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Breaking in Morocco: Opportunities and challenges for professionalization and gender equality in the run-up to the 2024 Olympic Games

ABSTRACT

In Morocco, breaking's formalization through governmental bodies already took off years ago and federations have played a crucial role in the organization, implementation and control of competitions. Formal institutions have shaped the local scenes and provided opportunities but also posed challenges for breakers on the ground. In this article, we explore formalization, gender inequalities and pathways for professionalization in Morocco in the run-up to the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Utilizing ethnographic vignettes, interviews and survey data, we investigate how dancers navigate the top-down institutionalization of breaking and we give voice to their criticisms. We discuss how the formalization of breaking affects the Moroccan breaking scene, what critical opinions about this formalization exist and how formalization can be organized in culturally sustaining ways. In our investigation we paid particular attention to opportunities for professionalization

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and achieving gender equality for dancers from the Global South as well as the question of access to the western structure of the Olympics. We found that institutional formalization is perceived as disappointing and detrimental to the long-term and bottom-up development and self-organization, while nevertheless also opening up support and new opportunities for professionalization and achieving equality for b-girls.

INTRODUCTION

As breaking evolves into an Olympic discipline, breaking scenes across the world are undergoing transformation. Local structures, discourses, relationships, embodied practices, financial flows and professional opportunities are currently being reorganized and formalized; though not without some challenges. Breakers express concerns that the informal structures (on the level of the crew, the city, the nation and the globe) that they have built over decades of grassroots participation are now at danger of being co-opted by institutions, namely the World DanceSport Federation (WDSF), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and their associated agencies on the ground.

In some countries breaking has a long history of formalization which has often been met with consistent opposition. In Morocco, breaking's formalization through governmental bodies began years ago and federations have played a crucial role in the organization, implementation and control of competitions. Formal institutions have not only shaped the local scene and provided opportunities but also posed challenges for breakers on the ground. Additionally, Moroccan dancers often have difficulty travelling abroad, which limits their opportunities to experience cultural exchanges with the global breaking community. The internet has therefore remained a vital source for inspiration and transfer of cultural and kinaesthetic knowledge. Furthermore, the participation of women is particularly scarce in Morocco, when compared to other global hubs, highlighting other conditions of inequality in the scene.

In this article, we explore gender inequalities and pathways for professionalization from this Global South locale and draw primarily on Friederike 'Bgirl Frost' Frost's long-term ethnographic engagements with the breaking scene in Morocco. Utilizing ethnographic vignettes, interviews and survey data, we investigate how dancers navigate the top-down institutionalization of breaking in the run-up to the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris and we give voice to their criticisms. To do so we discuss the following questions: how does the formalization of breaking affect the Moroccan breaking scene? What critical opinions about this formalization exist? And, how can the formalization be organized in culturally sustaining ways? In our investigation we paid particular attention to opportunities for professionalization and achieving gender equality for dancers from the Global South. We found that institutional formalization is perceived as disappointing and detrimental to long-term, bottom-up development and self-organization, while nevertheless also opening up new opportunities for professionalization and achieving equality for b-girls.

Answering our research questions will allow us to contribute to a growing body of pedagogical and institutional research that takes a social-justice and decolonial approach and advocates for a critical engagement with

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intersectional issues of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability and class. In this type of research, institutions such as the IOC, dance federations and agencies of the nation state, are viewed with a healthy critical distance. More radical approaches view such institutions as representing neo-colonial, capitalist and systemically racist soft-power interests that are to be rejected wholesale, while more moderate and liberal approaches seek to work with these institutions to promote change from within their world systems. In this article, we aim to strike a balance and straddle a fine line between these poles in social-justice and decolonial research. We show how breakers in Morocco on the one hand have a strong interest in protecting their local underground scenes from institutionalization, while on the other, they also find ways of tactically exploiting the affordances that institutionalization offers, namely the potential for global mobility and gender equality.

We begin by briefly presenting the IOC's vision for achieving gender equality and promoting youth and urban sports in the 2024 Olympics in Paris, in which breaking will be included for the first time as an official Olympic discipline. We continue by clarifying our positionalities as researchers and outlining our methodology and we provide a short overview of the history of breaking in Morocco. Drawing on participant observation, interviews and survey data, we then present a number of criticism and hopes articulated by Moroccan breakers regarding the formalization of breaking by institutions that are directly or indirectly involved in preparing breaking's entrance into the Olympics. We conclude by summarizing our findings and responding to our research questions.

