

Original Article (short paper)

Brazilian women elite futsal players' career development: diversified experiences and late sport specialization

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Abstract – Aims: To investigate elite women sports career development can be a way to better understand how gender issues and specific women sport practice conditions have influenced athletes' life and personal experiences, also subside reflections on policies and pedagogic intervention on the sport. The aims of this study were to investigate and describe the process of sports career development lived by Brazilian women elite futsal players, based on their own sport experiences and perspectives on futsal. **Methods:** Data of this qualitative study were produced by semi-structured retrospective interviews with 13 Brazilian elite women futsal players. Data gathering and data analysis were based on the Grounded Theory method. **Results:** This section is organized in four axes, with their main categories in parenthesis: 1. Diversified experiences in childhood and youth (enjoyment related to diversified sport practices); 2. Initiation on 'kicking ball games' practices (experiences with football and futsal informal practices and suffering of prejudice related to gender issues); 3. Systematic participation in futsal practices (experiences in systematic futsal practices within older age groups); 4. The investment on elite futsal career (moving from football to futsal career). **Conclusion:** Interviewed players had their first sports experiences on a variety of practices during sport initiation in childhood. The beginning on systematic practice of futsal occurred later than men athletes. The lack of competitions for young girls, and the fact that futsal and other 'ball kicking games' are considered as men preserve practices contributed to the late sport specialization process. The athletes' career presented strong thresholds related to gender issues on futsal.

Keywords: Women futsal. Sport career. Futsal. Gender. Sport participation.

Introduction

Futsal is a globally practiced sport¹, created in 1989 by *The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)*^{2,3}. FIFA states that exists over 1 million men and women registered futsal players worldwide. However, this data only includes those registered in national football governing associations that also administrate futsal. Considering that in some countries futsal is governed independent of these organizations (as Brazil), this number of players tends to be much bigger³. In Brazil, futsal is the sport with the largest number of men registered players⁴, the fourth most practiced sport by recreational adolescents athletes⁵, and is the most practiced sport in schools⁶.

Brazil is a detachable country in international men and women futsal competitions. Among women, was six times world champion (have won all editions of this tournament)⁷. In this country, the systematic and organized practice of women futsal is recent in comparison to men. Examples are the first Brazilian women futsal club, which was founded in the year 2000, and the beginning of the first state championship in the country in 2002⁸. The number of women futsal practitioners is small than men⁹ but exists a growing process of the quantity of women players, as well as its sports relevance and impact, both in Brazilian and worldwide terms¹⁰.

Despite this scenario of improvement of women futsal, this practice in Brazil is still timid in comparison to it could be¹¹, mainly due to the reproduction of gender discrimination in which futsal, as well as football^a, are still held as men

preserved sport practice^{8,12,13}. On this sociocultural aspect, Brazilian context is different from some countries in North America (USA and Canada) and Europe (Germany and Sweden, as examples), in which football practice is well developed and widespread among women¹⁴. In Brazilian reality, even amateur, as professional women futsal and football clubs, are affected by the reduced offer of investments, market consumption, and sponsorships in relation to men^{16,17}.

Gender segregation in sport exerts an important influence on women sports career development from an early age^{18,19}. Studies on women participation in futsal and football in Brazil^{18,9,11,12,16,20} describe a number of issues and barriers faced by athletes. Among the main ones are: a) the lack of support from family during the beginning of sports career; b) the prejudice and discredit about the involvement of women in such sports; c) the scarce offer of practice opportunities to girls who wish to practice futsal as a sports activity.

Because these reasons, the gender segregation institutionalized by the separation on men and women competitions, and the consequent naturalization of such cultural differences^{17,18,21,22}, women demand greater time and effort to incorporate social codes and behaviors considered appropriate to certain sport contexts¹⁹. This process of segregation create barriers to women participation in sport, reproducing a kind of men symbolic domination^{22,23}, especially in sports that can be considered as men preserved practices, such as futsal^{8,12,16}, influencing pedagogical processes as well as contexts of sports practices to girls and women^{9,23,24}.

