the Canals:
Rowing against the Current in Venice**
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Queens of the Canals: Rowing against the Current in Venice

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1. Discovering Venice from the Water

Everybody knows the city of Venice with its unique canals, which serve as mirrors in the water and reflect the beautiful palaces, churches, and other historical monuments. Slender, long black gondolas silently gliding on the water, steered at the stern by a gondolier dressed in stripes, have become iconic for the city and have attracted tourists from all over the world.

Described and represented in art and literature for centuries, gondoliers are part of a more than 900-year-old tradition considered by many to represent authentic Venice. While being a gondolier was a badly paid and not at all coveted profession, since the 1950s tourism has transformed it into a very lucrative one for gondoliers and their families (Vianello 2011), as historically gondoliers passed their licenses on to their sons.

Since 1995 it has been possible for anyone, not only gondoliers' sons, to aspire to the profession. This notably includes women: to become a gondolier, one solely needs to pass a rowing test. Yet although many women have proven to be excellent hobby rowers and have won notable regattas, all the outstanding female athletes that tried to pass the examination to become a gondolier failed. The profession has thus remained strictly male dominated.

The male domination of the profession has sparked a heated debate, both in Italy and beyond. The national and the international press have discussed aspects such as the lack of female gondoliers, the dominance of male relatives in the profession, concerns about the fairness and transparency of gondolier exams, and discussions about gender pay disparities in regattas. News such as the following made national and international headlines: "Patriarchy in the Canals: Why Is There Only One Female Gondolier in Venice?" (Giuffrida 2017); "The New Substitutes [Gondoliers]? They Are All Sons or Relatives of the Gondoliers" (Nuova Venezia 2018; il Gazzettino 2018); "Venice, Transparency Doubts Arise Over Gondolier Exam" (Tg.com. 2018); "Gender Inequality in Venice's Historic Regatta Awards" (Ferrigolo 2019)¹. Overall, these headlines point to the heated public debate about the patriarchal dynamics that lead to women being excluded from the profession of gondolier.

How could the same women who win regattas as athletes be deemed incapable of rowing professionally as gondoliers? This paradox triggered my interest to research rowing and gender in the Venetian lagoon. In this paper, I show how women in Venetian rowing collectively denounce the above paradox and contest male dominance in the canals of the city, thereby challenging the iconic image of the male gondolier. In their daily struggles, these women directly confront the gondoliers as "kings of the canals" and fight for gender

¹ Newspaper headlines have been translated from Italian.

equality. I will start my journey into the gendered realms of the Venetian lagoon in a rowing club, following some athletes, “queens of the canals” in the making.

2. Everything Starts in the Rowing Clubs

I embarked on ethnographic research from November 2019 to March 2020 in Venice, a city intertwined with my life and identity due to my Venetian roots. To gain access to the field and to get a concrete idea of what rowing means and how difficult it is, I wanted to learn how to row and thus enrolled in a rowing club, called a *remiera* (pl. *remiere*). Members pay an annual registration fee and can use boats to row in the canals and train for regattas. The social life of the club, in addition to learning how to row myself, granted insight into the dynamics of rowing and regattas.

The access to a rowing club is usually exclusive, and not everyone immediately manages to become a member. My gaining access as an outsider researcher was no accident: first of all, the *remiera* I am part of is less strict than others in accepting new members, but more importantly, my uncle has been a member of the rowing club for years. Thanks to him, I was immediately able to join. Carlotta, a university student coming from another Italian region and one of the women rowers I met at the rowing club, had a different experience: after arriving in Venice to study, she became curious about rowing and wanted to join a *remiera*, but had been rejected at another club before enrolling in the same one as me. She told me that, while her being from another city was a disadvantage, being a woman was the main reason why she had difficulties in being accepted. During my research, I quickly learned that men and women have different access to rowing, as I will elaborate later on.

During fieldwork, I conducted participant observation at the rowing club, where I met several people who taught me how to row and took me on trips to various islands in the lagoon, and I also participated in the Vogalonga regatta. Employing a snowball sampling technique, I was able to meet female rowers across different clubs and had the opportunity to visit their respective *remiere*. I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews, almost all of which were recorded (the rest were logged with notes). Most of these interviews were with professional women rowers. In contrast to the ease with which I could get access to the world of women rowers in Venice, many male gondoliers declined my requests for an interview. Only three ultimately agreed to speak with me.

