

## Women's futsal at a Brazilian university: does the academic social environment influence prejudices against the players?

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**Abstract - Aim:** Prejudice against women's futsal players is reported in the literature. The perception of prejudice in university futsal may be lower due to the higher educational level of the players and a more open-minded context. This study aimed to describe the experience of young women university futsal players and to explore their perspective on gender prejudice in that sports practice. **Methods:** Ten women university futsal players (aged 18 to 30 years old) were interviewed. Data were produced and analyzed following a grounded theory approach. **Results:** The results showed that the athletes perceived they suffered gender prejudice for playing futsal, however, in the university context this was attenuated. The participants experienced diversified practice before specializing in futsal and felt that the support of male family members and friends was important to their engagement in futsal and soccer in childhood and adolescence. However, they also suffered from prejudice against their futsal practice coming from family and friends, struggling with the constant association between futsal practice and hegemonic masculinity. **Conclusion:** The participants of this study perceived less prejudice in university women's futsal in comparison to other sports contexts. Thus, the university context may have the potential to boost the practice of futsal among women.

**Keywords:** gender, women's futsal, prejudice, grounded theory.

### Introduction

Historically, important barriers for practice were imposed on Brazilian women athletes, exemplified by social conflicts and legal bans. The decree in force between the years 1941 and 1979 officially prevented women from playing sports such as soccer and futsal<sup>1-3</sup>. The legal prohibitions were especially based on moral sense, legitimized by the discourse of the need to protect femininity and beauty (in the hegemonic sense). Despite the repeal of the legal prohibition in 1979, sports practice in Brazil is still related to a masculine image<sup>4,5</sup>.

Almost 35 years after the repeal of legal bans, a survey carried out by the Ministry of Sports of Brazil<sup>6</sup> revealed that around 5% of Brazilian women play football and 1% play futsal in their leisure time. The practice of women futsal in Brazil was made official on January 8, 1983, by the extinct National Sports Council (CND) and authorized by FIFUSA (International Indoor Soccer Federation) on April 23 of the same year<sup>7</sup>. The first Brazilian women's futsal team was constituted in 2000 and the first State Teams championship was held in 2002<sup>8</sup>. Therefore,

despite the important cultural value of team sports in Brazil, they are little practiced by women, especially futsal, which is related to a social construction based on gender, bodily, and sexuality stereotypes prejudice<sup>9</sup>.

Futsal and soccer are the most widespread sports in Brazil, culturally understood as a men's sport since the mid-twentieth century, with several discriminatory barriers over women athletes<sup>8,10</sup>. Both sports are targeted by women's resistance, although the movement was kept in the shadows<sup>1</sup>. Even though Brazil is the greatest exponent of futsal in the world, winning all 6 editions of the FIFA Women's Futsal World Tournament since its inception in 2010, the discourse linked to this sport practice still carries biological and prejudiced characteristics, being a male reserve practice, prone to gender prejudice, and still stirring up inquiries about women's bodies and femininity of the practitioners<sup>11,8</sup>. This is reinforced by the conception of women athletes compared to the socially accepted hegemonic femininity<sup>12</sup>.

A concrete example is the futsal player Amanda Lyssa de Oliveira Crisóstomo, who was named the best player in the world by the Futsal Planet for the eighth con-

secutive year. In the following report, Amanda refers to the beginning of her practice to explain the barriers she had to overcome and that are still faced today by girls interested in futsal:

“It was a futsal academy for boys. When I participated in my first competition, the other teams did not accept me. They did not want to face a team with a girl as one of the players.” (Amanda on [globoesporte.com](http://globoesporte.com)<sup>13</sup>)

Amanda's report demonstrates that it seems to be more difficult for a girl than for a boy to have support to practice this sport in Brazil. Futsal played by women was belatedly consolidated in relation to the one played by men<sup>14</sup>, and this may also reflect on less social support from family and friends. This is corroborated by Jardim and Betti's<sup>10</sup> study, which observed that Brazilian women futsal athletes struggled with their families' resistance to their involvement with practice.

Barreira et al.<sup>9</sup> investigated the “state of the art” about soccer and women's soccer and futsal in 76 articles from 38 Brazilian scientific journals and found that gender studies represented about one-third of all articles on women's football. For the authors, this reinforces the importance of the discussion about women's empowerment for female football and futsal development. However, little is known about this topic among university athletes, who represent a minority with access to a higher level of education<sup>15</sup>. Specifically, in the university context Hildebrant, Grossi, and Moraes<sup>16</sup> conducted a study with women university sports practitioners, including an interview with futsal players, who highlighted the gender biases related to the practice of futsal.

