

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL ACROSS THE FJORDS: THE CONTEXT OF A FOOTBALL TRAINING PROJECT FOR YOUNG GIRLS IN NORWAY

FUTEBOL FEMININO ENTRE OS FJORDS: O CONTEXTO DE UM PROJETO DE FUTEBOL PARA MENINAS NA NORUEGA

João Pedro Stec¹, Mayara Torres Ordonhes¹, Maria Thereza Oliveira Souza¹, Luana Loss Cabral¹, Christian Frøyd², Gleber Pereira¹

¹Federal University of Paraná, Curitiba-PR, Brazil.

²Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Sogndal, Norway.

RESUMO

O presente trabalho objetivou investigar o contexto de um projeto de treinamento de futebol para meninas em Sogndal, Noruega. A partir disso, buscou-se explorar as múltiplas formas pelas quais o futebol é acessado, experienciado e impacta a rotina das meninas. Por meio de método etnográfico, pesquisadores brasileiros participaram de sessões de treino e criaram material a partir de diário de campo, observações e conversas informais com as participantes. Os resultados revelam que Sogndal, em seus aspectos geográficos, sociais e culturais, desempenha um papel relevante na prática esportiva. Especificamente, foi destacado que o aspecto principal das atividades no projeto de futebol investigado é a prática lúdica e integrativa de exercícios físicos. Para as meninas, jogar futebol vai além da busca por desempenho na medida em que vivenciam os treinos como um ambiente divertido, socializador e enriquecedor. Ainda assim, apesar do incentivo à prática recreativa de futebol entre meninas e meninos durante a infância, assimetrias de gênero existem, e o incentivo ao alto rendimento feminino precisa de atenção.

Palavras-chave: esporte. gênero. educação física. futebol. meninas.

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the context of a football training project for girls in Sogndal, Norway. It then explores how football is accessed, experienced, and impacts girls' everyday lives. By adopting ethnographical methods, Brazilian researchers participated in training sessions and created material from diary records, observations, and informal conversations with participants. The findings reveal that as a geographical, social, and cultural environment, Sogndal plays a relevant role in sports practice. Specifically, it was highlighted that the main aspect of the activities in the investigated football project is the playful and integrative practice of physical exercise. For the girls playing football goes beyond pursuing performance, as they experience football practices as a fun, social and enriching setting. Still, despite the incentive for the recreational practice of football between girls and boys during childhood, gender asymmetries exist, and the incentive for women to play at high-performance needs attention.

Keywords: sport. gender. physical education. football. girls.

Introduction

In Norwegian society, sports have a notable position, with over one-third of the 5.4 million people involved in organized sports¹. As Pedersen² points out, however, there seem to be different access possibilities, patterns of interest, and ways of experiencing sports depending on gender and social class. This difference can be attributed to the fact that sports consist of a complex universe where various social issues are manifested, such as gender relations^{3,4,5}.

Women's space in sports has resulted from intense and successive struggles, which have only sometimes been accompanied by effective equality⁶. Specifically in football worldwide and particularly in Norway, several barriers have hindered women's participation, so it has been historically significantly underdeveloped, especially compared to the men's game^{7,8}. A notable example is that although The

Norwegian Football Federation (NFF) was established in 1902, women's football was only included in this federation in the late 1970s. At that time, there was resistance to women competing in sports in Norway because it was considered physically unsuitable and not acceptable for female behavior⁹. Therefore, it has been, for a long time, a real struggle for women to integrate into the NFF until widespread popularity and more acceptance were achieved.

Despite significant resistance and discrimination, football has been the most prominent organized sport for women in Norway since 1995. The development of women's football in Norway has been substantial, with the number of registered players increasing from about 1,500 in 1975 to almost 110,000 players and 8,340 teams in the present decade¹⁰. Norway has also been the first country to make a deal ensuring equal pay for both genders when playing for the national football team¹¹. Hjelseth and Hovden¹² indicate that this decision resulted from extensive pressure from the players and institutions applying discourses of gender justice and social recognition. This claim agrees with research showing that, to face the inequalities encountered in women's football, it is essential to increase the offer of sports training for girls and women¹³ and promote the transmission of values that break stereotypical patterns¹⁴.

