


## **GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN REPORTS ON WOMEN ATHLETES IN RIO 2016 OLYMPIC GAMES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** to identify reiteration trends or overcoming of gender inequalities in reports on female athletes published in Brazilian newspapers.

**Method:** a documentary research based on reports published in the special report on Rio 2016 Olympic Games in two Brazilian newspapers of national circulation. 51 articles and 87 images were selected and submitted to thematic content analysis and processed in webQDA software.

**Results:** four categories emerged from the empirical data: women's representativeness in the Olympic Games; women on the champions platform; recognition of women from overcoming male performance; and violence against women gaining ground in sports' agenda. Media coverage replicated socially constructed sexist patterns by portraying athletes from stereotyped female characteristics and revealed gender inequalities in describing situations of violence against athletes perpetrated by members of technical teams and supporters.

**Conclusion:** despite the visibility given to the protagonism of athletes, there was the production and reproduction of gender stereotypes. Therefore, it is necessary to deconstruct and confront inequalities between men and women.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Gender and health. Sports. Qualitative research. Periodicals. Nursing.

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## PERSPECTIVA DE GÊNERO NAS REPORTAGENS SOBRE MULHERES ATLETAS NOS JOGOS OLÍMPICOS RIO 2016

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** identificar as tendências de reiteração ou superação das desigualdades de gênero em reportagens sobre mulheres atletas publicadas em jornais brasileiros.

**Método:** pesquisa documental, realizada a partir de reportagens publicadas na sessão dos cadernos especiais sobre as Olimpíadas Rio 2016 em dois jornais brasileiros de circulação nacional. Foram selecionadas 51 reportagens e 87 imagens, submetidas à análise de conteúdo temática e processadas no *software* webQDA.

**Resultados:** a partir dos dados empíricos, emergiram quatro categorias: a representatividade das mulheres nos jogos olímpicos; as mulheres na plataforma dos campeões; o reconhecimento da mulher a partir da superação do desempenho masculino; e a violência contra a mulher ganhando espaço na pauta esportiva. A cobertura midiática reproduziu padrões sexistas socialmente construídos ao retratar as atletas a partir de características femininas estereotipadas e revelou desigualdades de gênero ao descrever situações de violência contra as atletas perpetradas por membros das equipes técnicas e torcedores.

**Conclusão:** apesar da visibilidade dada ao protagonismo das atletas, houve a produção e reprodução de estereótipos de gênero. Portanto, são necessários a desconstrução e o enfrentamento das desigualdades entre homens e mulheres.

**DESCRITORES:** Gênero e saúde. Esportes. Pesquisa qualitativa. Publicações periódicas. Enfermagem.

## PERSPECTIVA DE GÉNERO EN LAS REPORTAJES SOBRE MUJERES ATLETAS EN LOS JUEGOS OLÍMPICOS RIO 2016

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** identificar las tendencias de reiteración o superación de las desigualdades de género en reportajes sobre mujeres atletas publicadas en periódicos brasileños.

**Método:** la investigación documental, realizada a partir de reportajes publicados en la sesión de los reportajes especiales sobre las Olimpíadas Río 2016 en dos periódicos brasileños de circulación nacional. Se seleccionaron 51 reportajes y 87 imágenes, sometidas al análisis de contenido temático y procesadas en el *software* webQDA.

**Resultados:** a partir de los datos empíricos, surgieron cuatro categorías: la representatividad de las mujeres en los juegos olímpicos; las mujeres en la plataforma de los campeones; el reconocimiento de la mujer a partir de la superación del desempeño masculino; y la violencia contra la mujer ganando espacio en la pauta deportiva. La cobertura mediática reprodujo patrones sexistas socialmente construidos al retratar a las atletas a partir de características femeninas estereotipadas y reveló desigualdades de género al describir situaciones de violencia contra las atletas perpetradas por miembros de los equipos técnicos y aficionados.

**Conclusión:** a pesar de la visibilidad dada al protagonismo de las atletas, hubo la producción y reproducción de estereotipos de género. Por lo tanto, son necesarios la desconstrucción y el enfrentamiento de las desigualdades entre hombres y mujeres.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Género y salud. Deportes. Investigación cualitativa. Publicaciones periódicas. Enfermería.