Futsal in Brazil is little professionalized, and most athletes come from low-income families and perceive sport as a possibility of social mobility<sup>17</sup>. Considering that in the context of university sport, all athletes have higher levels of academic degrees in comparison with the Brazilian population, this study investigates how the perceptions of university women futsal athletes are different from athletes within other social contexts, and if this environment favors sports initiation or the maintenance of university women players' practice. Thus, this study aims to describe the experience of young women university futsal players and to explore their perspective on gender prejudice in that sports practice.

## Methods

### *Study design*

This study took place at the campus of Limeira-SP of the University of Campinas UNICAMP, Brazil. This campus was launched in 2009, with six different courses, including the Sport Sciences undergraduate course. UNICAMP is public and unpaid Brazilian university that has been recently ranked as one of the best universities in

Latin America<sup>18</sup>. It is a research-oriented institution, classified as the top Brazilian university in the number of published articles per faculty member, responsible for around 15% of the academic research of the country. Grounded theory was used to produce and analyze the data<sup>19,20</sup>. This method was developed in 1967 in the United States of America and consists of constructing a theory based on collected data and not on previous hypotheses coming from preexistent theories.

### *Participants*

The group of participants consisted of ten women university futsal players (aged from 18 to 30 years old) from three different undergraduate courses teams from the campus of Limeira of the University of Campinas, Brazil.

To participate in the study volunteers should be enrolled as students of UNICAMP and be regular futsal practitioners participating in university competitions for at least two years. The participants were identified as P1, P2, P3...P10 to maintain anonymity. The institutions mentioned by athletes, like sports clubs or schools they were part of, were identified by letters (e.g.: club Y). Ethical approval for this study was provided by a local Ethics Committee (number: 61808216.2.0000.5404) and all participants agreed and signed an informed consent form before participation.

### *Data collection source*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, by the first author of this study, following a script based on<sup>12</sup>. A pilot study was conducted with one volunteer. The participants indicated the best place and time for the interview, which were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim (40 pages, 1.5 spaced).

### *Data analysis*

Each participant received the transcription of her interview by e-mail, and all approved its final version. The transcriptions were extensively studied to inductively structure the categories following the stages proposed by Charmaz<sup>20</sup> and Corbin and Strauss<sup>19</sup>:

“Microanalysis: The detailed line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories; a combination of open and axial coding<sup>19</sup>.”

“Open coding: The analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data<sup>19</sup>.”

“Axial coding: The process of relating categories to their sub-categories, termed “axial” because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions<sup>19</sup>.”

“Selective coding: The process of integrating and refining the theory<sup>19</sup>.”

Validation of the theoretical framework: resuming the analysis of the initial data comparing the categories and presentation of theory to the participants to check their ideas and positions. All participants agreed with the theory.

## Results and Discussion

This study aimed to describe the experience of young women university futsal players and to explore their perspective on gender prejudice in that sports practice. Two main thematic axes are presented: 1) Players' sporting pathways - this axis concerns the sports practiced in childhood and adolescence, and encouragement or resistance of family members to the practice of futsal; 2) Perceptions about gender issues: this axis concerns the athletes' perceptions on the prejudice they or their teammates experienced in futsal practice.

### *Axis 1: Players' sporting pathways*

In this axis, athletes narrate their sporting experiences. All participants reported that they enjoyed being involved with physical and leisure activities during childhood and youth, usually with friends and siblings. P1 and P2, respectively, comment on the type of activities in which they were involved:

"I used to skate with my cousins, and we used to play on the streets, volleyball, and dodgeball." (P1)

"I started playing soccer with my cousins, at home with my brother." (P2)

Different practices related to what Scaglia<sup>21</sup> nominates the "family of foot ball games" are mentioned by the participants in association with futsal, especially soccer. Futsal and soccer are different sports but share similarities in terms of tactic and technical competences, as well as cultural characteristics. In addition, all participants experienced diversified sports practices before specializing in futsal. They practiced sports at school and other places, such as sports academies for children and on the streets. They also experienced athletics, basketball, handball, karate, and fencing, as explained by P6, who reported having played sports, but also engaged in deliberate play (i.e., the creation of sports game and playing, in a process led by the children themselves<sup>22</sup>) with her friends, and by P7, who listed all the activities she experienced during childhood:

"I started swimming with eight [years old] ... I used to play a lot in the streets, stickball and all other games that showed up." (P6)

"I used to swim and dance when I was a child. At school, I played basketball and volleyball in Physical Education classes. I also practiced athletics, rhythmic gymnastics, table tennis, basketball, handball, futsal, fencing..." (P7)

Literature shows that sampling before specializing in a single sport during childhood favors the development of a motor and athletic repertoire that contributes to the long-term engagement with sports practices, both in recreational participation and elite performance<sup>22-24</sup>. In the case of the participants of this study, being involved with games that share similar characteristics, such as those in the "family of foot ball games", contributed to the initiation and maintenance of the practice.