3. Women Only: Exploring Women’s Participation in Rowing as a Past-Time

Despite the enormous progress women have made in asserting their right to engage in sports, scholarship has revealed that men in Western societies jealously and fiercely guard the gendered field of sport (Besnier, Brownell and Carter 2018, 143). Tied to images of masculinity, sports still play a role in legitimizing the perceived innate superiority of men and reinforcing the perceived inferiority of women: “Sports naturalizes differences between men and women as biologically determined and thus contributes to the construction of discriminatory gender relations” (Das 2018, 111). Even sports that involve both female and male genders are permeated with gender norms. Rowing in Venice is no exception.

From the very beginning of my research in Venice, I understood that there are specific gender power dynamics at play in the world of rowing, where men think of themselves as



Figure 1: The author learning to row at the bow of the boat. Illustration: Enrico Bachmann 2023

the experts. Women, however, are actively contesting these claims to male expertise and authority.

One example of women contesting male authority includes that of a self-organized sub-group in a different club than where I was a member. Twenty women there had been organizing rowing trips together for years. Ornella, a woman in her fifties, had founded the group. She told me that their group was born out of the need and the desire to foster an environment exclusively for women, intentionally excluding men. She recalled the difficulties they encountered with men of their *remiera* when they first started to row among women: "Do you know what the men of the *remiera* were telling us at the beginning? 'You will get lost; you will get lost! You will never arrive!'" Although this group of women has established its place and continues to organize adventurous boat trips, they had to initially confront men to gain their independence:

"Monica's husband was the most opposed, he was saying, 'Why this boring feminism, what do you women think you are doing!?' Monica and I almost had to go begging to get the boats from the *remiera*, because its president had told us that we were embarrassing him. 'You are a subgroup in the *remiera*, you don't demonstrate any sense of belonging!' They were telling us this instead of being proud and saying, 'look what our women are doing!'" (Ornella).

When I was talking to Monica on a bench in Campo Santa Margherita, she explained that in the world of rowing – including in the clubs – men generally presume to know better than women how to row, and women are given little confidence:

"Men act like they always know more [...]. It is unthinkable that a woman teaches a man how to row. [...] Men are always the ones making remarks and comments to women, even on how to tie a knot, which is basic knowledge for anyone who rows. Also, women would never advise a man on posture or on technique [...]. Men have this attitude that they always know better how to row and must always teach women. A woman must never dare to say anything to a man".

Lucrezia, also a member of the all-female sub-group of rowers, described sexism in the Venetian rowing scene also beyond the context of the rowing club:

"Men think they are superior in rowing, and they do not hesitate to make discriminatory comments. Gondoliers are sexist [too]! When there is a woman rowing, they are always a bit male chauvinist, and so is everyone else: transporters and water bus drivers. Any man rowing, if they see a woman [...] they [can potentially] bother you, they get in your way somehow."

It happened to me too. As I intersected with boats while rowing through the canals with someone from my *remiera*, men – mostly gondoliers – would make obnoxious remarks to me about the way I was rowing. They would bother to correct my posture and to tell me how to hold the oar. At times, comments like: "Who taught *you* how to row?!" were thrown my way, or "*Ma vara sta qua!*" which means "But look at this one!" in Venetian dialect. The scrutinizing and judgmental glances made me feel assessed with every movement.

Sexism permeated rowing in Venice, even at the rowing club, where rowing is carried out as a pastime. Although women were sometimes prevented from becoming club members, as the experience of Carlotta showed, women like Ornella, Monica and Lucrezia succeeded in gaining more autonomy and freedom by self-organizing, and in so doing, they actively contested their male companions' continuous claims to superiority. The conversations with these women piqued my interest, and so I decided to further explore the realm of Venetian rowing by exploring rowing as a competitive sport by meeting some of the most talented women racers in Venice to talk about gender disparities.