In addition, research indicates that participating in football can be experienced as empowering for Norwegian girls¹⁵. Through interviews with practitioners at different sports levels, Skogvang⁸ highlighted that Norwegian female players emphasize that being a good footballer gives them status and that playing football has had a formative effect on who they are, providing self-confidence, joy, beautiful moments, and friends from all over the world. Similarly, Fasting¹⁵ found that football has taught Norwegian female players to be creative, do things independently, find new ways of solving problems in their own lives, and provide them with togetherness, belongingness, and fun times. Even though these outcomes cannot be taken as a general fact, they prove valuable and promising, considering that football's association with masculinity remains deeply ingrained¹⁶.

Starting from this brief introduction, the present study aims to investigate the context of a football training project for young girls in Sogndal, Norway. This endeavor explores how football is accessed, experienced, and impacts girls' everyday lives. The findings have implications for understanding the football scenario in a village that has yet to be studied and represents one of the most sported municipalities in the country.

Methods

This paper draws upon a wider research project entitled *Empowering Girls Through Football: A Real-life Integrated Learning Environment for Children's Health and Social Inclusion* that promotes and examines girls' and women's football culture in Brazil and Norway. For this case, Brazilian researchers visited Sogndal and produced material through ethnographical methods during the first semester of 2024. The football team investigated was part of the Sogndal Fotball youth category and comprised twenty girls aged from nine to thirteen years old and three coaches responsible for their training sessions. In this study, ethnography is understood as a research attitude and a multimethod strategy for acquiring knowledge and delving into the culture, arrangement, behaviors, and beliefs of the participants of a football project for young girls¹⁷. This process was conducted by authors following the three main tasks oriented by Oliveira¹⁸ in the field: observe, listen, and write.

We documented training sessions through diary records and made further observations related to social contexts using written notes. During the practices, we helped conduct warmup activities and football exercises and held informal conversations with participants. Surprisingly, almost all girls were fluent in English to the effect that translations from third parts were unoften necessary. We believe that it allowed a more natural and dialogical connection that remained closer to chatting than to an interview. Being part of the activities also enabled us to unravel more profound layers of a group's culture and individual behaviors' subtle motives and meanings. As Goffman¹⁹ points out, everyday interactions reveal broader societal questions. Seemingly insignificant attitudes such as habits during breaks, ways of communicating during the game, and comments about the activities caught our attention as a way to unpack the implicit social norms of that group. Through this approach, we simultaneously assumed the roles of insiders and outsiders, conscientiously acknowledging the researcher's position we held and following principles related to openness, distance, and skepticism²⁰. Remarkably, our position as

Brazilian researchers is essential to clarify at this juncture, as it shaped our standpoint of epistemology and allowed us to adopt a critical and global perspective.

Using material produced from ethnographic fieldwork, we scrutinized institutional aspects of the project, the structure of training sessions, specific socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded, girls' experiences of playing football, and the possibilities for both agency and gender subversion. The description of the results was systematized on three topics: environmental contextualization, football training, and perspectives related to women's football in Norway. Simultaneously, articulations were made with the specialized theoretical framework.

Finally, we ensure that ethical guidelines were rigorously followed during research in accordance with the principles developed in the Declaration of Helsinki (Sikt personal data treatment Ref. 806543). It includes that before and during fieldwork we kept a dialogical relation with girls, coaches and parents involved in the project to explain the methods and purposes of the research.

Results and discussion

Environmental contextualization

According to Tordsson²¹, sports phenomenon should be understood considering the geographical and sociocultural context that surrounds it. Macro-level structures and conditions shape circumstances and events on a micro-level²². Sogndal is in a semi-urban area west of Norway, with a population of approximately 12,200 people, bordered by fjords and mountains. Due to its high latitude and the orographic effect, the village varies between long sunny days, ideal for water activities and bike or running rides, and many weeks every winter when it might not receive more than 5 hours of sunlight, usually becoming covered with snow and ice. During this time, skiing and snowboarding became one of the most practiced activities of the region.