## INTRODUCTION

In the course of history of the Olympic Games, the insertion of female athletes presented a continuous growth. Nevertheless, it was only in the edition of the London Games in 2012 that all participating countries had at least one female representative in their delegations. Thus, in addition to the greater inclusion of women in the event, it was also possible to perceive the emphasis given by the international media coverage of these athletes.<sup>1</sup>

Although in the current scenario the participation of women in Olympic events has gained greater visibility, it cannot be said that male and female athletes have the same opportunities. Sports is a space of production of generalized bodies due to the cultural construction that determines masculinity and femininity representations. For this reason, it is possible to observe in the sporting events the normalized representation of femininity and eroticization of the female bodies, in order to exalt their physical attributes and sensuality.<sup>2</sup>

In this scenario, printed and/or televised media can contribute to the reaffirmation of gender inequalities in sport. The media reinforces the degenerate roles assigned to men and women by emphasizing the socially constructed patterns of femininity and masculinity. In the case of reports on female athletes, biased press coverage reveals the need to sell sports specifically to male audiences, and should therefore tailor their coverage to their potential customers.<sup>3</sup>

The female body representation as a “thing” in the sports environment requires wide discussion based on gender perspective to minimize inequality and consequent gender violence. Recently, the issue of sexual violence gained prominence in the international media due to the condemnation of the male physician of the American women’s Olympic gymnastics team for innumerable reports of sexual violence perpetrated against athletes children, adolescents and adults during the years in which he practiced sports medicine.<sup>4</sup>

Given the above and recognizing that media coverage can greatly influence public perceptions of female athletes, the present study started with the following research question: what is the content of the articles published in Brazilian newspapers regarding participation of women athletes in the Rio 2016 Olympic Games? The objective was to identify reiteration trends or overcoming of gender inequalities in the subjects on female athletes published in Brazilian newspapers.

## METHOD

This is an exploratory and descriptive documentary study, with a qualitative approach, based on *Teoria de Intervenção Prática de Enfermagem em Saúde Coletiva* (TIPESC, freely translated as Praxical Theory of Intervention of Collective Health Nursing).<sup>5</sup>

The research was carried out from reports and images published in the special report section on Rio 2016 Olympic Games in two Brazilian newspapers of national circulation. These newspapers were chosen because they were among the five most widely read national newspapers<sup>6</sup> and because they presented special report section on the Brazilian Olympic Games. Newspaper A was consulted in printed form; and Newspaper B was consulted in its online version. It was not possible to access the full contents in the printed version of Newspaper B. However, this was not a limitation, since this content was consulted in full in the newspaper’s online version.

The selected reports and images were published from July 25 to August 22, 2016, corresponding to the opening and closing of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. Initially, a pilot data collection was carried out with a view to the discussion and elaboration of a structured tool for gathering and systematizing the data. This tool identified each report with index number, title, number of lines, presence or absence of image, date of publication, author’s gender, speeches contained in the reports, and correspondence with the study’s theoretical framework.

The data collection from Newspaper A was carried out in December 2016, and from Newspaper B was carried out in January 2017. Three independent reviewers read the titles of the reports, headlines, leads and images published in the special report section on Rio 2016 Olympic Games.

Publications were selected whose central characters were female athletes. Initially, 46 articles were selected in Newspaper A, and 40 articles were published in Newspaper B, which were read in full. Of these, publications of an informative nature, such as those expressing only the results of the matches and the table of athletes' next games, were excluded. Considering the established criteria, there was a total of 26 articles from newspaper A and 25 from newspaper B, totaling 51 articles.

In relation to the analyzed images, from the selected articles, 37 photographs of Newspaper A and 50 photographs of Newspaper B were extracted, totaling 87 images. Images that did not portray athletes but only their relatives or the technical team, were excluded. In the images, the Olympic modalities, photography scene and feelings expressed by athletes from victories or defeats, were analyzed.

Speeches and images of the selected articles were submitted to content analysis, consisting of pre-analysis, material exploration, treatment of results, interpretation and inference,<sup>7</sup> with the support of WebQDA software.<sup>8</sup> Analysis for the understanding of the object was performed from gender<sup>9</sup> and gender violence analytical categories.<sup>10</sup>

The term "report" was used to identify all the texts published in the two newspapers. Excerpts and images reproduced in this manuscript were identified with the letters A and B, representing the newspaper from which they were posted, followed by Arabic numerals to indicate their sequence. The research did not require Research Ethics Committee appreciation, since texts and images of two Brazilian newspapers with greater circulation were made publicly available and with free access to information.