4. Navigating Disparity: Addressing Inequalities in Rowing Competitions

The tendency of excluding women from specific sports is frequently rooted more in cultural definitions of a sport as "masculine", rather than reflecting a physiological inability of women to compete (Besnier, Rownell and Carter 2018). Women athletes, in Venice and beyond, have proven that they not only are able to row, but that they excel at it. Nevertheless, gendered stereotypes are tenacious, as became clear in my conversation with Lorena, another professional rower who has won many prizes. She told me that she is often confronted with the idea that a woman's body is not ideally made for rowing competitions, unlike a man's. Despite the stereotypes and structural barriers they are confronted with, women athletes have continued to compete and win in the world of competitive rowing.

In Venice, ten official regattas per year are organized by the municipality. In the most famous regatta, the *Regata Storica* (historical regatta), women and men compete separately in pairs. However, it is important to note that in 2020, the monetary value of the first prize for women was equivalent to the fourth prize for men, clearly marking a gendered disparity in the valuation of athletic success. Fiorella and Federica, two of the best rowers in Venice, have won the first prize of the *Regata Storica* for many consecutive years. When I talked to them, they proudly shared how they have successfully balanced their athletic pursuits with their academic studies, professional commitments, and the responsibilities of raising children, demonstrating remarkable success in their endeavors. According to them, the relationship with the men rowers is strained, however: "they don't look at us well". This is mainly because Fiorella and Federica – like many other women racing in regattas – have been fighting for equal prize money at regattas. "It is not necessarily a matter of money", they added, "but a matter of principle, a matter of recognition for the effort that is made."

Additional aspects tend to favor the presence of men rather than women in regattas. Regattas allow men to compete in three categories depending on their ability and expertise. This enables also less skilled rowers to participate in competitions. Where women are even allowed to compete, they all compete in one single category. This means that only the best women participate in competitions, and that female novice rowers are unlikely to get selected to compete.

Other official (albeit smaller) regattas, such as *Santi Giovanni e Paolo*, do not allow women to participate. In 2017, only three young men registered to participate, whereas a minimum of nine participants is required for the race to take place. Seven young women, including Anna, a sportswoman in her late twenties, decided to apply to partake in the regatta, but their request was disapproved with contempt: participation was reserved for men, and

the regatta was canceled. Many sports officials (who usually are all male) maintain the hierarchical separation between men and women, even if it comes at great cost.

In addition to disparities in prize money and awards, the search for sponsors for women also gives rise to occasional challenges. My interlocutors have shared with me their struggles in securing sponsorship due to the higher prominence enjoyed by men. While certain companies readily embrace the opportunity to sponsor men's regattas, often initiating sponsorship proposals themselves, actively seeking support as a woman is "like asking for charity" (Fiorella). Fiorella and Federica have even experienced instances where sponsors pledged financial support, yet after being advertised by the women wearing their logos during the regattas, the promised funds never materialized, leaving them in a situation of disregard. "Such things never happen to men!" (Federica).

Despite all these barriers, women athletes have continued to compete and win important races. One year, Anna, for example, won the third place at the *Regata Storica*. In a conversation with me, she recounted an episode that took place during the podium commemoration, during which Iacopo Ianni, representing the Venice municipality, presented the awards to the competitors amidst the presence of journalists. During the ceremony, he extended his hand to Anna and quipped: "If I had rowed, you wouldn't even have come third!" She described to me how she felt at the time: "I was there, crying because I was happy, and he comes with this comment! And then [another politician], a disaster, told me: 'Congratulations to your father!' This sentence is still imprinted in my mind ... actually, I am the one that rowed!"

Like Anna, Fiorella and Federica also experienced trivialization, even within their own club. In 2019, they achieved a remarkable feat by clinching first place in the *Regata Storica*. Their victory marked a historic milestone, as they were the first women from the island of Burano to win this race. Their club, the Burano *remiera*, could now count the two women among its list of champions. However, the novelty of having two female champions did not generate the winners' expected enthusiasm. The two rowers shared that they were not even welcomed by the members of the rowing team after the race. Fiorella explained that:

"In the *remiera*, there is a wall with all the framed photos of all the champions of Burano, until now, all men. We are the first *Buranelle* (women from Burano) to have won the historic regatta. There were no women before us! All were men! Consider that these [the pictures] were printed and bound by the *remiera* as a tribute to the champions ... and for us? We had to organize the party to hang our pictures to the wall ourselves, we made it ourselves!"

