
FEMALE ATHLETES REMEMBERING FOOTBALL DURING CHILDHOOD- THE TRANSPOSITION OF GENDER BORDERS

ATLETAS MULHERES RELEMBRANDO DO FUTEBOL NA INFÂNCIA – A TRANSPOSIÇÃO DE FRONTEIRAS DE GÊNERO

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RESUMO

O futebol tem sido historicamente pouco praticado por meninas em escolas e espaços de lazer na infância. Apesar disso, sempre existiram meninas que cruzaram as “fronteiras de gênero” – entendidas como as linhas tênues que dividem os comportamentos ditos adequados e culturalmente estabelecidos aos sexos – e passaram a conviver com meninos na prática do futebol. No intuito de entender como se deu esse processo na vivência de algumas atletas, foram formuladas as seguintes perguntas norteadoras: de que forma narram as suas memórias sobre a infância no futebol, mulheres que seguiram caminhos profissionais em tal esporte? Como os meninos as tratavam a partir do momento em que elas manifestavam interesse pela prática? No anseio de respondê-las, utilizou-se a metodologia de História Oral. Alguns aspectos encontrados nas narrativas das atletas revelam que nenhuma das trajetórias esteve livre das tentativas de impedimento ou restrições à prática de futebol, seja por meio do desencorajamento de familiares, ofensas ou a exclusão inicial do convívio masculino. Entretanto, as entrevistas permitiram aferir que interdições às meninas não se dão necessariamente ou exclusivamente por seu sexo, mas sim pela diferença de habilidade técnica apresentada em relação à maioria dos meninos.

Palavras-chave: Memórias. Mulheres. Futebol. Fronteiras de gênero.

ABSTRACT

Football has historically been practiced very little by girls in schools and leisure spaces during childhood. Nevertheless, there have always been girls who cross the “gender borders” - understood as the thin lines that divide culturally established, so-called appropriate behaviors for each sex - and join soccer practice with the boys. In order to understand how this process took place in the experience of some athletes, the following guiding questions were formulated: How do women, who followed professional career paths in football, narrate their childhood memories of the sport? How did the boys treat them from the moment they showed an interest in playing? In order to answer these questions, Oral History methodology was used. Some aspects found in the narratives of the athletes reveal that none of their trajectories were free of attempts to impede or restrict their practice of football, either due to family discouragement, offenses, or the initial exclusion from playing with the boys. However, the interviews allowed for the insight that impediments to the girls are not necessarily or exclusively because of their sex, but because of difference in the technical skill displayed in relation to the majority of the boys.

Keywords: Memories. Women. Football. Gender borders.

Introduction

It can be observed that the behaviors and roles that should be occupied by men and women in social situations have been historically and culturally established. Conforming to defined roles tends to be taught and encouraged since childhood, largely by families and in educational institutions where there are appropriate activities for each sex^{1,2}. In order to elicit these divisions and differences, as well as their consequences and implications, it is necessary to apply the concept of gender, which refers to the established social constructs for each sex³. The concept of gender is of interest to the present study due to the fact that, “[...] at an institutional, individual, and interactional level it is embedded in athletic structures and systems.”^{4:33}

Therefore, in Brazil for example, football has ended up becoming a sport widely characterized as masculine, and women, consequently, have been kept away from regulated play of the sport for a long period of time, such that their trajectory in the sport has been characterized as irregular and full of impediments, regulations, and prohibitions⁵. A major outcome of this is that football has historically been practiced very little by girls in schools and leisure spaces during childhood, such that differences in the numbers of players, opportunities, and abilities between the two sexes have been perpetuated. This is because boys are generally “[...] trained repeatedly and thus are able to continue developing a certain ability of handling the ball. This, as a rule, does not happen with girls, who, when starting to play football, start to do so much later.”^{6:540} Such spaces – school and leisure – have become a manifestation of a masculine domain⁷.

In spite of this, there have always been girls who cross the “gender borders” – understood here as the tenuous lines that divide the culturally established, so-called appropriate behaviors for the masculine and feminine sexes^{3,8} – and join the boys in practicing football. It is useful to highlight the idea that “[...] gender is something relational and the standards of masculinity are socially defined in opposition to some model (either real or imagined) of femininity.”^{9:265} Therefore, most of the time there is a certain strangeness when the borders are minimized or partially bridged by agents of either the feminine or masculine sex.

In this sense, the present study seeks to discuss the memorialistic constructions of four ex-athletes from the Brazilian national football team about their experiences of initiation into the sport, when, much of the time, the girls that desire to practice it have to do so in a primarily masculine environment, that is, they are the exceptions within their social locus. Therefore, the questions that guided this study are: How do women, who followed professional career paths in football, narrate their childhood memories of the sport? How did the boys treat them from the moment they showed an interest in playing?