## RESULTS

### Reports characterization

The results of this research revealed that Newspaper A reports ranged from 32 to 171 lines, while Newspaper B reports ranged from 14 to 81 lines. As for the authors' gender, in Newspaper A, 19 reports were written by men, five by women and two by men and women. The same pattern was repeated in Newspaper B, 16 of which were written by men, two by women, four by man and one woman, and three were not authored.

In relation to the images, the Olympic modalities with the greatest number of references were soccer (12), judo (11), athletics and gymnastics (10), swimming (8), sand volleyball (6), volleyball court and basketball (5). On the context in which athletes were photographed, spaces of competition (52), podium (11) and training (10).

Texts and images' content analysis resulted in the emergence of four empirical categories, namely: *women's representativeness in the Olympic Games*; *women on the champions platform*; *recognition of women from overcoming male performance*; and *violence against women gaining ground in sports' agenda*.

### Women's representativeness in the Olympic Games

The analyzed reports highlighted, in a general way, the participation of women athletes and their achievements in the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. Among these, it was possible to emphasize the pioneering in the achievement of medals, in the achieved records and in the insertion of women in sports considered masculine: *The Rio Games have been highlighted by the abundance of heroines [...] (B11). She will be the second woman in the history of Brazilian participation to carry the flag (A7). The judoka (judo practitioners) won the bronze medal in the light heavyweight category and became the first woman to win two podiums in the Olympics for Brazilian judo (B7).*

In the images selected, it was possible to observe emphasis on the achievement of medals, as 11 photographs were recorded on the podium. It was observed that athletes themselves emphasized their victories by showing the medals at the moment of photography, usually supported on one hand and away from the body (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** – Athlete holding medal, extracted from report B2.

### **Women on the champions platform**

In this category, the selected reports presented athletes from the expression of feelings and the reproduction of historically and socially constructed femininity patterns manifested by characteristics linked to women's emotionality and sensitivity.

In the photographs taken at the time of the competitions, tension and concentration of athletes are observed in movements performance during the game (Figure 2). 15 references were identified in Newspaper A and 19 in Newspaper B.





**Figure 2** – Athletes disputing ball possession, extracted from the report B46.

At the moment after the competitions, the photographs showed signs of joy associated with the victory. In these images, athletes were photographed smiling (Figure 3). In Newspaper A, 14 references were selected, and in Newspaper B there were 20 references.



**Figure 3** – Athletes celebrating victory, extracted from the report A8.

In the analysis of the texts of the reports also highlighted excerpts described the figure of the athlete associated with crying, as much in the moments of victory as of defeat. This aspect reinforces the stereotype of the woman as sensitive and emotional: *Conquered the gold medal and cried compulsively after the victory* (A11). *The final result of fifth place made her leave the mat to tears* (A14).

The feeling expressed by crying was identified in six images from Newspaper A and two images from Newspaper B. These images were recorded mostly in defeats (Figure 4). Nevertheless, it was also possible to observe such feeling on the podium.



**Figure 4** – Athlete crying after defeat, extracted from report A22.

In addition to crying in the texts and in the images, it was found that the writing of the reports tended to highlight the stereotypes of femininity that are related to the fragility of women, as shown in the following excerpts: [...] *She has a delicate, almost angelic way and looks younger than her 31 years* (A17). *At the top of the podium, listening to the Hungarian anthem, she seemed harmless, vulnerable* (B23).

### **Recognition of women from overcoming male performance**

The reports repeatedly compared the results obtained by women with regard to the performance of male athletes, regardless of whether they are in the same Olympic modality or not. Furthermore, the athlete was recognized by overcoming a performance or by similar results achieved by male athletes: *The fans returned her performance with a resounding “ah, she’s better than Neymar”* (A10). *The gymnast dismisses comparisons with the biggest names in the sport today. “I’m not the next Bolt, the next Phelps. I’m the first Simone Biles”* (A18).

In the images the direct comparison between male and female athletes was not identified. Nevertheless, two photographs stood out in the sense attributed to this category. Two fans wore the shirt of the men’s soccer team, in which the name of the main athlete was scratched and just below was written the name of the athlete with the most prominence in the female modality (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** – Fan wearing the Brazilian soccer team jersey, extracted from the report B29.