The local infrastructure of the football club, adapted to the climatic conditions, includes two stadiums with a pitch of official size, an enclosed grass field with reduced dimensions, futsal courts, gyms, and a developed support network for athlete development. Besides, they have private indoor swimming, track and field, and climbing facilities. This extensive array of natural and artificial outdoor and indoor sporting facilities, coupled with a robust network of other factors such as a well-established voluntary sports club sector, a primary school curriculum system that emphasizes physical exercise and recreation, as well as high levels of parental involvement and favorable socio-economic conditions, seems to create an ideal setting for sports engagement²³.

At the Sogndal Fotball Akademiet, young girls interested in football can start playing as part of a group from the age of six years old. As outlined in the club's planning manual, their goal is to promote equal conditions for sports practice for boys and girls, collaboration between the club and schools for improving academic results and developing a conducive environment for self-growth characterized by cooperation and agency capacity. These principles are under the guidelines of the Norwegian sports system, characterized by voluntarism, idealism, social democracy, and equality. Youth elite and recreational football are theoretically based on these values and are driven and organized within the same structure²⁴. It is worth to say, however, that differently from the men's youth category which is divided in a different squad for each one or two years difference up to professionalization, girls usually play within larger age gaps and different conditions. From the age of 14 years old on, while boys take part of an "elite" organization ("Topsatsing") with professional coaches and more training time, girls remain part of the grassroots until they move to Sogndal FK Damer, that is a women's professional football team. Other gaps between speech and practice persist. One discreet example that stands out is that inside the main stadium, there are several posters with photos of idols and current players of the male local team. Still, no images of women exist, even though they are a significant part of the institution. This situation alerts us that men's football still seems to retain a powerfully symbolic power, an intricate way of cultural domination that confirms an individual's placement in a social hierarchy²⁵.

In the specific group investigated in the present study, girls predominantly started playing football with the age of six and trained once or twice a week. Many girls also shared that they practice another sport. The most frequently mentioned examples were gymnastics, handball, and skiing. Activities like mountaineering, skating, swimming, and dancing were also highlighted, showcasing the diverse opportunities available for the motor and physical development of Norwegian girls. This vast

initial experience corresponds to the initiation models recommended by several authors of contemporary approaches in Sports Pedagogy, which indicate that a multimodal experience is necessary in the first years of life for the development of motor coordination so that there may later be specific technical and tactical specialization in a sport²⁶.

Football training

The football training sessions took place twice a week in the late afternoon, after school activities, and lasted an hour and a half. Training sessions varied between 6 and 20 girls participating. They all arrived at practice wearing uniforms and had football cleats. There were balls, cones, vests, and other materials for practice, even though some coaches complained that the boys' team had access to higher-quality and more numerous examples of them. The coaches were usually either undergraduate students in sports science at the local university or the parents of the girls, all interested in the modality but not necessarily with formal sports instruction. This voluntary model of sports organization is standard in the Nordic countries and has some distinctive characteristics such as more democratic decision-making structures, relative independence from the state or the market, and heterogeneity of professions and specific knowledge²⁷. Specifically in Norway, most of the work in sports clubs is voluntarily conducted. The voluntary sports sector comprises The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee, the Confederation of Sports, and its network of national special sports organizations²⁸.

The local team's youth categories had a standardized periodization model that divided the activities carried out by the teams based on three main objectives: technical-tactical skills, physical capabilities, and playing matches. Thus, although each session was planned with a variable structure that mixed different activities and purposes, there should always be a primary objective. This affected, for example, the choice of warm-up activities, which could alternate between more playful games, such as rondos, or the performance of exertion tests like sprints, agility, and jumps. In each training session, the girls played small-sided football games and ended by playing a full-pitch game (adapted for their age) for a duration between 15 and 40 minutes. Occasionally, the teams had recreational matches against others in 7x7 or 9x9 format.

