



French boxer Ana Gasquez trains in a gym of Havana. — AFP photos



Cuban boxer Idamelys Moreno (left) trains in a gym of Havana.



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## Women boxers striking a blow for equality in Cuba

In the musty funk of a Havana boxing gym, Idamelys Moreno smacks a series of whomping right hooks into a heavy punching bag. For the past four years, she has ripped it up in training to try to emulate dozens of Cuban men in winning Olympic boxing gold. But she and other big-hitting women are punching not so much a glass ceiling as a glass wall: In Cuba, only men are allowed to compete in boxing tournaments. "They haven't given us our chance," fumes Moreno, a muscular 27-year-old with burning ambition and a simmering frustration.

Ducking and feinting, her stance constantly shifts as she works her way around the swinging bag, the room resounding as her heavy blows dent its synthetic leather. The island's boxing greats beam down from posters on the walls, among them three-time Olympic champion Teofilo Stevenson.

"She's a boxer with a lot of enthusiasm and enormous physical capacities, but she is nowhere near her full potential yet," said her coach Emilio Correa, who won Olympic silver in 2008 and World Championship gold in 2005. Cubans are rightly proud of their unique boxing tradition which has brought a haul of 37 Olympic golds and 76 World Championship winner's medals—all by men. But featherweight Moreno—whose haymaking right fist has been honed by sparring with men—pleads: "If they'd give us the opportunity, we can also build on the medal collection that the men have won."

Moreno is not the only woman working the bags. Taking turns to spar with her are Yuria Pascual, a 26-year-old biologist, and Ana Gasquez, a French woman who says she was drawn to Cuba by the mystique of its boxing tradition. Ever ambitious, Moreno has set her sights on "a world and Olympic medal". Pascual says: "If men can do it, why can't we?"

### Male bastion

It's an ugly paradox for these women that since 2006 Cuba has been represented in the female programs in all Olympic sports, including weightlifting and wrestling—but not in that last bastion of Cuban machismo, inside the ropes of a boxing ring. It is generally accepted here that boxing is a man's sport, far too dangerous to accommodate women. Elsewhere, gender equality in sports has evolved and boxing joined the ranks of women's Olympic events at the London Games in 2012. Moreno dismisses the views of Cuban men that boxing is too dangerous for her, insisting body protection is more than adequate.

"All combat sports are dangerous. But we have protection for the chest, the head and mouth." The official reluctance to recognize female boxing "will end up discouraging" young women who want to climb into the ring, says Moreno. They have role models aplenty across the globe, including Ireland's undisputed lightweight world champion Katie Taylor, whose path to professional success

began with Olympic gold at London 2012.

### Help from the boys

Ironically, women are welcome to train in countless boxing gyms across Cuba and Gasquez acknowledges the gesture from male counterparts at boxing's grassroots level. "Boys help us, they don't discriminate against us," she says. It's the officials in suits that draw their ire. Women seemed primed for a breakthrough in 2016, when Cuban Boxing Federation President Alberto Puig announced the possibility of opening competition to females. But three years on, nothing has changed.

They continue to train, fueled by optimism that the Cuban Sports Institute may eventually give a green light to women's boxing ahead of the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. For these young boxers, it's impossible not to think of Namibia Flores, held up as an example to women boxers but who reached the age of 40 — the age ceiling for competition—without ever realizing her dream of bringing a women's gold medal to Cuba. "I don't want the same thing happening us," vows Moreno.

Correa, the coach, says that if women's boxing is eventually sanctioned by Cuban authorities, the potential for the sport is "massive—because this is the island of boxing." Alcides Sagarra, considered by many as the father of Cuban boxing, believes it is only a matter of time before women take their place among the sport's icons. "Cuban women



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cannot be denied their rights to participate in boxing competitions," said Sagarra, 82. He has a keen eye for developing talent, having trained more than 80 Cuban Olympic and world champions, including the legendary Stevenson who died in 2012. Their talent is still raw, he says, but is willing to make a prediction: "They will eventually have a good level." — AFP



### Samoa bans hit Elton John biopic over gay sex scenes

Samoa has banned the blockbuster Elton John biopic "Rocketman" from cinemas over depictions of gay sex, which remains illegal in the Pacific island nation. Samoa's Principal Censor Leiataua Niuapu confirmed the ban to local media this week, saying the film contained too many scenes that were "not good for public viewing". Niuapu told the Samoa Observer that the movie "violates laws against same-sex marriage and doesn't go well with cultural and Christian beliefs here". "It's a good story, in that it's about an individual trying to move on in life," he said.

"He (Elton John) went through a difficult family life and managed to move on and become very successful. But there are acts that are not good for public viewing and against the law." Samoa is a devoutly Christian nation and gay sex can attract jail terms of up to seven years, according to London-based lobby group Human Dignity Trust, although it notes authorities do not actively enforce the laws. The country is also well known for its acceptance of fa'afafines—men who dress as women and adopt female mannerisms—known locally as the third sex.