Therefore, to investigate the career development of well-succeeded women in sport can be a way to better understand how such social condition of gender issues and specific sport practice (training and competition) condition has influenced athletes' life and personal experiences^{8,12,14}, as well as can work as a subsidy to reflect on policies and pedagogic intervention on sport activities for women^{16,24}. Studies on women who achieved an elite level in sport are justified by the athletes' career investment processes and their success^{24,25}, overcoming not only barriers related to sports competition, but mainly to a wider sociocultural perspective^{19,24}.

There is a paucity of research on the sports career development of women athletes in relation to the number of studies on men²⁶, especially related to futsal and football in Brazil²⁷. There is a need for growth in the number of studies on the sports career of women athletes^{4,9,28}. With the increase of women participation in futsal, investigations that analyze and describe the processes and pathways within this sport become pertinent, especially due to their men preserved sociocultural characteristics^{12,16}. Such studies can contribute to fostering reflections and practical interventions on making the sport more egalitarian and less prejudiced in relation to women participation, besides promoting pedagogical improvements on the processes of women sport career¹⁶.

Faced with such assumptions, this study has as its main question: How was structured the sports career development of Brazilian women elite futsal players? The aims of this study were to investigate and describe the process of sports career development lived by Brazilian women elite futsal players, based on their own sports experiences and perspectives on futsal.

Methods

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of social phenomena within a specific context (women elite futsal players' sports career development). Considering the difficulties of conducting longitudinal studies on sports careers, to describe the pathway of an athlete, based on their own perceptions about

the lived experiences, through the use of retrospective interview, is a recurring and recommended approach by literature^{29,30}.

The data of this study were gathered by semi-structured retrospective interviews with Brazilian elite women futsal players. The processes of gathering and data analysis were founded on the Grounded Theory method (GT)^{31,32}, which has been frequently used to study sports development phenomena^{33,34}.

GT^{31,32} was used to identify emergent and critical factors that role as issues on women futsal players career development. The GT approach was chosen because this investigation presents an exploratory nature, which requires a methodology highly generative, with a certain freedom to explore the dynamics of the subject, and flexibility to permit diverse comprehensions on emerging data³³.

For this, a first step of the study was to gather and analyze data from players' discourse, through the codification process proposed by GT. After that, was developed the discussion faced with literature, considering the inductive data-driven approach (proposed by GT) and the data provided by other studies for the final writing of this article.

Participants

This research had as participants 13 women elite futsal players, from a club sited in São Paulo state, Brazil. As criteria to select the interviewed players, were assumed the results of state champion, runner-up or semi-final round (on under-20 or senior levels) on the last three years, from the interviews' dates. The choice for a club from São Paulo state is justified by the fact that the Futsal Federation from São Paulo (FPFS) is one of the biggest state governing bodies of futsal in Brazil. This sport regulatory institution promotes women championships from under-13 to senior age groups, with a total number of 37 clubs in 2015³⁵.

Table 1 presents information on players' time of experience with systematic practice of futsal, as well as some aspects of their family backgrounds.

Table 1. Participants' information and family background.

Participant	Experience with systematic practice of futsal and family background
P1	Six years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Lack of family support related to the beginning of sports practice; Mother support related to futsal practice has started in a secondary period, mainly motivated by P1's disposition, pleasure, and enjoyment related to sport.
P2	Seven years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Parents are former football players that influenced on P2's disposition, pleasure and enjoyment for practicing futsal.
P3	Seven years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Family support related to sports practice; The whole family has practiced sport; The older brother was her primary sports influence (futsal and track and field); Full family support to futsal practice has started when the parents expected a future P3's career as futsal player.
P4	Six years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Mother support on the beginning of futsal practices.
P5	Five years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Lack of family support related to the beginning of sports practice, especially from father; Mother has supported only after P5's earned a college scholarship related to the futsal practice.

Continues...