No celebratory event was organized in their honor, contrary to the customary tradition when a member of the team secures the first place. Why did the two women not deserve the same celebration as men? As sociologist Michael Messner writes, female athletes are working hard enough to attain the same level of legitimacy as men. Marginalization or trivialization of female athletes – even very successful ones, as the testimonies by Anna, Fiorella and Federica make clear – are unfair and prejudicial (2007, 41).

"Women's movement into sport represents a genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition, and as such it represents a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination" (Messner 2007, 32).



Figure 2: Women racing during the *Regata Storica*. Illustration: Enrico Bachmann 2023

Following the conversations with Anna, Federica and Fiorella, I interviewed Iacopo Ianni at the Venice City Hall. Ianni, who had made the disrespectful comment to Anna during the award ceremony, is a member of the *Lega*, a right-wing political party. He is also the National President of the Coordination of Venetian Rowing Associations and holds the title of “Councilor Delegate for the Protection of Traditions”. I wanted him to explain the reason for the disparity in prizes between men’s and women’s rowing competitions, but he evaded any question regarding the discrimination of women in rowing and prize money disparities, delving into the history of Venice and rowing instead of addressing concrete facts. Initially, I believed the interview had been a useless waste of time, as he constantly evaded answering my questions. But later I figured that perhaps he refrained from giving me an answer because it would have meant admitting that there is no defensible reason behind women rowers’ discrimination.

5. Women Dressed as Rats: Gendered Boats

Regattas are held with different boats that take on a gendered character. The *mascareta*, typically rowed by women, derives its name from the word *maschera*, meaning mask in Italian. Historically, prostitutes used to row through the canals with these boats to look for clients, disguising themselves by wearing typical Venetian masks so that their face would not be recognized (Fiorella; Brunello 2020). The *mascareta* is perhaps the lightest boat, very maneuverable and relatively cheap to build and maintain (Pergolis 1981, 52). During regattas, it is only rowed by women, and according to my informants it can be considered the least prestigious boat in a hypothetical ranking.

The *gondolino*,² instead, is a symbol of masculinity and rowed only by men. During my fieldwork, men rowers often referred to the *gondolino* as “sacred” when stating that only men can ride it. In the hierarchy of importance among boats, the *gondolino* holds the same level of importance as the *gondola*. Federica complained that the city municipality in Venice chooses not to lend *gondolini* to women, saying: “We can get the *mascareta* whenever we want, whenever! But the *gondolino*? Absolutely never! What is the difference? [Having the *gondolino*] is like having a Ferrari, yes, faster than other boats, but what’s the big deal?”.

There is just one exception where women row the *gondolino*: every year during the “rats regatta” (*Regata delle pantegane*), in the Cannareggio Canal, for the opening of the famous Venice Carnival. The peculiarity of this regatta is that women race with the *gondolino* but disguised as rats. This playful manner makes it distinctly different from a conventional regatta and, consequently, women’s participation is judged differently. According to some of my interviewees, the *Regata delle pantegane* is indeed not taken seriously.

Women react differently to this “opportunity” to row a *gondolino* disguised as rats. Some, like Daria, decline to take part in the opening spectacle: “I do not participate this year because I do not want to ridicule myself. If we do a *gondolino* regatta, we do it like men! As it should be!” Others go to great length to participate. For women who participate in the event, procuring *gondolini* proves to be a challenging task. Interestingly, for official regattas, Venice’s municipality provides boats for the racers, but not for this particular regatta. Anna told me,

“For [the rats’] regatta on February 9 [2020] we will all use the *gondolino* but the municipality does not lend it to us, because they give it only to men. And so we have to go to some male rower friends who have it privately and ask if we can borrow them for the regatta. Why do you think the municipality does not lend us the *gondolini*? Because the top racers don’t want to give it to the women because otherwise, they would be downgraded.”