The games at the end of the training sessions also revealed social elements open to a deeper analysis. Not uncommonly, due to the low number of girls forming two teams, the coaches invited some boys of the same age to participate in the training. While some girls supported this initiative, others questioned it. Most of the girls told the coaches that the boys had better technical skills than them and that they could raise their level of play with their presence. On the other hand, some girls understood that the presence of boys on the pitch reduced their participation since the boys took over the game. Concerning their ability to train and play football compared to boys of the same age, most girls only said they feel "good" or "ok", demonstrating that this may not be a matter of concern. Among those who gave more detailed answers, three were happy with the interaction with the boys, answering: "I love it because it makes me better"; "I think it's fun"; "Yep, great fun". Two others, however, were reticent regarding this aspect: "It can be fun but sometimes they go ego"; "Boys have better opportunities", suggesting the reason for their higher average football level. The coaches managed this situation by alternating between conducting it only a few times, sometimes even during just half of the game. Post-game feedback and democratic voting were the strategies chosen by coaches to balance when to do it again.

When boys participated in the game, the rule was agreed upon that only girls could score goals. Adopting this rule, whose objective seemed to give the boys a secondary role in the match, however, on some occasions, seemed to have collateral effects. The boys usually took charge of building the initial phase of the plays. At this moment, the girls prioritized passing the ball to them, who promptly decided which side the play would happen on and launched into the attack to become playmakers for the team. While the girls tended to have few touches on the ball and to stand still in their positions after that, the boys engaged in long sequences of dribbling and passes. When they got close to the goal, they sought to create the most straightforward possible goal-scoring situation for a girl to finish. In a tone of disbelief, they seemed not to believe in their ability to finish in conventional situations fully. Except for a few girls who possessed technical attributes above the average of their category, one or two boys in each team with six or more individuals were the ones who actively engaged with the ball and immersed

themselves in the game's core action. Correspondingly, the boys would mark each other, creating confrontation within the game.

Clark & Paechter¹⁶ and Eliasson²⁹ suggest that the girls' challenges in maintaining ball possession go beyond mere skill. Their hesitance to fully immerse themselves in the game is compounded by a lack of confidence to play among boys and the supposed notion that boys have greater authority in football. In the Brazilian context, to overcome this barrier, Souza and collaborators³⁰ argue that more exclusive spaces for girls to practice football need to be offered. Our experience suggests that the most skilled girls were more involved in the game when they approached it as challenging. However, the less experienced girls decided to take as few risks as possible because they felt less comfortable in the environment. This lack of experience may be caused by the fewer opportunities for competitive practice, as warned in the response of one of the girls, increasing the boys' ego.

When asking the girls what they liked most about football training, the highlighted aspects were fun, socialization, the possibility of learning new movements, and the perception of self-improvement. On the other hand, only a few mentioned anything when asking girls about things they didn't like about football training. In this case, the criticisms were related to being a reserve player, doing too many repetitions of the same exercises, and noticing a lack of focus from colleagues. The answers demonstrate that, in a heterogeneous pattern, the socialization factor inherent to the project and to the sporting life of these girls in the observed context, as well as their enjoyment of playing football, can be seen as important aspects of the practice for the group, that materialize in their adherence to the football project.