OFFICIAL DISCOURSES OF THE OLYMPICS

The inclusion of breaking – alongside sport climbing, skateboarding and surfing – in the 2024 Paris Games aims to make the Olympics 'more urban' and 'more artistic' (Goh 2020: n.pag.). Breaking is thus conceptualized as bridging sports and art and as having an appeal especially to urban youth. These youth sports 'are inclusive, engaging and can be practiced outside conventional arenas' (IOC 2020: n.pag.). Breaking made its debut in the 2018 Youth Olympics in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where it showcased itself as an 'urban culture at its finest' and a 'truly global sport' (McAlister 2022: n.pag.) with competitors hailing from all five continents, who showed great 'comradery' and created a 'party atmosphere' (McAlister 2022: n.pag.). Such discourses align breaking with the long-established Olympic principles of fairness and internationalism, while also rejuvenating and 'jazzing up' the Games by emphasizing youthful artistic urbanity. In the IOC's official rendering, breaking is thus conceptualized as a youthful, urban and artistic 'sport'. In contrast, within breaking scenes and within hip hop at large, breaking is often conceptualized as a 'culture' or an 'art form' rather than a 'sport'. This discrepancy between breaking-as-a-sport and breaking-as-a-culture, our findings reveal, sometimes lead to misunderstandings and can create disappointments on both sides.

Apart from wishing to attract more urban youth, the IOC is also determined to achieving a 'historic 100% gender equality in athlete quotas' (IOC 2020: n.pag.) for the 2024 Paris Games. Achieving full gender equality certainly poses a thorny problem for breaking; a notoriously male-dominated form of dance (Johnson 2023; Singh 2022; Schloss 2009; Engel 2001; Rose 1994). It might thus be difficult for local federations to identify and prepare enough

b-girls for each nation. This might be especially true for nations in the Global South, where b-girls not only have to prove themselves within the masculine culture of breaking and hip hop, but also find themselves having to negotiate patriarchal structures prevalent in wider society, such as feeling unsafe when practising in public spaces. Additionally, not all b-girls might participate in the local battles and thus might not be visible outside their local community, their neighbourhood or city (Gunn 2022: 7).

While a quota-based idea of gender equality is certainly a laudable starting point towards providing fairer opportunities for b-girls – but not necessarily queer, trans and non-binary breakers – the more thorny issue revolves around dismantling breaking's masculinist kinaesthetics that posits the male body as a benchmark and a norm (which is the case for many other sports as well). The masculinist kinaesthetics regiment not only male, but also female, queer and non-binary dancers' body movements and they shape the interactional logics of battles (Gunn 2016; LaBoskey 2001; Güngör et al. 2021; Singh 2022; Frost 2023). Can the IOC's commitment to introducing quotas in order to guarantee full gender equality strengthen the b-girl's involvement, presence and aesthetics and thus begin to undo the hegemonic masculinity prevalent in breaking and achieve true equality for b-girls? We certainly hope so, and the visibility and equal treatment of b-girls in the Breaking for Gold competitions of 2022 and 2023 are showing positive trends. Yet our research suggests that we must remain critical of assumptions that this simple top-down imposition of a gender quota will enable b-girls, in particular those from the Global South, to be able to compete on an international stage.

RESEARCHERS' POSITIONALITIES AND METHODOLOGY

As academics and hip hop practitioners, both researchers occupy unique insider/outsider perspectives. Frost is an internationally known b-girl, who grew up in Berlin-Kreuzberg, Germany. Since she started breaking in 2001, she has been involved as a dancer, organizer, judge and activist in the international breaking scene. In her research, she follows a practice-of-theory approach that explores breaking as a cultural practice, questions gender assumptions and heteronormative structures (Güngör et al. 2021; Frost 2023), interrogates her own positionality as a white dancer (Frost 2022), and considers the transnational exchange of breaking movements. Singh is a hip hop head who grew up in and around Frankfurt, Germany. Since the late 1990s, he has been an amateurish graffiti writer, emcee, DJ and beatmaker. He is not a breaker but has always loved watching breakers getting down to the floor at jams and battles. In 2013, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Delhi, India in the emerging local hip hop scene (Singh 2021, 2022; Dattatreya and Singh 2020), where almost every hip hop head was also a breaker. Thus, Singh started developing an academic interest in understanding the interactional flows and the masculinist semiotics of the dancing bodies he observed in the parks and jams in the city. Singh and Frost both utilize their unique insider and outsider perspectives for their research. In previous work we have shown how the 'connection of embodied and cultural knowledge and the involvement in hip hop practice with academic epistemology fuses duelling perspectives' (Frost 2022: 21), and creates 'a continuous oscillation between insider and outsider – a role ambiguity' (Singh 2022: 84).