Anna postulated that if the municipality lent women *gondolini*, it would potentially result in a detriment of the status of male rowers, as once women use *gondolini*, the boats themselves would lose prestige. “The *gondolino* is only for men, it is untouchable for women, so we cannot use *gondolini* from the municipality but private ones!” (Federica). Fiorella told me that some women racers did not participate in the *Regata delle pantegane* because their husbands, also rowers, did not let them: “[Men say] the *gondolino* is sacred! They did not want their women to participate, what a shame!”

Consequently, women wishing to participate in the *Regata delle pantegane* need to procure the boats themselves, asking private owners or *remiere* to lend them a *gondolino*, but many men are reluctant to offer their *gondolini*. Anna recounts facing refusals, even from individuals she believed to be friends, when seeking to borrow a *gondolino*. The justification they provided revolved around concerns of potential conflicts with colleagues or friends if the boat were lent to a woman. In sum, the fact that women faced so many obstacles when seeking to row a *gondolino* confirms the point made by Das that women’s entry into male sports is tolerated “only if it is accompanied by attitudes and behavior that serve to normalize this deviant action and do not challenge male superiority within the sports” (2018, 111). Hence, women can row the *gondolino*, but only if they are dressed as rats.

² *Gondolino* sing.; *gondolini* plur. is very similar to the *gondola* boat in its shape, but it is smaller and faster.

6. Canal Flow: The Promises of Tourism

Tourism, which thrives in Venice year round, has created new job opportunities in rowing-related activities. Some women rowers have established independent businesses, such as Canal Flow, an association composed of women that is committed to teach rowing to curious tourists.³ Among its members are skilled rowers, some engaged in competitive racing and others retired racers. Instead of offering the classic gondola ride, women of the association teach tourists to row a *batella* boat while acting as tourist guides. The association also extends to schools, offering free courses to young people. Canal Flow has caused a stir among the gondoliers of Venice because it dares to compete with their traditional tours. Moreover, only women offer this service.

Women from Canal Flow frequently cross paths with gondoliers as they navigate through the canals with tourists on their boats. The nature of these encounters is scornful and rather tense, as revealed by Cristina's description:

"Many times, they make comments like 'aah! Women at the stern!' or they make comments out loud but among themselves, like 'be careful, there's a woman at the stern' to say that we probably cannot handle the boat. [...] With some there are even problems, like they even threatened us."

The interactions between the rowing women and gondoliers can also reveal instances of arrogance, as shared by a young female racer in a radio interview: "last week I was with my rowing partner, and routinely all the men on the water [said things like], 'What are you doing? Return back home to the kitchen cooking and cleaning in your house'" (Clark and Conrad 2017).

In a more recent development, towards the end of October 2020, the administrative body representing the gondoliers dispatched a letter to Canal Flow, signed by several lawyers, threatening to denounce the association if they do not close their organization immediately (Anna). The letter was accusing the association of being an illegal business, which in reality it is not. Gondoliers see Canal Flow as a threat. As one of my interviewees explained, the presence of the association has sparked a conflict of interest with the gondoliers, the latter thinking that women steal their clientele. However, women in Canal Flow do not think they concur with gondoliers because they provide a different service, teaching tourists how to row rather than only taking them on tours. Nevertheless,

"Gondoliers hate us! [...] but they don't understand that our job is different from theirs because we aim to the experience, it's experimental tourism [...]. The majority of tourists that I have in my boat to teach them how to row, they often tell me that they already did the classical gondola ride with the gondoliers. Because they [tourists] see the two activities as different, and they effectively are!"

Canal Flow does not only teach tourists how to row, it is also committed to raise awareness for rowing among younger generations who have lost interest in recent years and organizes rowing classes in schools. It is also the only association of women that has the mission of supporting women in rowing, for instance by sponsoring women's participation in the regattas. Canal Flow is, together with the city municipality, the major sponsor of women's

³ The name of the association has been anonymized.

regattas: “During a particularly prosperous year we sponsored more than the municipality. Which is great for us”.