This study participants were not elite athletes, but they were practicing sports since childhood. Thus, as showed in other studies<sup>25,26</sup>, for the participants of this study, sampling before specializing showed to be the best way of being engaged in long-term practice. The diversified practice was also a way to keep the participants in sports, despite the prejudice they suffered from their family for wanting to play futsal. It generated engagement in sport, making it possible for those women to be open to futsal again when they reached adulthood, in the university context.

Altmann and Reis<sup>27</sup> and Mascarin, Oliveira e Marques<sup>11</sup> observed that elite level futsal women athletes reported playing with boys in their childhood, which favored the participation in games traditionally understood as masculines, such as soccer and futsal. For the participants of this study, it was common to play with boys in childhood (specifically cousins and brothers). In addition, regarding encouragement or discouragement for the women players' practice in sports in general, most of the participants reported to have been encouraged by their parents, as demonstrated by P1 and P7:

"My father was a basketball player, ... we always went to the park to train, and my mother, because she was a physical education teacher, I always lived her lifestyle, her eating habits, she used to run, and I started to do it with her." (P1)

"I have always engaged in a lot of sports since I was a child my parents have always encouraged me." (P7)

However, this encouragement was not described by the participants when it was related to the practice of futsal. This is demonstrated by P4 and P5, who explained that they perceived resistance from their parents when they started to play. On the other hand, players described that these barriers have lost the charge during the years.

"... I used to play futsal at the club Y, and then my mother did not want me to play there anymore. She said that those people were a bad influence for me..." (P4)

"They [her parents] did not support me so much, especially at school... At home nobody was a big futsal fan, they were prejudiced about it... Now they support me, join me during the games, everything has changed..." (P5)

The results of this study corroborate the importance of family support to encourage sports practice for the participants. Five of the athletes reported that they were

encouraged by their parents to practice futsal and that, in some cases, it was crucial for them to be involved at practice. On the other hand, the lack of family support was reported by four athletes, and two of them stated that it happened due to the prejudice of their parents towards the practice of soccer or futsal by girls. In addition, the support offered by male family members or friends helped the participants of this study to get involved with futsal and soccer in childhood, when they are more prone to the influence of adults who could prevent this practice. Indeed, Brazilian women's futsal literature shows that family support to engage in this sport and the participation in competitions and training sessions, notably from the father, represent an important influence on the access and continuity of girls and women in sports practices<sup>11,14,27</sup>.

### Axis 2: Perceptions about gender issues

In this second axis of analysis, we considered issues linked to gender and futsal practice. The first theme we identified was prejudice against women futsal players. All athletes have suffered or witnessed this kind of prejudice. For example, P2 manifested her indignation:

“Absurd! There are many types of prejudice. For example, when we were trying to participate in this men's championship we argue with the boys, and they said - ‘no, you are going to get hurt, you are weaker.’” (P2)

P3 and P1, also share their experience reporting prejudiced comments they have heard:

“...People always looked down on girls who played - ‘Oh my God, look, a “butch woman” - I have heard this kind of comment so many times.’” (P3)

“She might be a lesbian, she might have a masculine way of living, she probably does not wear dresses, she probably does not wear high heels’ - you now, the masculinization of a woman just because she plays soccer or futsal.” (P1)

Another theme we identified in this axis was the depreciation of women's futsal in comparison with men. The participants believe that the media and the society, in general, devalue women futsal, as stated by P8 and P4:

“...there is a prejudice, and the major one is the media prejudice.” (P8)

“... For men it is ok, it is normal to play futsal, and for women, it is seen with prejudice, something uncommon.” (P4)

P1 agrees, but add that the problem affects other sports:

“I think that women athletes are devalued, not only in futsal but in all sports, because women are seen as impotent to this day... we learn that soccer is for boys and dolls are for girls in childhood.” (P1)

Other studies have found similar results<sup>14,16</sup>, evidencing a gender stereotype against women who play futsal. In general, the women athlete stereotype is grounded on the hegemonic femininity sense based on sociocultural aspects related to the myth of the “fragile sex”, which was reinforced in Brazil for previously mentioned laws<sup>3</sup>.