Apart from our practical and theoretical knowledge of hip hop and breaking culture, our research is informed by several data sources: we administered

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an online survey, wrote ethnographic field notes and conducted interviews. The online survey was administered in 2022 among breakers in Morocco. A total number of fourteen breakers responded and answered our questions on their personal opinions and involvement of breaking as an Olympic discipline, their needs and hopes regarding the national federation, and reflections on their local breaking scene regarding the level and support of b-girls and b-boys. The survey was anonymous, but respondents could choose to share their identities and have their names published. Most respondents were dancers between 18 and 24 years of age and they were predominantly male. Frost conducted participant observation in Morocco in 2021 and 2022 in several practice spots and competitions in Casablanca, Rabat and Marrakech. She interviewed five dancers (one of them a b-girl) in 2022 and had several informal discussions with various breakers in practice spots or after events in 2021 and 2022. She documented one written exchange with a representative of the 'Fédération Royale Marocaine des Sports Aérobics, Fitness, HipHop et Disciplines Assimilée' (hereafter called 'the Federation'), in which breaking as a sport is formally included.

BREAKING CULTURE IN MOROCCO

Hip hop culture emerged in Morocco in the 1980s through TV and through youth whose families had emigrated to countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium or France, while they visited Morocco for holidays. They danced in public space and brought VHS cassettes with them that started circulating among youth in Morocco. In big cities like Tanger, Fez, Marrakech and Casablanca, rap and breaking crews started appearing alongside an increase in hip hop music clubs. There was said to be a vivid cultural and artistic exchange between Moroccan dancers and those visiting from Europe. Thus, it seems that hip hop in Morocco was predominantly influenced by European hip hop culture – through the emigrated youth – rather than mediated by popular American hip hop culture (Alami et al. 2018). For example, b-boy Yoriyas from the well-known breaking crew 'Lhiba Kingzoo', discovered breaking in the early 2000s, when spending the summer holidays with his cousin in Tangier, and seeing dancers from Morocco, Belgium, France and the Netherlands practising together. He observed and imitated their movements, continued practising in his hometown and came back again one year later, to exchange once again with the local and international b-boys in Tangier. In the mid-2000, the Moroccan government noticed the hip hop movement and permitted dancers to practise in public space; later dancers were also able to access youth centres for practice or to host events. Consequently, crews developed their skills and some achieved international recognition such as 'Lhalla Kingzoo' representing Morocco in the Battle of the Year 2008 or 'Lhiba Kingzoo' with their RedBull BC One 2018 world champion Lil Zoo (Yoriyas 2020: n.pag.).

Today, hip hop is the most popular youth culture in Morocco, producing a number of famous rap and trap artists, such as Don Bigg, Dizzy Dros, 7Liwa or the globally renowned Moroccan–American rapper French Montana. In contrast, breaking remained to be a self-organized grassroots movement, even though it has been existing for more than thirty years in the country. The lack of cultural infrastructure forces dancers to organize themselves to be able to practise in public or private spaces. Only few 'formal' practice spaces dedicated to dance or hip hop culture exist in some of the bigger cities; for example, the private cultural institutions 'L'Uzine', run by the Foundation Touria

et Abdelaziz Tazi in Casablanca that opened its doors in 2014, or the 'Centre Culturel Les Étoiles Maroc', which is run by the Foundation Ali Zaoua with their 'Positive School of Hip Hop' in Casablanca (since 2014), Tangier (2017), Agadir (2019), Fez (2019) and Marrakech (2022). These spaces offer practice possibilities for the breakers and they put on breaking and other dance classes for local communities to learn about hip hop movements and culture. In other cities, youth centres or martial art studios offer limited spaces to practise, but often dancers find their own practice spots in their living rooms, the urban space or on the beaches. The public practice spots as well as nearly most of the youth centres and martial arts studios were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. This has not only resulted in a lack of practice possibilities but also made it difficult for the local dance communities to meet and exchange.

UNSAFE SPACES

Moroccan society at large regards breaking as being connected to the 'street', a word or space that is often locally associated with crime and drugs. In our survey, several respondents mentioned that it can be unsafe to practise on the street or in public spaces more generally. B-boy Xidori (Survey Respondent A 2022) stated that:

there are not enough dance studios available for dancers [...] the majority of dancers train outdoors, which means that they can face many problems such as bad weather, getting kicked out of their training place (because it is done in public spaces), problems with the police (sometimes people can complain to the police about the loud music), and finally it can be dangerous sometimes to train at night or near bad neighbourhoods.

If training outdoors can be difficult for b-boys, it might even be more difficult for b-girls. 'Training outdoors can be more problematic for a girl's safety and image' adds b-boy Xidori (Survey respondent A 2022: n.pag.) (see also Gunn 2022). The cultural association of breaking with the street might therefore prevent b-girls' access to training spaces. Additionally, it prevents b-girls from being a visible part of the community, if they, for example, can only practise safely at home.