Table 1. Continued

Participant	Experience with systematic practice of futsal and family background
P6	Four years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Family support mainly from uncle and grandfather, which have accompanied on training sessions and competitions. Mother support related to futsal practice has started when she realized a possible future P6's career as a futsal player.
P7	Six years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Mother support on the beginning of futsal practices; The father has never supported the futsal practice; The mother let the younger daughter to participate on selections in different futsal clubs.
P8	Three years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Lack of family support related to the beginning of sports practice; Contrary on the family will, the player has started to play football, with the support from a coach and other players' relatives.
P9	Two years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Lack of family support related to the beginning of sports practice; Some support has started in a secondary period, mainly motivated by P9's disposition, pleasure, and enjoyment related to sports practice.
P10	Four years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Mother support on the beginning of futsal practices; Other relatives support has started in a secondary period, mainly motivated by P10's disposition, pleasure, and enjoyment related to sports practice.
P11	Seven years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Father support on the beginning of futsal practices; The player reported struggles between her parents who did not agree about futsal practice; Mother support has started in a secondary period, mainly motivated by P11's disposition, pleasure and enjoyment related to sport practice.
P12	Twelve years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Lack of family support related to play on a club sited far away from P12 hometown, and also due to prejudice related to the women sports practice; Some support has started in a secondary period, mainly motivated by P12's disposition, pleasure, and enjoyment related to sports practice.
P13	Six years of experience with systematic practice of futsal Lack of family support related to play on a club sited far away from P13's hometown and also due to prejudice related to the women sports practice; Some support from mother has started in a secondary period, mainly motivated by P13's disposition, pleasure, and enjoyment related to sport spractice.

To recruit players for interviews, initial contact was made with the club's technical staff, which made possible the approach to athletes. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' host university (CAAE: 27526714.0.0000.5407) and all the interviewees signed the free and informed consent term. In order to preserve the identity of the participants, they were named as P1 to P13.

Data gathering and analysis

Data gathering consisted on retrospective, semi-structured, personal and individual interviews³⁶ that took place on the players' training facilities, at dates and times indicated by the participants, to do not disturb the training and competitions routines. The interviews were recorded in audio and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Interviews were based on a guide specifically developed for this study (that was tested and improved on pilot experiences with other players before the research). The main questions related to players' sports career were:

1. Describe how your first steps were on futsal practice.
2. Describe the reasons that stimulated you to begin on futsal practice.
3. Have you already practiced another sport?

4. Have you practiced another sport before futsal?
5. Describe how your experiences with other sports practices were, different from futsal.
6. Do you participate in futsal training sessions since what age? And on futsal competitions?
7. Describe how used to be the participation of your family on your sport career.

On Grounded Theory, it is essential that data gathering, and analysis occur in parallel. This process consisted of some steps, which did not necessarily happen on this order: Microanalysis; Open coding; Axial coding; Selective coding; Validation of the theoretical scheme (through the sending of the data to athletes for validation)^{31,32}.

The data transcriptions, in manuscript format, have guided the researchers on data analysis. On the primary moment of this process, the first author developed the Microanalysis and Open coding steps. To organize those initial categories in axes and the Selective coding process, the first and third authors have discussed based on transcriptions, tables and diagrams. The revision of all coding process and final organization of the data into final categories and axes counted with the participation of the three authors, as well as the writing of the article.

The coding process related to data analysis was organized in axes and their categories (Table 2):

Table 2: Axes and categories

Axes	Diversified experiences in childhood and youth	Initiation on informal football practices	Systematic participation in futsal practices	The investment on elite futsal career
Categories	Experiences with diversified sports practices	Experiences with football practices	Ages at beginning in futsal systematic practices	Decision process in investing futsal as a sport career
	Personal satisfaction related to sports practices	Experiences with informal football practices (especially sharing the activities with boys)	Support to futsal systematic practices	Futsal as possible elite sport career
	Enjoyment related to sports practices	Gender issues and prejudice related to women football players	Training and competition experiences in older age groups during youth	Moving from football to futsal

Results and discussion

This section was organized according to different periods and steps of the interviewed athletes' sports career. The data descriptions and theoretical constructions from the results are presented, as well as reflections and discussions faced with the literature. Some excerpts from the athletes' discourse were used in the form of quotations (translated from Portuguese language) to illustrate certain phenomena.

The results were organized in four axes: 1) Diversified experiences in childhood and youth; 2) Initiation on informal football practices; 3) Systematic participation in futsal practices; 4) The investment on elite futsal career.

Diversified experiences in childhood and youth

All athletes reported that have already practiced other sports beside futsal, however without competitive focus. Examples include football, handball, basketball, volleyball, swimming, track and field, capoeira, jiu-jitsu, dancing, and table tennis. Players have described the experiences in a diversity of sports during childhood (Table 3).