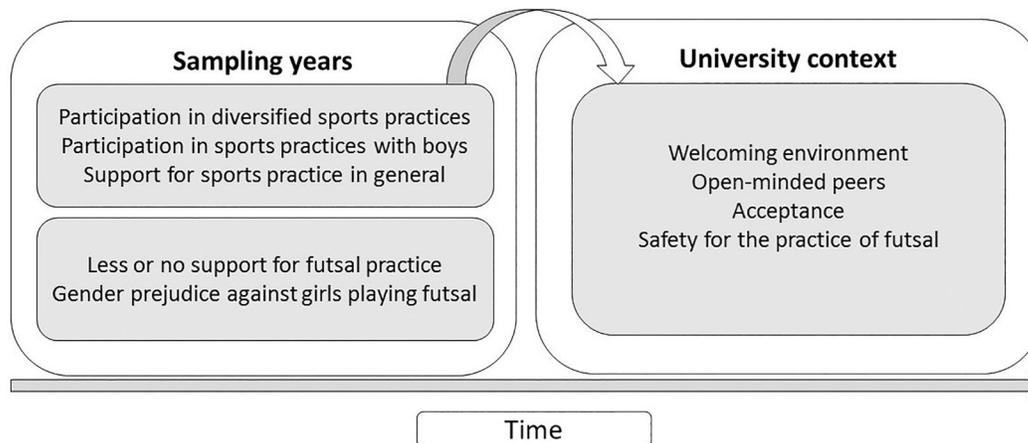
The participants of this study perceived less gender prejudice in university futsal compared to other social contexts. Five athletes reported that they do not notice this type of prejudice at university, as stated by P4:

“Here (at the university) we do not have a lot of prejudice manifestations...” (P4)

P5 and P10 show how they feel that their sport is accepted and legitimized in the university:

“Here in the university futsal is more accepted... people are open-minded, they do not judge so much a person [woman] playing futsal.” (P5)

“At the university, it is seen [futsal] as a positive thing, but outside of the university, I have heard about friends who suffered prejudice.” (P10)



**Figure 1** - Representation of the participants' lifelong involvement in sports.

Contrary to what we observed in the literature, the participants of this study perceived the investigated university sports environment as a welcoming space for women to practice futsal. Outside of the university context and including the scholarly context, soccer and futsal are often considered a men's practice, and consequently, the behavior expected from players is the exacerbation of characteristics such as virility and masculinity, culturally attributed to men<sup>9,11,28</sup>. **Figure 1** is a representation of the experience reported by the participants with futsal and with sports in general.

Despite having received less support from their families for practicing futsal, or even been discouraged, and having experienced gender prejudice, the participants of this study participated in diversified sports practice, played with boys, and were encouraged to be involved in sport in general during childhood. This scenario seems to have contributed to the maintenance of the involvement with sports and favored the resumption of futsal practice in adulthood.

### Conclusion

We investigated the experience of young women university futsal players and explored their perspective on gender prejudice in that sports practice. We have observed that the athletes participating in this study have had a diversified sporting experience in their childhood, including different sports and ball games with the feet, and this was supported by family and friends. We have also observed that the influence and support of male family members, such as fathers and brothers, as well as friends, had a role in fostering these women's futsal practice.

All participants reported experiences of prejudice related to their futsal practice or that they know people who experienced this kind of discrimination. For some athletes, the prejudice in women's futsal is manifested in the limited access opportunity in relation to other sports, which were reinforced by their families. Thus, the results of this study are consistent with the literature, describing gender prejudice against women in soccer and futsal. Although the prohibition of this practice by women was revoked decades ago, and the visibility of this sport is growing, gender issues are still present, hindering women's practice. Therefore, we believe educational actions are needed to increase understanding about this practice and ultimately, respect by women players.

On the other hand, in the university where this study took place, the athletes did not perceive gender prejudice. In this social context, they felt valued and safe, understanding it as a favorable environment for their futsal practice. They also perceived this environment as welcoming, with peer reinforcement for their insertion and continuity of engagement with the sport. We suggest that further studies investigate university leagues and their

possible potential to boost the practice of futsal among women, as it shows itself as a space in which the perception of prejudice is lower and women university students feel valued by their peers when practicing sport.

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