Survey participants expressed the hope that the Olympics might help to change the 'street' image of breaking to a recognized sportive activity, which might result in better understanding, acceptance and appreciation in society at large but also in the immediate families of the breakers. Dancers also hope that through the Olympics, breaking can garner a wider audience, and thus attract sponsors and create opportunities for professionalization. They hope for better infrastructure, learning opportunities like workshops and regular battles to show and prove their skills (Survey respondents A, D, E, F, I 2022). Still, the hope of breakers that the Federation might create access to regular and safe practice spaces and learning opportunities does not necessarily turn into reality. Apart from training camps for the national team, no new professional training facilities have become available for dancers in Morocco (Interview B 2022). Moreover, the IOC's official discourses frame breaking as an 'urban' and 'youthful' sport that can be picked up by young people from around the world without needing access to expensive

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training facilities. This might romanticize the idea that breaking is connected to the street in ways that might be counterproductive for Moroccan breakers and especially for b-girls.

B-GIRLING IN MOROCCO

As is apparent in breaking communities around the world, b-boys usually outnumber b-girls. This is not different in Morocco. Traditional family structures and unsafe practice possibilities add to a lack of b-girls or a sustainable involvement of women. B-boy Xidori (Survey Respondent A 2022) explained in the survey that

our society can make women feel attacked or judged when they decide to pursue this discipline (breaking), under the pretext that a woman cannot dance, which is in contradiction with our true culture since women have always danced in our folkdances and traditional celebrations.

Most of the survey participants stated that there are not enough professional b-girls in Morocco to make up 50 per cent of the National Moroccan Olympic Team (as envisioned in the IOC's 'historic 100% gender equality in athlete quotas' for the 2024 Paris Games), while they do think that there are enough good b-boys around. Contradictions are apparent in many ways. There is an awareness in the Moroccan breaking scene that there are not enough b-girls, and many b-boys are in favour of having more b-girls in the scene. But the reasons for the low number of b-girls are often expressed as being connected to society or unsafe spaces rather than acknowledging that the behaviour of the b-boys might also perpetuate this problem. In Frost's field observations in Rabat and Marrakech in 2022, she witnessed several cyphers where b-girls were treated disrespectfully, for example, by cutting their turns short or sexualizing them through offensive gestures (see also Johnson 2023: 111).

The masculine heteronormativity prevalent in breaking cultures can restrict access for women, queer and trans dancers. Nevertheless, in Frost's observations in Rabat and Casablanca, and during an interview with b-girl El Mamouny, it also became clear that organizing regular safe practice sessions, having friends as coaches, holding b-girl competitions and having b-girls on the national team, can improve b-girls' opportunities in breaking. Gunn (2022: 8) displays how this circle of visibility and access is important to attract and keep women in the breaking scene. Thus, encouragement among b-girls is an important factor, but without access to safe spaces, and without the support of promoters, organizers and dancesport federations, b-girls will remain marginalized and disadvantaged in breaking scenes, such as the one in Morocco. The Federation organizes annual competitions like the Moroccan Breaking Championships, where the best breakers are determined by national judges. In 2021, the first official b-girl edition was implemented, enabling the local b-girls to occupy the stage and claim their title. Constructively, the integration of b-girls in the competition used the same criteria from the b-boy battle – the same number of rounds to dance in the battle and the same prize money. In an interview with a representative for breaking in the Federation, he stated that the development of gender equality is not primarily fuelled by the integration of breaking in the Olympic Games in 2024, but rather by the idea of equal treatment as athletes and the Federation's motivation to encourage b-girls to participate in their events. He notes that, 'all persons,

Moroccan b-boy or b-girl, has a chance to represent their country on a high level' and adds that 'of course, it depends [on] the preparation, sacrifice and determination' (Interview E 2022: n.pag.).

The idea of personal 'sacrifice' plays a major role in the Moroccan breaking community and was apparent in interviews as well as the survey. 'Sacrificing' time and financial means paired with a highly professional level of breaking – a contradiction that also exists in the idea of an 'underground' hip hop artist – is very present in the approach to breaking in Morocco (Interview B, C, D, E 2022; Survey respondents C, H 2022). Moreover, many dancers expect that *others* have to provide structures and support, instead of creating their *own* structures themselves (Interview A, B, C 2022; Survey respondent C 2022).