Apart from economic considerations, there might be another issue at stake when women enter the tourism business in the canals of Venice. I argue that the very ideal of masculinity plays a crucial role in this. There is an interesting parallel with the aviation industry, where women continue to be under-represented as pilots, a profession still dominated by masculine values and practices and seen as incompatible with raising a family whilst being away for long periods of time – even though women make up 72% of the entire crew, and as flight attendants many work the same shifts as pilots (Gibbon 2014, 46). Similarly to gondoliers, the highly masculine image of pilots hampers the attempt to diversify a workforce (Gibbon 2014). The division of roles is constructed along lines of gender where only certain behaviors are allowed and “men workers’ images of masculinity linked their gender with their technical skills; the possibility that women might also obtain such skills represented a threat to that masculinity” (Acker 1990, 146). Thus, the female presence in the canals threatens the gondoliers’ self-perception that rowing is a highly masculine activity. The stylization of the gondolier as a male profession, a question of male honor and power, however, “exposes the dominant patriarchal order as potentially fragile and inconsistent” (Besnier, Rownell and Carter 2018, 147).

7. Aspiring to Become a Gondolier

As I have mentioned at the beginning of this working paper, women who are experienced sports rowers have taken the test to become gondoliers but failed. What adds an intriguing layer to this situation is the evident paradox. Official regulations indeed permit anyone, including women, to pursue the role of a gondolier. Despite being skilled rowers with years of racing experience, these women did not pass the exam.

When I asked Gregorio, a gondolier in his fifties: “If I perfectly learned to row, could I ever become a gondolier?” his answer was an unequivocal “no”, and to my “why not?” he replied that it was “just not possible!” and that “a gondolier [...] must be a man”. Hence, to be a gondolier is not a question of rowing technique. Giorgio, a retired gondolier, admitted that some women rowers are technically able to row with the gondola even better than some gondoliers:

“these female champions who won the historic regatta three or four times in a row, never dared [until recently] to say, ‘I’m going to be a gondolier!’ Because it was always a tradition that the gondolier is a man, not a woman! [...] Everywhere in the world if there is a gondola, there is a man, not a woman. [As provided by law] there can be women, but there doesn’t have to be!”

Being a gondolier is a lucrative profession. A tour costs 80 euros for 30 minutes, and the fee increases to 100 euros for evening tours. The earnings also can largely increase depending on the number of tours declared to the fiscal authorities. A gondolier’s license has an estimated value of half a million euros. Gondoliers therefore tend to prioritize retaining profits within their families, insisting on the inheritance of licenses from father to son, despite official regulations. It seems that money has an influence on gondoliers’ choice of keeping the profession within their circle. Anna acknowledged that “we know that it’s a shitty environment, that only [gondoliers] can make big money, cash, [they] only want [their] sons

or brother-in-law, because [they] know that they would never denounce you⁴, [gondoliers] would never say 'ah, no, excuse me I don't earn 20,000 euros a year; I earn that in half a month!'"

Within Canal Flow, numerous women have tried to pass the exam to become a gondolier in response to provocations:

"Why can't women become one [a gondolier]? With [Canal Flow] many of us are rowers, some women even better experts than me, super qualified women who know exactly how to row because of their experience. They tried to pass the test, an examination at the bow of the boat, so it is not that you need to know many things⁵ [...]. But they already reject you at the first step! And I say, even I might eventually struggle to carry a gondola alone with people like an experienced gondolier, but you can't tell me that [someone] with a racing experience of 10 to 15 years can't row at the bow! It doesn't exist! But there are young men who have a dad gondolier and immediately pass!" (Cristina).

Anna recalled that gondoliers accused her group of being "fake gondoliers" and challenged them to prove their legitimacy by taking the gondolier exam. They contended that women could not assert equality without having passed the rowing exam. Women were convinced that they would fail the exam, as they know that the jury is mostly controlled by gondoliers and their friends, so they expected it to be inherently biased and corrupt. Nevertheless, in 2018, women of Canal Flow thought the time had come to try to pass the gondolier exam.

The participation fee for the gondolier exam was 150 euros. Lorena told me:

"When the call was publicly announced the girls said, 'We don't want to do it, why should we waste 150 euro to be humiliated!?' That's when I said, 'No, if you don't stand up and be counted no one is going to count you!' Well, then we actually paid 150 euro each to be humiliated."