Table 3 – Sports practices during childhood, except futsal.

Participant	Sports
P1	Handball, volleyball
P2	Volleyball
P3	Track and field, basketball, handball, volleyball
P4	Football, volleyball, basketball
P5	Track and field, football
P6	Volleyball
P7	Jiu-jitsu, volleyball, handball
P8	Volleyball, basketball, handball
P9	Volleyball
P10	Swimming, volleyball
P11	Football
P12	Table tennis, basketball, handball, football
P13	Football, Muay Thai, karate, capoeira, swimming, dancing

In addition to the diversity of stimuli, the practices experienced during childhood can be compared and related to deliberate plays^b, corroborating what has been reported by literature^{26,37,38}.

The rest [other sports] was just for fun, as to train volleyball, handball. I have practiced all sports, but not aiming to reach the elite level (P8).

I used to practice swimming and volleyball. I was thirteen years old. [...] Swimming was much related to competition performance, but volleyball was just for fun (P10).

The deliberate play allows the child or adolescent to learn about series of sport situations that form a base of transferable experiences before the 'specializing years'⁴⁰, which together to 'investment years', are staged on sports participants' pathways with a dedication to a lower number of diversified sports activities²⁶. These stages have as the main characteristic, the search for better sports performance, based on a process of reducing deliberate plays and increasing deliberate practices^c aiming the development of an elite level sport career³⁷.

In several situations, the amount of time invested in deliberate plays can differentiate elite from sub-elites athletes⁴¹, in other words, those that engaging in sports career in adulthood differ from who dropped-out^{25,42}, and in a broader sphere, recreational participants from sedentary individuals⁴³.

Both the data in this study and the literature indicate that such diversified experiences, linked to personal satisfaction in childhood and youth, can be linked to successful sport careers^{26,44} for men and women²⁴.

Since I was a child, there were a lot of boys and girls in my neighborhood, and they used to play football every day. The girls also played so well. They were older, I was only six years old and have already enjoyed it, I used to play together with them. [...] I started to enjoy it (P7)

Besides this kind of experience, the participation of girls in some deliberate plays and sport initiation practices (especially related to team sports) still suffer some prejudices and sociocultural barriers imposed by a culture of men preserved social spaces within the sport and physical culture fields, like football and futsal^{17,18,19}.

Initiation of informal football practices

Among the deliberate plays that were part of the first years of interviewed athletes' sports career, is detachable the initiation of informal football practices, especially on the street. This kind of experiences can be called as 'kicking ball games'⁴⁵, which stands out on players' discourses.

I used to play football on the street. Everyone in my neighborhood used to play football together (P5).

Scaglia⁴⁵ proposes, as 'kicking ball games', all activities involving the predominance of feet to control a ball (this group includes football and futsal, among other games). While there are distinctions between the systematic practice of futsal and the 'kicking ball games' on street, it is possible to presume the similarity and transference (on a learning-centered term) of tactical-technical skills among them⁴⁵.

The interviewed athletes in the present study had their first contact with 'kicking ball games' at different ages, on the street and in the company of men neighbors, friends and relatives before they have specialized in futsal.

It was a sport [informal football on the street] that I felt good, comfortable, mainly by the influence of friends and my older brother. He was a football goalkeeper and taught a lot to me. We used to play on the street, and so, I started to play futsal (P4)

I used to play among boys, all of them with the same age as my older brother, and I was the younger one in the group. They were 16, 17 years old and I was 10, playing among the boys on the street. It was very cool! (P8)

Regarding the participation of interviewed players on these games, the influence of family members and men friends was a very mentioned factor. These discourses can be compared with the findings on literature about South American¹² and Brazilian⁴⁶ women adult futsal athletes, that also started their participation in informal football games with men, such as neighbors, friends, and relatives.

The street was the most mentioned environment where happened the first contacts with the 'ball kicking games'. The same phenomenon is also reported by Santana and Reis¹¹, in quantitative research with 43 elite women athletes in the state of Paraná, Brazil. On the present study, only two athletes mentioned the school as the environment of the first experiences on 'ball

kicking games". Some of the interviewees still report that have suffered prejudice in the school for "being a girl playing football games", a prejudice also from other girls and teachers, as evident in the quotations from P7 and P1.