These approaches enable the Federation to expect high commitment from the dancers with little institutional/financial support, as informal (underground) practice and formal structures get mixed up. Dancers and the Federation are both facing challenges and are committed to advancing breaking locally. On the one hand, breakers within the hip hop community have a desire to be self-organized but often require external support. On the other hand, the Federation utilizes a top-down approach but presents new opportunities and develops infrastructure and better conditions for professional breakers. But in these contrasting approaches, both sides ignore the fact that they carry a responsibility for the few professionalization possibilities, for the disillusion and consequently the low commitment from Moroccan breakers. Additionally, it remains questionable if the aims of the Federation can help to achieve a higher female involvement. Responses from our survey (Respondents B, C, D) highlighted that there are a number of factors that influence this in the Moroccan breaking scene. These include traditional cultural perspectives prevalent in Moroccan society, scarce practice possibilities and a hegemonically masculine breaking culture.

BREAKING BATTLES

Both practice spots and breaking battles in Morocco are typically self-organized – often with no or small budgets, where local DJs and judges work voluntarily or for very little money. They are often organized in local youth centres or private cultural spaces both with or without small financial support from state infrastructure or European cultural organizations. Once a year, the Moroccan Championships as well as the urban youth festival 'Freestyle Maroc Urban Dance – Festival International des Cultures Urbaines' (FMUD) are organized by the Federation. FMUD is the only regular festival that has some international judges and battle guests, travelling to Morocco often on their own means. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Moroccan Championships were cancelled in 2020, and they were held online in 2021. FMUD was cancelled in both years and finally took place again in 2022 with national participants only.

In spite of this, only a few events offer possibilities to qualify for international battles, but none of these happen on a regular basis. One example is the Red Bull BC One Cypher event which was unfortunately cancelled in 2020 and 2021. Other events include the Battle of the Year (2008 and 2012) or some privately organized qualifier events for other tournaments. These events provide the local scene with fairly inconsistent opportunities to compete on a local, national or international level, to gain experience in battling or connect with the global breaking scene.

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TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS AND BARRIERS

Moroccan breakers have long been connected to a number of European breaking scenes, due to Morocco's geographical proximity to Spain and France as well as the long history of colonial occupation by these countries, and the diverse Moroccan communities in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Fieldwork interviews highlighted Lil Zoo as one of the notable transnationals connecting European and Moroccan scenes. Lil Zoo is a source of inspiration for interviewees, not only for his moves but also for the dreams of many Moroccan b-boys to win world competitions and become internationally famous. Several high-level dancers from Lil Zoo's generation also migrated to Europe where they found better practice conditions and working opportunities as dancers. This was confirmed by a survey respondent, who noted that 'b-boys and b-girls don't have that much support in our country, that's why a lot of Moroccan b-boys immigrate and prefer continuing their breaking life abroad' (Survey respondent D 2022). Interestingly, this refers only to b-boys as persons who migrate, and reproduces the general discourse of mobility in Morocco as a 'male thing' (Bel-Air 2016: 4). This generation of émigrés are not as present in supporting the young Moroccan breakers, creating a noticeable generational gap. These generational and knowledge gaps can be observed in other countries like Cuba, where migration similarly impacts young dancers' lives (Frost 2022: 27). Nevertheless, some breakers stay connected to their homeland through the internet or regular visits to Morocco.

At the same time, the emigrated generation of b-boys might potentially reduce the opportunities for b-boys residing in Morocco to participate in the Olympics. Dancers who live abroad often have a higher skill level and have access to good training facilities. By retaining their Moroccan citizenship they can enter competitions as Moroccan nationals (paralleling mobilities in other sports, such as football). Additionally, Moroccan émigrés with EU residencies/visas are able to participate in the qualifying events that are predominantly organized in European countries that require visas that are often difficult to obtain for Moroccan dancers. For example, in the Breaking World Championships 2022 in Korea, no breakers residing in Morocco participated, despite promises from the Federation to bring the two Moroccan breaking champions to the event. Only the BC One Cypher Morocco 2022 champion, who lives in the United Kingdom, was able to attend. He represents Morocco in the Olympics and is part of the national team.

While several Moroccan b-boys live in Europe, there are currently no Moroccan b-girls who emigrated to other countries and compete at an international level. This enhanced the chances for the b-girls in Morocco to earn one of the sixteen places for b-girls in Paris 2024 through the African Continental Qualifier that was held in May 2023.¹ B-girl El Mamouny secured the win and will represent Morocco in Paris 2024. In spite of this, questions arise regarding the preparedness of Moroccan b-girls (and b-boys) and their support systems as they train and participate in the Olympic Qualifier series and compete at the Paris 2024 Olympics. Will the Federation use their financial means to send their b-girls abroad to compete, to gain experience and to get coached to meet international levels? And will these dancers be sufficiently prepared physically and mentally to succeed at an Olympic level?