In order to respond to such lines of questioning, the use of Oral History methodology was chosen. A principal characteristic of the methodology is the production of oral sources by means of interviews between the researcher and his/her collaborators, who should be “[...] individuals who participated in, or can provide witness to, happenings and circumstances from the past and the present.”^{10:155} This methodology requires support from studies referring to the use of memory as a source, as the narratives of collaborators are widely based on their efforts to remember. In this sense, this study is guided primarily by the methodological and theoretical tenets of Alessandro Portelli¹¹ and Michael Pollak¹².

The athletes were selected according to their long trajectories in the sphere of semi-professional Brazilian football, such that one of the selection criteria utilized for inclusion in the study was having played on the national Brazilian team. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour and twenty minutes, and all those interviewed signed an informed consent form authorizing the use of the recorded content by the researchers and permitting the use of their real names, although the document contained the option to maintain anonymity, if necessary. This study is connected to the study entitled “WHAT GREAT TIMES... IN THAT ERA...: scrutinizing sports memories and narratives”, which was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Human Sciences of the University of Brasilia, under the number CAAE 51225615.5.0000.5540. The content of the narratives were transcribed according the the methodological tenets of Verena Alberti¹⁰, who recommends that the transcription should faithfully represent the oral source, albeit with minor adjustments so that the text is more adequate for reading.

An integral aspect on which this analysis was based was non-judgment, as the methodology of Oral History demands. In spite of not having the intention of focusing only

on the words of the interviewees, it is likely that confrontation with other kinds of sources can become dangerous with this methodology's particular approach, because the goal is not to seek the truth, but the feelings and meanings of memories narrated by the collaborators, because "[...] they are all significant and truly reflect the narrator."^{13:122}

Experiences, conflicts, and resistance

Factors that are easily perceptible upon analyzing formal or informal environments of football practice among children is that there is a great predominance of masculine participation⁸. However, it is becoming more common that "intruders" willing to dispute these spaces with their colleagues are observed. This finding is reinforced by the statements of the first interviewee in the present study, Dayane Rocha, who after many years of a national and international football career, in addition to various invitations to play for the Brazilian national team, describes her introduction to the sport as follows:

At seven years old, my father decided to put me in a football school. I was the only girl amongst the boys, I suffered a little with this in the beginning, because I thought, I was born in [19]85, so it was exactly in that time that female football was very discriminated against and being the only girl in the middle of all the boys and able to play in a category below, I was always above them and due to this I suffered a lot of discrimination, because the parents came in and said things like "ah how can a girl play in the middle of the boys and still wear the number 10 shirt of the team?" This was one of the negative points I had at the beginning of my career, but my parents after this decided to support me, so I stayed in the school from seven to fourteen years old. (DAYANE ROCHA, 2016).

The first phrase from the citation above reveals something important, which is that even though generally it has been naturalized that machismo is produced and applied exclusively by men, in this case the athlete's father was the biggest motivator for her to enter an environment of notable masculine dominance – a phenomenon that has already been found in athletes' narratives in other studies in the area¹⁴ – in a period in which the female sport still had not reached the relevance that it has today. In spite of this, from a previous passage, the athlete's memories reveal that from the beginning she faced resistance within her own family nucleus:

At six years of age I broke everything in my house, because my passion was always football, it was always the ball and my parents didn't support me. They didn't want to give me the ball, so I made my own balls. I cut the head off of my doll, I cut the hair to make a ball, and with this I fought against my parents for a period of time. (DAYANE ROCHA, 2016).

In the comings and goings of her narrative, as "[...] memory is, above all, a continuously updated reconstruction of the past, more than a faithful reconstitution of it,"^{15:9} a possible interpretation is that this support only came after insistence on the part of the athlete and her resistance, including her resistance to the attempts to meet feminine norms, in that she revealed that she transformed dolls (a toy widely identified with the feminine gender) into balls to play football – totally inverting the social logic that should be followed. Such fact demonstrates that the "[...] gender difference is not something that simply exists. It is something that happens and needs to be made to happen; it is also something that can be undone, altered, made less important,"^{16:56} or in other words, this social structure is always in dispute between individuals, institutions, and groups.