I suffered prejudice from girls because I was the only one playing ['ball kicking games']. I was excluded from the group, the girls have judged me, they did not talk to me. The girls have talked - "Oh, this is not a girl thing!" The girls did not do other things, they did not play, they did not run. They thought that football games were things preserved only for boys. There was a period when I did not even care, but in some moment, I got upset, so I thought that would be better to move from that school, and I did it (P7).

I remember that on the 2nd grade at school I did not have a Physical Education teacher, it was just the primary teacher, and at the Physical Education class she used to say "Oh, the girls will play rope skipping and the boys will play football" - But I just did not want to play rope skipping, I wanted to play football. [...] Once, I went to play football among the boys and the teacher said "No, you will play rope skipping, because playing football is only for boys" (P1)

In addition to the reproduction of prejudiced discourses by the girls schoolmates, it is evident in quotations from P7 and P1, that the school did not provide the same stimuli on 'ball kicking games' to boys and girls from an early age, as well as social support to women futsal or football players, as reported by Oliveira²³ on a study with girls futsal players from a high school level in Ribeirão Preto/SP, Brazil. It is essential and desirable that Physical Education at school can provide equal futsal and football learning opportunities both for boys and girls.

Such prejudice is largely based on gender stereotypes linked to the preservation of body forms, according to a normativity expected for women, through the softness of gestures such as dance and gymnastics, which are predominant⁴⁷, reproducing a form of men symbolic domination²². The 'ball kicking games' are configured, in this Brazilian scenario, historically as men preserved practices^{11,16,17}.

Most of the interviewees started practicing informal football games on the street, without structured and systematic pedagogical accompaniment and in the company of men, in an environment based on deliberate plays. This type of initiation can be positive for different reasons, among them, the exchange of motor experiences with other children (in these cases, normally boys), sometimes older and more experienced in this sport^{12,16}. Besides that, the possibility of more girls practicing football or futsal at school could be a kind of social exercise against gender prejudices and differences arbitrarily imposed over children and adolescents²³.

Systematic participation in futsal practices

The average age of interviewed players on this study when started on systematic futsal training participation was 13.1 ± 2.9 years old. Only two of the thirteen players started the training process before the age of thirteen. Thus, the majority of players have experienced the systematic practice of futsal after the period named as sampling years, such a period of athletes' pathways that would aim to foster early diversity-rich body experiences, when most activities were characterized as deliberate plays³⁸. This fact evidences that there was no early specialization in this sport, taking advantage of the benefits of diversified experience in sports practices during the childhood^{26,28,37,48,49}.

Santana and Reis¹¹ verified similar tendencies to those found in the present study, regarding the beginning of the systematic participation in futsal by players from Paraná state, Brazil, which occurred on average at 13.69 ± 3.18 years old. The authors¹¹ detached the necessity of attention to sociocultural factors that make the futsal specialization process lived by boys and girls be different. As an example, the lower number of tournaments and opportunities of practice offered to girls during childhood, in comparison to boys. This aspect may contribute to explain the reduced number of girls who specialized in futsal before puberty, thus reducing the chances of early sport specialization^{9,11}, that can be defined as the early search for a high level of performance on youth, without the living of initial diversified sports experiences, especially based on deliberate plays³⁷.

Literature suggests some occurrence of early sport specialization on youth men football and futsal^{50,51}. Even when this phenomenon did not happen, an earlier beginning of the systematic practice of futsal for boys^{52,53,54} is related, in comparison to this study and other studies^{7,11} on girls' athletes. As an example, investigating the sports career of 97 Brazilian men futsal professional players, Santana and Ribeiro⁵⁴ concluded that the beginning on the systematic practice of this sport occurred on average at 10.6 ± 3.8 years, with the majority of athletes began their systematic participation between five and eleven years old.

The two interviewed athletes in the present study who started the systematic futsal practice before the age of thirteen have reported that started it at eight and eleven years old. During this period, they shared the training sessions with older girls and competed sporadically with boys on their own age groups, because they have not had access to women competitions within their own age.

When I was eight years old, my grandmother and my uncle registered me in a futsal academy [...] but I was the youngest player on that team, the girls were fifteen years old. The club used to participate in championships, but I have never played, I only played with the younger boys (P7).