"This censorship is yet another way for moral seekers to bash a few people for no good reason," Tuisina Ymania Brown, a Samoan fa'afafine who is co-secretary of Geneva-based rights group ILGA. She said fa'afafines were part of Samoa's cultural fabric and the "Rocketman" ban was a contradiction of the tolerance they enjoyed. "Now are we saying that art that celebrates fa'afafines are not allowed?" she told Newsline Samoa.

"The power of the church has now reached into censoring the celebration of art. There are more important issues we should focus on, such as gender-based violence (and the) church paying taxes." Samoa also banned the 2009 movie "Milk" about pioneering US gay activist Harvey Milk, but last year's "Bohemian Rhapsody" was screened without attracting any complaints. In Russia, the gay sex scenes were cut from "Rocketman", prompting condemnation from Elton John and the stars of the movie. — AFP



In this file photo US actress Julianne Moore poses as she arrives for the screening of the film "Les Misérables" at the 72nd edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. — AFP

### Czech film festival to honor Oscar-winner Julianne Moore

American Oscar-winning actress Julianne Moore will be honored at the Karlovy Vary film festival in the Czech Republic at the end of the month, organizers said yesterday. Moore won the 2014 Best Actress award for her role in "Still Alice". She is also known for "The Big Lebowski", "Hannibal", "The Hours" and "The Kids Are All Right." Moore will receive the Crystal Globe award "for outstanding contribution to world cinema" at the opening ceremony, the organizers said in a statement.

Together with her husband, screenwriter and director Bart Freundlich, Moore will introduce their latest film "After the Wedding". "Six Feet Under" and "Sharp Objects" star Patricia Clarkson will receive the same Crystal Globe at the final ceremony, the organizers said. The 54th edition of the festival in the western Czech spa city of Karlovy Vary, which sold 140,000 tickets to 501 screenings last year, will run from June 28 to July 6. — AFP



In this file photo Actor Kevin Hart (right), his wife Eniko Parish (left) and children Hendrix, Heaven and Kenzo walk the carpet at the 'The Secret Life of Pets 2' Los Angeles Premiere at Regency Village Theatre in Westwood, California. — AFP

### 'X-Men' flops as 'Secret Life of Pets 2' tops box office

"X-Men: Dark Phoenix" flopped to the franchise's worst opening weekend as its mutant superheroes were beaten at the box office by fellow new entry "Secret Life of Pets 2." "Dark Phoenix" could only conjure up \$32.8 million at North American theaters over the three-day weekend, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations said Monday. Its opening haul—by far the lowest of the dozen "X-Men" titles released over the past two decades—was described as "disastrous" by Variety.

Starring Game of Thrones' Sophie Turner alongside James McAvoy, Jennifer Lawrence, Michael Fassbender and Jessica Chastain, the movie cost \$200 million to make. It is said to be the final installment of the current "X-Men" film series. It was forced into second place by Universal's new animation "The Secret Life of Pets 2", which pocketed \$46.7 million over the same period. A sequel to the 2016 hit tale of what animals do when their owners are away, "Pets 2" features the voice of Harrison Ford as a straight-talking pooch.

In third place was Disney's live-action "Aladdin," at \$24.7 million. The Guy Ritchie feel-good film stars Will Smith as the genie. Dropping from last weekend's top spot to fourth place was "Godzilla: King of the Monsters," taking in \$15.5 million. And in fifth was Paramount's "Rocketman," the biopic about singer Elton John, at \$13.8 million. Actor Taron Egerton, who plays John, has drawn strong reviews, including a warm endorsement from the singer himself. Rounding out the weekend's top 10 were:

"Ma" (\$7.8 million)  
"John Wick: Chapter 3 - Parabellum" (\$7.4 million)  
"Avengers: Endgame" (\$4.9 million)  
"Pokemon: Detective Pikachu" (\$3.2 million)  
"Booksmart" (\$1.6 million). — AFP

### Egypt asks UK to halt auction of Tutankhamun sculpture

The Egyptian embassy in London requested that Britain prevent the planned sale by Christie's of an ancient sculpture representing King Tutankhamun's head and return it to Egypt, Cairo said. "The Egyptian embassy in London requested the British foreign affairs ministry and the auction hall to stop the sale," Egypt's foreign ministry said. Christie's has announced that the brown quartzite head of the pharaoh—measuring 28.5 centimeters high and more than 3,000 years old—would take place on July 4. It said it expected the sale,

from the Resandro Collection—one of the world's "most renowned private collections of Egyptian art"—to fetch more than four million pounds (4.5 million euros, \$5.1 million). The foreign ministry also requested the sale of all Egyptian items planned by Christie's during auctions on July 3 and July 4 be stopped, stressing the importance of securing valid ownership certificates before the sale of these items. The statement also said the antiquities ministry had requested the UN cultural agency UNESCO stop the sales. — AFP