With a similar discourse regarding the support from her father figure, but with a more amenable tone in relation to the possible difficulties experienced in the beginning of her athletic practice, Marina Toscano Aggio, who also played on the Brazilian national team on many occasions, states:

[...] I never faced, inside my own home, resistance to practicing the sport, because my father is passionate about the sport, so since I was little I was taken to the fields, played, practiced in the midst of the men. Thus, all the resistance that girls normally encounter when practicing the sport, due to family, I didn't have this problem, because my father, my parents, gave me an apparatus, a great amount of support during this time. (MARINA AGGIO, 2016)

Marina Aggio's discourse manifests the science of the athlete in relation to the difficulties that many girls face in the moment in which they show interest in playing football. Thus, she reiterates what has already been discussed and defended with respect to the barriers for the growth of this sport in Brazil¹⁷, describing herself as one of the "lucky ones", at least by her own understanding, for not having faced this kind of objection.

Demonstrating the particularities of each trajectory and also the divergences in the reconstruction of memories and positions inside of social circles formed around common characteristics¹¹, Karen Rocha, athlete that played on the Brazilian national team in the 2011 Pan-American cup, says that:

[...] I had no idea what prejudice was, that a girl couldn't play, but early on I suffered from this, to the tune of: "Ah, that girl over there is Maria João" and I didn't understand, for me it didn't make sense, because I excelled with the boys, I grew up with them. It was just a standard of age, and I, I kept growing with them and then the little jokes and games in bad taste began. Then I played at school, but I had to impose (I didn't understand why), but I ended up imposing in order to be able to play, I was hard on the boys [laughs]. "You can put me in" [laughs] and then after that, there was a girl, a school friend that also liked to play, so I had another friend that played, so it was another reason for me to always want to play, you know. (KAREN ROCHA, 2016).

That is, while Marina Aggio minimizes the prejudice faced when beginning to play the sport, Karen Rocha declares the necessity of imposition when faced with the impediments suffered from the boys. And at this point in her story, a fundamental aspect of the analysis emerges, that there seems to be a change in the boys' behavior when they move from childhood into adolescence – it was in this phase that the mockery began, as the athlete reveals. Such a moment embodies the biological maturation and ample differentiation between the sexes, which can culminate in an expressive increase in the gap between physical performances of each sex, and in a change in the interests of both boys and girls, who begin to see their peers in terms of the dualist vision of gender found in a large part of modern societies. In order to contradict such social rules, the athlete herself said she utilized characteristic mechanisms of the masculine frameworks in order to establish herself in their midst, challenging the defense of the boys in relation to their positions, such that:

Girls represent a threat to football games, such that they might modify the meanings of certain events that occur inside the game, maybe even depriving it of masculine connotation, with the boys seeking other strategies to be boys: adhering to another form of the game, in which there is no presence of girls, or admitting the possibility of less orthodox parameters in relation the differentiation of gender.^{18:147}

Karen appeared, in a certain way, to be proud of having overcome the attempts at exclusion, and utilized a humorous tone to describe “imposing” herself on the boys. Her expressions demonstrated that these facts no longer provoked the kind of unhappiness that they might once have caused, given the fact that her successful professional career seems to have upstaged these obstacles. In this way, her narrative demonstrates the importance and the fascination of oral sources, because of the “[...] fact that they don’t passively remember the facts, but elaborate on them and create meanings through the work of memory and the filter of language.”^{19:18}

Dayane Rocha also declared that this kind of situation occurred during her first steps playing the sport, when she played exclusively with boys:

In that time I was seven years old, we are talking around 1992, it was time in which there was really a lot of prejudice against women’s football. I remember, until today, that many times my father got a lot of flack from other parents because they said: “Hey, that girl should be helping her mother wash the dishes, the only thing she knows how to do is crochet.” Many times my mother said I wasn’t going to play football anymore, and my father defended my playing, saying that, while he could fight together with me, I would play. (DAYANE ROCHA, 2016)

Her experience demonstrates that there is great difficulty in being accepted when some rules and customs that are widely entrenched in society are, in some way, violated, since “we define our own gender, but we are not free to do as we like. Our gender practice is powerfully formatted by the order of gender in which we find ourselves.”^{16:156} In this case, the mother of the athlete, possibly with the fear that her daughter would suffer the consequences of such a violation, preferred to advise her to follow another path, while the parents of other athletes tried to discourage her participation so that masculine characteristics could be maintained in the environment in which they invested for the education of their sons.