The exam to become a gondolier is only offered when there is a concrete need for new personnel. In 2018, several of my interviewees participated in a preliminary examination of rowing carried out at the bow, the front of the gondola. In the call for applications, 238 people responded. The first 60 people that passed this preliminary test would be subsequently admitted to the course of "Art of the gondolier" necessary to achieve the qualification of gondolier, a course that includes hours of theory, Venetian history, English and Spanish language courses, navigation safety, and rules of good behavior with tourists (Cardona, 2018). It is said that even before the examination, judges had a list of names of 55 aspiring rowers who would pass the preselection for the competition, of which 36 male candidates ultimately passed the test (Il Gazzettino 2019, La Nuova Venezia and Mestre 2019, TG.com 2019).

The exam took place in a military area only accessible by water taxi. "It was a two-minute row in the front of the boat in the marina area [outside Venice, near Porto Marghera]," Anna recounted. Women of Canal Flow were already suspicious of the corruption within the examination process. No witnesses were allowed, except for the judges and the people

⁴ Here she refers to the fact that some gondoliers are altering tour prices or choosing not to report certain rides to taxation authorities.

⁵ Rowing at the bow of the boat is easier than at stern.



Figure 3: Rowing in the shadow of menacing figures. Illustration: Enrico Bachmann 2023

that took the exam. Lorena, the founder of Canal Flow and a former national champion in stand-up rowing, described the circumstance during the exam as follows:

“No witnesses, except for your group,⁶ because obviously there are so many trying to get in. There is nothing like a list of what you have to do to pass or anything like that, they’ve had their own secret list, so they know the rumors around you [...], no one knows what to do to pass. And they certainly were not testing us to see how we could handle the boat [...] I got fewer points than some boy after me, he crashed into the pier!”

Anna had a similar experience:

“We did the exam, in military area so no one sees you, with no audience or testimonies. [...] The exam is not at the stern, but you ride in the front of a boat with someone behind you rowing, and you have to literally row seven times, you have to stop the boat, [...] row again, arrive, stop the boat, another seven times, stop the boat, go down and say goodbye. How can you evaluate if a person is able to carry other people like that? My examination lasted a minute and ten seconds.”

The only people that passed the test were sons or relatives of gondoliers, and the only two women who landed in the backup selection were gondoliers’ daughters. Anna recounted, “Of 60 people that passed, 55 are sons of gondoliers and five of those who wash gondolier’s gondolas [...] who already tried to take the exam last year”. Lorena added, “The women that got into the backup selection are women who do not know how to row, they are not part of any *remiera* and they do not participate in regattas. They are just daughters of the gondoliers”. It seems that a woman can only become a gondolier, if she is the daughter of one. Despite their skills, experienced female rowers could not enter the circle of gondoliers.

8. Conclusion

As I have shown in this paper, women are systematically excluded from rowing in the canals of Venice – but they actively resist sexism and contest male dominance. Rowing clubs adhere to certain behavioral rules, where men instruct women and women are discouraged from taking too much initiative. In the realm of sport competitions, borders between the genders are maintained, there are regattas exclusively for men or women, and it is forbidden for women to participate in a regatta designed for men. Furthermore, boats and their usage are gendered, as women are expected to use specific boats and are prohibited to use ones that are exclusively for men. Whenever women strive to claim more space in the field of rowing, they challenge the established patriarchal order and threaten its equilibrium.

Despite the heated public debate that has emerged in the media about sexism in Venetian rowing, gondoliers remain locally respected figures who represent Venetian tradition to tourists and locals alike. Few people challenge rowing traditions and related economic structures, even though they appear to consistently favor men and disadvantage women, continually placing obstacles or imposing restrictions.

Nevertheless, the queens of the canals are achieving victories in their struggle against male privilege. Since I began my research at the end of 2019, I remained in contact with the group of women that was advocating for equal prize money for the historical regatta. On

⁶ Participants were divided into groups of 10 people and did the exam one group at a time.

a damp and rainy evening of December 2023, I once again met them in Venice. They told me that their call for more gender equality in sport had been met with considerable resistance, but finally in 2021, the prizes for women and men were made equal. They had exerted stronger pressure on the city municipality by appealing to the “higher-ups” in politics. Through their resourcefulness, persistence, and perseverance, and against all odds, they finally achieved at least one of their goals.

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