In our survey, several dancers expressed a hope that the Olympics can 'open new doors, especially for those from disadvantaged countries, whose mobility and access to world events is limited' (B-boy Xidori, Survey respondent A 2022).

1. To reduce inequality for dancers from the Global South, four Continental Qualifiers have been organized in 2023 giving five b-girls and five b-boys a chance to directly qualify for Paris 2024, as well as for b-girls and b-boys placed between second and fourth to participate in the two Olympic Qualifier Series events in 2024 (Breaking for Gold 2022).

2. Since 2011, Morocco has been declared a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. Still, authorities restrict freedom of expression, critical journalists or human rights associations and activists are hindered in their work and/or sentenced to jail, laws that discriminate women and LGBTQ+ persons stay intact (see Human Rights Watch 2022) and corruption is an ongoing issue in the private sector and governmental institutions (see Trading Economics 2022).

Dancers qualify for the Olympic Games in 2024 in Paris through a world-wide ranking system where points are collected to determine the top qualifying athletes for the Olympics. Additionally, five Continental Qualifiers were organized (including one for Africa), from which the two winning dancers qualify directly to compete in Paris (Breaking for Gold in Paris 2022). But due to visa and travel restrictions, especially during times of the COVID-19 pandemic, many dancers from the Global South could not participate in competitions held in European or other western countries. Until today, all qualifier events were organized in economically affluent countries and regions (such as in Europe, the United States and Korea), widening the gap between dancers from the Global North and Global South.

This highlights a stark global inequality in terms of access to the ranking events. It is striking that more than half of our survey participants (62 per cent) think that Morocco has enough qualified b-boys, but their possibilities to gain experience within these world-class competitions is restricted. With breaking often described as meritocratic, inclusive and participatory culture by its participants (Osumare 2002: 31, 33; Schloss 2009: 15), it is obvious that this 'inclusiveness' is not equally available for all breakers within this new DanceSport structure. Accordingly, individual nationalities and passports represent critical determinants for access to the global breaking community. This may be an issue that had always existed, but has become evidently more noticeable. Breakers, and in particular b-girls, from the Global South are disadvantaged in multiple ways and the formalization of breaking in the run-up to the 2024 Paris Olympics makes this inequality apparent. The lack of access creates a lack of visibility, a lack of participation and thus makes it difficult to work and live as a professional athlete. The Olympic Games and their affiliated organizations reproduce the marginalization of the Global South.

THE FEDERATION'S STRUCTURES AND GROWING MISTRUST

As already mentioned, breaking as dancesport in Morocco is solely regulated by the Federation. No other federation or organization exists that includes or regulates dance in Morocco. The Federation is an official government structure. It organizes the annual national competition, supports athletes in getting an official artist status that helps procure visas and organizes training camps for the National Team. The Federation works together with big commercial events like the Red Bull BC One and the Battle of the Year, securing governmental permissions for the organization of these international battles and potentially contributing to the travel costs for any qualified Moroccan dancers. Dancers who want to benefit from any of these institutional structures are obliged to become members and abide by the Federation's politics and policies. Any self-organized breaking event within Moroccan youth infrastructure, take for example youth centres across the country, are required to get official permission from the Federation and attach the Federation's logo on any communication about the event, even when they don't have financial support. This process of adapting to structures in Morocco, as a parliamentary constitutional monarchy, is a normality for dancers.²

In 2021 and again in 2022, a National Team of breakers was set up, including b-girls and b-boys who took winning places in the Federation's Championship (if they were holding a Moroccan passport). These breakers are obliged to participate in dance training camps hosted by the Federation. Hopes were high from breakers to not only participate in the camps, but to receive

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long promised athlete contracts and a chance to battle abroad (Interview B 2022). Between 2021 and 2022, six breaking camps were organized by the Federation. According to participants, the camps in 2021 lacked in organization, exercise science or professional coaching, and the various promises around athlete contracts, payment and travel had not been met. This resulted in a boycott of the last camp in 2021. All National Team members cancelled their participation in the camp, and the breaking ambassadors (four b-boys in four cities that support the local scene who have a relationship or work with the Federation) and leading breaking representatives within the Federation all resigned from their roles. Interview respondents (B, D) suggested that this created the critical pressure needed for the Federation to provide better terms for breakers. Through such activism, breakers were able to achieve more professional, fair and sustainable treatment in the following breaking camps in 2022, but it did not change the fact that none of the dancers received their athlete contracts.

The failure of 2021 resulted in a more critical approach by the dancers involved in this resistance towards the Federation. B-boy Xidori stated that, 'I think the Federation is doing the opposite, giving b-boys and b-girls false promises that don't come true, resulting in a loss of motivation and hope' (B-boy Xidori, Survey respondent A 2022), and b-girl El Mamouny recounts that, 'if they [the Federation] can't help me to travel and battle abroad, I will find a way to do it myself' (2022: n.pag.).