Oh, all they [teammates] were boys, so I had to, as a girl, to push myself even harder (P13).

Training and competing in different age categories during childhood and adolescence was a recurring action in the descriptions of the studied group, in which seven of the thirteen athletes started their participation in systematic training sessions and competitions of futsal in older age groups, evidencing that some of them did not have access to these activities on their own age group.

By one side, this scenario can have contributed to the interviewed players' sport successful development as athletes, but it can be interpreted as a problematic issue, a worrying consequence of the lack of futsal competitions offered to girls before the thirteen years old⁹, or the low amount of girls that play this sport systematically and competitively on youth¹¹. This scenario reinforces the perspective that futsal is a man preserved sport in Brazil^{8,11,12,20}, and that is necessary the improvement of opportunities and incentives for girls to play it on youth^{9,16}.

However, athletes express positively the exchange with older boys and girls, as well as other studies suggest^{12,23}. This interaction of factors occurred as a threshold, critical events, which can modify the athletes' participation within sport field²⁹, characterizing a particularity of this group of athletes, through the experience of playing with older colleagues, both in competition as well as deliberate practices activities. While they could experience positive events regarding the conviviality with heterogeneous groups, there were no pressures for competitive results in an early age/stage.

What helped me in the futsal career was to train with the adult players since I was young. I learned. I grew up as an athlete. I was fifteen years old. I was not even old enough to play in the senior team yet. I spent almost one-year long training with the adult to participate in competitions with only sixteen years old (P5)

Three athletes had their beginning on systematic practice of futsal between 16 and 20 years old, a period that according to Côté, Baker and Abernethy³⁷ would correspond to the investment years, characterizing, in the case of these athletes, examples of late sports specialization²⁴. This scenario may be due to the lack of competitions for young girls in Brazil and the fact that futsal is considered as a man preserved practice^{9,11}. In this case, the previous experiences in another practices, different from futsal, possibly can influence the players acting in sports, allowing to reach the elite level, even initiating the systematic training of futsal in a later period than usually happens with men⁵³.

A wide range of childhood and adolescence experiences is sometimes more influential than a specialization process initiated in adolescence⁵⁴. The diversified experience of the interviewed athletes in this study can be worked as positive for their sports career success.

The investment in elite futsal career

Most interviewed athletes have experienced some kind of competitive participation in sports such as track and field,

football, table tennis, swimming, muay thai and jiu-jitsu before futsal, whether at school or at clubs in municipal, regional or even state level of competition. Such experiences can highlight processes of specialization experienced in other sports, as it is exposed in the P8's quotation.

I have participated in the Paulista Jiu-Jitsu Championship. I liked it, trained a lot and then I competed for other times (P8).

Sometimes, as evident in the interviewed athletes' reports, there was a specialization in other sports before any contact with the systematized futsal training. Therefore, athletes within the process of specialization in a particular sport may come to specialize later in another one, having success, as was the case of P8 in futsal. This process of competitive experience and temporary specialization in other sports can be characterized as part of the diversified experience, previous to the current specialization in futsal. Another example that emerged from players' discourses was football.

I have always played football. Since I was seven years old, I used to play in football championships. I started to practice futsal only at fifteen years old (P5).

Regarding the participation of athletes in football, four of the seven interviewees who experienced this practice in a systematic way, competing at state or regional levels, four had experience before futsal, while three had it simultaneously. The phenomena that explain the choice for futsal can be interpreted as thresholds that marked the transition between the specializing and investment years, as the case of the P5's quotation, which chose to develop her career in futsal because the opportunities that happened, even she has declared the preference to play football.

I used to play both [football and futsal]. I was able to reconcile both sports, so I used to train football on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and futsal on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday [...] I really do not know [the reason that let to choose futsal], because at eighteen years old I used to play football and futsal simultaneously. If I would choose, I actually preferred football, but I received a better opportunity to play futsal and I took it. Then, I cannot even reconcile both anymore (P5)

In Brazil, it is common that financial investments are less significant in women football and futsal compared with men^{13,16,17}, what can be interpreted as a consequence of the men symbolic domination on these sports²³. This scenario of inequality of opportunities for practices between women and men promotes a series of thresholds that structure the women athletes' sports career development, influencing their decisions.