Perspectives related to women's football in Norway

Football can be considered an essential symbolic field through which various social, cultural, political, economic, and historical dimensions are negotiated. Notably, Norway is fortunate to have several top-class women footballers. Målfrid Kuvås, on the pitch as a player and captain and off the pitch as a leader, is regarded as the "Mother of Women's Football in Norway" for helping numerous football-playing women to excel in Oslo, the capital of Norway. Ada Hegerberg, in 2018, became the first-ever female recipient of the Ballon d'Or, FIFA's highest award to honor football players for excellent performance at that time, thus becoming an idol for many girls who want to participate in the sport in the country. Most of the girls in the project said they were encouraged by their family and friends to play football, and none reported ever feeling harmed or suffering prejudice for playing football. This initial concern and the need for clarification on these aspects coming from Brazilian researchers in the conversations with the girls are justified because related to the Brazilian context there is a vast literature that shows that this practice was for a long time considered inappropriate for women^{31, 32} and girls^{33, 34}. It was clear from the observations that the sporting options in Sogndal are varied for girls and that culturally, families and friends have the habit of practicing them regularly. As pointed out by Zoglonek³⁵, schools in Norway also play an essential role in the practice of physical activities, as physical education focuses on the body and experiencing movement to attain a variety of basic skills and to develop an active health style. Asland, Walseth e Engelsrud³⁶ reinforces this information and shows that the school is also a place for physical training and the development of fitness in a systematic manner.

We also had the opportunity to ask the girls about broader perspectives on football in Norway. Curiously, only a few expressed a genuine intention to play football professionally (specifically those few mentioned before who engage technically, tactically and physically when the boys participate in training). When it came to opining about differences between genders in playing football, some girls said that "it's completely normal and a lot of girls do it here"; "no difference" (related to boys), and "they are all equally good, but perhaps in slightly different ways". The others expressed concern about the opportunities given to girls and women in the country: "more suitable for boys"; "clubs make it easier for boys to reach professional level than for girls. There's still a big gap between salaries and the possibility of having football as a job for girls"; "the boys get paid more and people care more about boys' football"; "unequal payments and opportunities. Boys have national leagues but not for girls"; "Fewer people are interested in women's football, less audience". Or, even, demonstrated that they believe in the supposed superiority of boys: "boys are often better and are looked upon more than girls"; and "the boys are a little better". Regarding these comments, Skogvang³⁷ demonstrates that, although Norway is seen as a country with egalitarian gender policies, including being the first country to equate the daily wages received by men and women to defend the football national team, opportunities continue

to be much more significant for boys and men, especially about club salaries, visibility, and professionalism, which results in many girls facing considerable uncertainties when starting a professional football career.

Conclusion

The objective of the present research was to investigate the context of a football training project for girls in Sogndal by exploring how football is accessed, experienced, and impacts girls' everyday lives. In the ethnographic approach adopted for this endeavor our positions as Brazilian researchers played an important role. The aspects we highlight and tension are conditioned by perspectives from our background. We believe that the reflections made from the analysis of a particular reality as Sogndal can at the same time hold in high its unique aspects and contribute to widespread practices and arrangements to broader scenarios.

Our findings showed that Sogndal as a geographical, social, and cultural context is favorable for engaging in sports. Girls are provided with multiple sporting experiences and frequently practice more than three different modalities. Specifically, it was highlighted that the main aspect of the activities in the investigated football project is the playful and integrative practice of physical exercise. For the girls, in particular, playing football goes beyond pursuing performance, as they experience football practices as a fun, social and enriching setting. Still, we identified from the fieldwork crossed alongside information from the literature on women's football in Norway that competitive opportunities at a high level appear to be more significant for boys, especially after the period of basic school life. This more excellent professional representation also means differences in the prestige received by boys and girls, something seen in the different conditions of training between girls and boys and greater exposure of male athletes in the walls of the observed institution. Also, in training sessions where boys were present, it was possible to notice changes in the game dynamics, with some girls no longer participating as much in the actions. Therefore, despite the incentive for the recreational practice of football between girls and boys during childhood, gender asymmetries still exist, and the incentive for women to play at high-performance still needs attention.

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ORCID:

João Pedro Stec: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6534-1761>
Mayara Torres Ordonhes: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8014-7923>
Maria Thereza Oliveira Souza: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1636-6969>
Luana Loss Cabral: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3591-8132>
Christian Frøyd: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5927-8598>
Gleber Pereira: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4508-3730>

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Corresponding author: João Pedro Stec, joaostec86@gmail.com