In our survey as well as in the interviews, Moroccan breakers pointed out that even though hopes are high that the Federation will offer dancers chances for participation in breaking events abroad and foster professionalization, there is a wide-spread mistrust surrounding the institutionalization of breaking. Nonetheless, El Mamouny also noted that even though the Federation did not hold what they had promised (e.g. issuing athlete contracts or facilitating travel to qualification events), the camps motivated her. Waking up early and developing endurance through regular breaking training provided an important daily structure as an athlete. Spending focused time with a group of motivated and skilled dancers, she could level up in her skills and fitness. By the end of 2022, as the only National Team breaker residing in Morocco, she was finally able to travel outside of the country to compete internationally – the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic. With the help of the Federation she was able to procure a visa, and got in touch with a number of European organizers, so that finally she could participate in several competitions in France, where she came first in a b-girl battle.

ACTIVISM AND COUNTERMOVEMENTS

The top-down organization of the Federation and its influence is met with growing dissatisfaction within the Moroccan breaking scene. This has led to the formation of a counter-movement called El Mouvement, organized digitally by a few Moroccan b-boys (with all of them living abroad) in 2020. By organizing online battles and activities, El Mouvement claimed to exert pressure on the Federation to improve conditions for dancers. El Mouvement used the digital upwind caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that pushed dancers to rely heavily on online exchanges and self-organized battles. In their first Instagram post in December 2020, El Mouvement stated that, '[w]e "LMouvement Community" will announce for you very soon some events! [...] If they are killing our HipHop, let's build it by ourselves! Our love for the

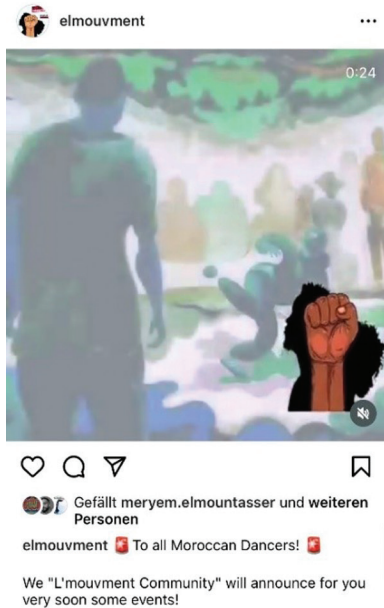


Figure 1: Public Instagram post by @elmouvement, 18 December 2020.

culture who pushed us to fight! Peace, Love, Unity & Havin' fun' (@elmouvement 2020). By evoking an old-school hip hop ethic of positive community spirit and activism, El Mouvement claimed a specific type of authenticity and portrayed itself as a grassroots alternative to the top-down initiatives by the Federation and other institutions. El Mouvement managed to hold a few online battles and expressed their anti-Federation position through posts, comments and hashtags, and the initiators even suggested that Moroccan dancers should boycott the Federation's events and structures.

In spite of this, given that all of El Mouvement's initiators were living in Europe and thus did not face the regulations imposed by the Federation's structures in Morocco, it remains questionable what to make of their activism. El Mouvement was short-lived, lasting for about a year before going silent. Such activism does not seem to be sustainable but rather a result of the trending online battles and activities in the global breaking scene during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. It seems that the grounded and united activism of the breakers in Morocco had more fruitful impacts for working with the Federation.

Not all breakers were overtly opposed to the affordance the Federation's structures can offer, and more than half of the survey participants were in favour of breaking becoming an Olympic discipline (and thus being institutionalized). Two breakers remarked in an interview that it can be beneficial for dancers to be part of the Federation's structure, if the Federation can, for example, support visa applications, travel or applications for Moroccan artist cards (Interview A, B 2022). The artist card is a professional supporting document that enables dancers to get basic health insurance, social security considerations and reduction of travels costs in Morocco. It is also an important supporting document for any visa application process, assisting athletes with global

mobility. As a basic requirement health insurance for the Federation-affiliated dancers should be set up – as many dancers do not have the official status that gives them these benefits as freelancers or unregistered artists. Moreover, athlete contracts or financial support could be issued to further support this process. In Morocco, where living expenses are relatively low, a small income of a few hundred euros and health insurance would ensure financial stability for many local practitioners, enabling them to focus on their training and help to convince their families that dancing can be a viable career path.