Another important aspect of personal relationships between boys and girls in football, that is revealed in the reminiscences of the athletes, is that the respect and interaction between peers greatly depends on the girls’ demonstrated abilities and on overcoming the initial awkwardness of the feminine presence. Simone Jatobá, athlete that played in the 2007 Pan-American Cup for the Brazilian national team, after recounting that until twelve years of age she played football only with boys and, asked if there was resistance on their part to her presence, responded that “[...] before touching the ball, yes, after you begin to play, they see that you aren’t as bad as you seem, so things change a bit, then they begin to choose you for the team, but until then: ‘ah, girls don’t play football, girls don’t know how to play,’ that whole thing.” (SIMONE JATOBÁ, 2016). It is notable here that the athlete switches “I”, which she used for a large part of her narrative, to “you.” Pronominal dislocation, characteristic of oral sources¹¹, can be interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate that this kind of phenomenon is not specific to her experience. This is reinforced by Marina Aggio:

In the beginning yes [there was resistance], I remember that when I went to enroll when the school opened, we were 150 kids total, of which I was the only girl, and everybody kept asking me : “what are you doing here? What are you doing here?” And I said: “I’m going to play, I’m going to train, I’m going to get what you are all going to get, the same knowledge as you guys,” but it was only at that moment, afterwards the boys got so used to my presence, that when I didn’t go or missed classes, they asked me where I had been. And from then on I made great friendships, which I still manage to have until today on my *Facebook*, on the old *Orkut*. As such, the retaliation was only in the beginning, after that they got used to my presence and everything was okay. (MARINA AGGIO, 2016)

Such memories align with elements described by Eustáquia Sousa and Helena Altmann, who upon analyzing the athletic interactions in Physical Education classes, confirm:

[...] The criteria for exclusion is not exactly due to the fact that they are women, but for being considered weaker and less skilled than their classmates or even other female classmates. Furthermore, girls are not the only ones excluded, because the younger boys or those considered weak or bad players frequent the reserve benches during classes and recesses, and on the field they receive the ball less frequently than even some of the girls.^{20:56}

This was also observed by Moreira de Souza Júnior and Suraya Cristina Darido: “The fact that they are more accepted when demonstrating that they know how to play shows that discrimination in class is due more to a lack of ability than to being women.”^{7:6} It can be seen then, that according to the memories of these athletes, upon proving themselves capable, they legitimized themselves among the boys. And, this meaning can be interpreted as a possible sense of identity in such affirmations, taking into consideration that the memorialistic and representative process of placing oneself as technically qualified since childhood legitimizes them in their medium, and logically to the eyes of researchers, since memory “[...] helps to strengthen identity, on the individual level as well as on the collective level.”^{15:16}

Final Considerations

Some of the aspects found in the narratives of the interviewed athletes reveal that none of their trajectories were free of attempts to impede or restrict their playing of football, either due to the discouragement of family members, offenses, or initial exclusion when playing with boys.

However, the interviews allowed for the conclusion that the impediments in relation to girls in football is not necessarily or exclusively due to their sex, but also due to the difference in technical ability displayed in relation to the majority of the boys, a deduction similar to those found in other studies regarding this same theme²⁰. It is worth noting that a large part of this difference exists possibly as an outcome of expectations created and characteristics valued in relation to boys and girls, which generates inequalities in incentives and time for practice. Such aspects were minimized in the case of these athletes, precisely due to their constant participation in play related to football. At this point, it is worth highlighting the transitory and mutating nature of the notions of gender, such that in spite of the controlling discursive structures that exist, individuals and groups are constantly reconfiguring themselves through intentional actions or daily activities.

In terms of their memories, from the moment in which they were introduced into a predominately masculine environment for football practice, displaying similar technical qualities to the boys, these athletes were well-accepted and became part of the group. This warrants the remark that “[...] by means of an act of narration, disperse events become one event with one meaning,”^{13:59} or in other words, there are indications that athletes tend to tell their stories in the sport as an evolving and growing journey, as if the recesses or periods of weakness were less important moments.

In conclusion, it is important to point out that such narratives, in spite of being “[...] capable of communicating experiences that go beyond the private trajectory of a determined interviewee”^{21:110}, that is, that can elicit broader questions in relation to the groups and social activities to which these athletes are connected, are constructions elaborated in a meeting between researcher and collaborators. This is such that, the presence of the former, his/her closeness with the interviewee, social status, appearance, and model of interaction during

recording are elements that contribute and affect the way in which memories and events are narrated. Thus, one cannot neglect attempts to represent one's identity by defending characteristics as resilience and courage in order to overcome obstacles, and the self-valuing technique of these athletes in affirming their abilities helped them to become accepted, since "[...] there is no search for identity without memory, and inversely, the search for memories is always accompanied by a feeling of identity, at least individually."^{15:19} Furthermore, memory, as a selective activity²², shapes the narrative in order to make it more pleasing to the expectations that the collaborators believe the researchers may have.

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