P12 has had experiences on futsal and football during the sampling years, specializing in football on adolescence, and after overcame some thresholds, preferred to invest in a futsal career on adulthood. In her discourse, it is evident that the routine of playing football was not pleasurable. During the period in which she practiced football, P12 has had the father as her main source of incentive, and as she acquired greater autonomy, decided to turn efforts on futsal, a more pleasant environment to her.

My father influenced me a lot. He said that on football it would be easier to build a career [better opportunities for job, salary, fame]. On the beginning, I used to enjoy playing football, but it was not what I have looked for. During the last year in football, I decided to drop-out. I have never felt comfortable playing football anymore. I need to find new things, to live in a new environment, meeting new people, doing a different activity. Then I preferred to play futsal (P12)

On the processes of breaking the link with football, the in-depth specialization process on futsal occurred in very particular ways among the interviewees, characterizing different thresholds, products of the interaction between the different learning cultures and agents involved on this process^{29,55,56}.

Conclusions

The aims of this study were to investigate and describe the process of sports career development lived by Brazilian women elite futsal players, based on their own sport experiences and perspectives on futsal. It is concluded that interviewed players had their first sports experiences with a variety of practices during childhood, before to specialize in futsal, having practiced diversified sport on youth.

Most athletes began playing informal football practices on the street, without a systematic teaching and coaching support, counting with the influence of men neighbors, friends or relatives. In addition, it has been reported that there was minimal incentive to practice futsal at school or at clubs, but rather a discouragement from part of some people, based on prejudice about gender stereotypes.

The players' beginning on the systematic practice of futsal occurred later in comparison to men players. The lack of competitions for young girls, and the fact that futsal and other 'ball kicking games' are considered as men preserved practices contributed to the late sport specialization process.

A considerable parcel of the participants of this study has divided efforts between futsal and other sport during the specializing years, mainly in football. By the other hand, interesting data is that some athletes have specialized in other sports before investing in a futsal career. The wide range of transferable experiences in childhood allowed some athletes to begin in the systematic practice of futsal during adolescence.

The transition between the specializing and investment years in futsal was marked by particular situations, interpreted as thresholds that have had strong relations with gender issues related to the participation of women in futsal, explaining how society imposes different obstacles on the women sports career development, especially in men preserved sports, such as futsal. The differences in sports career between genders are consistent with expectations from a society that historically presents a process of symbolic men domination in several social fields²².

This research offers contributions to better understand women sports career development in futsal. Attention is necessary to the need of depth studies on women sports career, given some differences presented in comparison to men, as the years of specialization and the beginning of participation in competitions. The girls and women sports career studies can evidence how society can become more sensitive and be more susceptible to changes against gender stereotypes.

Pedagogical actions, as discuss gender issues among men and women players, and to coach futsal for girls and boys with the same rigor and investment (in the sense of seriousness, time dedication and offering of adequate sports facilities) are necessary. It could help for educating future generations about gender equality, not only the athletes but relatives, coaches, managers, trying to avoid future reproductions of men domination actions that oppress and limit the full participation of women in sports (and in other fields of society).

Associated with this, the offer of futsal/football systematized practices and competitions to young girls, especially at schools and sport clubs, could work as a way to contribute for future cultural changes on women players access to ‘ball kicking games’, as well as to decrease prejudice and social barriers to women that practice sports.

As an object for future studies, it is proposed to carry out researches that address the perspective of family, coaches and managers on women futsal, in order to seek a broader understanding of this kind of sports career, from the vision of the different agents that also influences on this process.

Endnotes

^[a] Futsal, in this study, is considered as a specific and autonomous sport¹⁵, with historical origin in *futebol de salão* and, consequently, heir of cultural traits from football¹⁶. Therefore, the same symbolic value with respect to gender issues can be observed in both sports¹². Thus, in some parts of this text, football will be mentioned, but it should not be confused with futsal.

^[b] Deliberate play refers to all activities that are often related to the beginning of the child’s physical involvement, but which do not cease to exist throughout life, characterized as intrinsically motivating, in which individuals experience potentially transferable skills, contributing to the acquisition of important experiences for their sport trajectory³⁹.

^[c] Deliberate practices are structured activities, carried out with an explicit aim of skill development, specific performance improvement and overcoming weaknesses³⁹.

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