Additionally, breakers suggested that the Federation should hire breaking experts who are knowledgeable of the dance, the culture, the requirements to succeed in international battles and have a good understanding of the local scene to develop the infrastructure and possibilities for Moroccan breakers. Both the survey and interview responses highlighted the need for the Federation to bring in experts that can coach dancers to develop high-level skills to enable breakers to secure further work as professional dancers. Controversially, the idea to include breakers into the Federation was put into practice by the Federation's breaking representative. The Federation appointed four breaking ambassadors (four nationally known and respected b-boys) to take care of local battles and assist in training camps. However, these ambassadors do not seem to have any influence within the Federation's structure to develop better training and living conditions or travelling opportunities for the local dancers.

Some interviewees (A, B and C) held breakers accountable for not advancing dancesport opportunities with the Federation. Because of this departure, they argued that breakers need to develop a professional mindset, create their own events, not only focus on the Olympics (given the finite positions available worldwide) and should not rely on the Federation's actions. The idea that *others* (external organizations) should provide help and support to progress instead of dancers being responsible for their own actions and the health of the local breaking scene was also prevalent within our survey (Survey respondent A, C, E 2022) as well as in the various discussions with breakers in the field. This points to tensions still playing out between self-actualization and institutional co-option and only time will tell if these perspectives can reconcile in Morocco.

CONCLUSION

The formalization of breaking in Morocco and other countries of the Global South seems to offer some opportunities for achieving gender equality and professionalization. Yet, in terms of safe training facilities, funding and social recognition, the discrepancies between the Global South and the Global North seem stark. Despite the unfavourable conditions for the dancers in Morocco, breaking as an Olympic discipline gives hope for a justification of being a dancer. Even if many breakers living in Morocco may not be able to attend or qualify for the various events leading up to the Olympics, the Olympics does create new opportunities for participation in the global breaking community. This can potentially motivate breakers, especially b-girls, to look for opportunities for professionalization themselves. Despite these advances, it must be noted that many Moroccan breakers mistrust the institutionalization and formalization of breaking. In our interviews and survey, breakers argued that the Federation lacks sufficient knowledge about or interest in making genuine connections to the local and international breaking

scene and its bottom-up structures. This disconnect may make it difficult for the Federation to provide dancers with necessary support to prepare them to compete at an international level.

Until today, it is very unclear what the mission or vision of the Federation is. They intend to support and prepare the dancers for Olympia, but do not – or cannot – create a sustainable and professional infrastructure to do so. They promise athlete contracts with monthly payments, but do not issue them. They hold a championship event without clear communication if the win will benefit dancers in their path to the Olympic Games and they hold training camps without sending breakers to Olympic qualifiers. Notably in 2021 and 2022, no breakers residing in Morocco had been supported to participate in worldwide ranking events. Only in 2023, the top breakers from the National Team were able to attend two international Breaking for Gold World Series qualification events with the support of the Federation. It appears that the Federation wants their athletes to perform and represent the country, but they do not have a clear plan nor the sufficient expertise to prepare their athletes to do so.

Through our participant observation, survey and interviews, it became clear that the expertise of breakers regarding hip hop culture, the dance itself and athleticism are crucial for a sustainable implementation of breaking inside the Federation's structure. Therefore suitable coaches, and other institutional supports from the breaking community should be linked with the Federation's existing infrastructure. Additionally, financial support from the Federation for breakers is necessary to provide dancers with the possibility, as well as the motivation, to train professionally. But the self-determination and engagement by breakers themselves is just as crucial for professionalization. They cannot wait for opportunities but must create them by themselves, they must speak up and become active – which the Moroccan dancers of the National Team successfully did in 2021 – to achieve better conditions in Morocco.

At the same time, it is much easier for a European federation to benefit from or adapt to the Olympic processes and structures given their affluence. The Olympics is a fundamentally western organization that sustains systemic gatekeeping processes that privilege breakers and federations in the Global North. The access to the Olympics for dancers from the Global South is directly influenced by their affiliated federations and their ability or interest to advocate and support breakers to take part in global competitions. The federations are key to successfully applying for travel visas, for getting travel costs reimbursed and for competing at this international scale in Morocco. Unfortunately, dancers have few possibilities to influence their federation's actions, especially when they are intertwined with governments – which to some extent stands in diametrical opposition to the self-organized and locally built-up structures of global breaking scenes. This reproduces community concerns that breaking is being co-opted by external structures. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that in Morocco, dancers constantly negotiate better conditions for their athletes with the Federation. The question remains if the Federation in Morocco is willing to continue to give support to its associated breakers and live up to its promises. But, as several accounts we presented here illustrate, with dedication, persistence, personal initiative and a little help from the Federation, it will be possible for Moroccan breakers to travel, gain experience and thus prepare for the Olympic Qualifier Series and Paris 2024.

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