Women overcoming in relation to men could also be noticed in the training of athletes. The physical preparation that gave them the appearance and performance equivalent to the masculine one was highlighted in a positive way, according to the following excerpt: *The new phase made her sprout stronger, almost masculinized, but mortal* (B15).

### **Violence against women gaining ground in sports' agenda**

Violence against women was highlighted in two ways. The first, in the reports on violence situations experienced by athletes: *"It is not possible for anyone to wish you to be raped or to die. You do not have to like me, but you need to have respect", blurted the athlete* (A12). *The Hungarian is trained by the husband who draws attention by the way he reacts in the tests of her, considered as severe, he has already vehemently rebuked her in public* (B6).

The second, in the reports that disqualified women, was for the physical or for the inability to be themselves responsible for their victory: *The two goalkeepers of almost 100 kg "cover" the goal with their big size* (A20). *The Hungarian victory became news when a commentator on the American channel NBC referred to her husband as "the man responsible" for the conquest* (B11).

In this category, it was not possible to identify images that represent forms of violence against women.



## DISCUSSION

The media coverage of the Olympic athletes is one of the reflexes of the increase of the female participation in the competition. This aspect can be identified through the reports related to the event, in which the female achievements were positively highlighted.

It was noticed the protagonism of athletes in the Rio 2016 Olympics, mainly in what concerns the participation and the conquest of unpublished medals in different sport modalities, as in judo, in swimming and in athletics. Nonetheless, the greater visibility of athletes in the media during the Olympic Games is due to the fact that it is a sporting event of significant worldwide repercussion. Thus both positive and negative results are revealed regardless of gender.<sup>11-12</sup>

In most of the reports, the Brazilian print media highlighted the positive achievements of athletes. This result corroborates that of another study, in which 66.35% of the reports published in sports newspapers were associated with victories and 11.5% with women's defeats.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on victory was also identified in the images, since the number of photographs of athletes demonstrating joy was superior to that of expressions of sadness.

In addition to representing the results of the Olympic Games, the data showed that part of speeches of the analyzed reports reproduced historically and socially constructed sexist patterns. These patterns reinforce gender inequalities by portraying athletes by stereotyped characteristics corresponding to the female gender, such as sensitivity, fragility, and delicacy. On this subject, researchers assume a de-generalized tendency of the description of athletes in the texts, in the images and in the comments of the newspaper, in that women are often presented as sexual objects and not as competitive athletes.<sup>14</sup>

A study carried out on international researches produced in the last three decades on the media coverage of female athletes found less presence and greater infantilization of these women in the headlines and reports. The media constantly emphasized aspects related to the familiar pattern and the sexualization of the images of athletes to the detriment of sports conquests.<sup>15</sup>

Another study also found a shortage of sports coverage for female athletes in televised news, in which women's sports had lower transmission times and reduced production values of high quality. The facts were generally conveyed in a monotonous manner and without the same inspiration expressed in men's sports.<sup>16</sup>

The difference in the portrayal of male and female athletes by the sports media reveals gender inequality in this environment, where athletes are represented primarily as women not because of their performance in the sport in which they practice. It is as if there was an antagonism between being an athlete and being a woman, as if the attributes assigned to the feminine were able to cancel out those destined for a sportsman, in other words, incompatibility of coexistence between both attributes.<sup>3</sup>

The present study identified that the portrayal by the media for each sex is expressed in a degenerate way, influencing the way women are seen in sports. In the reports about the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, it was possible to note the reproduction of the female representations related to the sensuality, beauty and gracefulness of athletes. Therefore, the ability of the media to construct and renew the stereotyped image of an ideal of femininity.<sup>14</sup>

Reproduction of gender stereotypes in sports was also verified in a Spanish study carried out with 98 school-aged children, in which it was observed that the boys preferred preferentially for competitive physical activities, and the girls by games that involved social interaction. In addition, it was found that boys and girls did not participate in the same activities, however, girls who wished to be part of boys' games had their skills tested to be accepted.<sup>17</sup>

An expressive number of reports highlighted the cries expressed by athletes, both in situations of defeat, due to dissatisfaction with the result, and in victories for the emotion generated by the conquest.

The importance attributed to crying once again reveals the need to present the female image linked to vulnerability, even in situations where athletes were record-players or Olympic medalists. This fact, besides reinforcing the concept that women are naturally emotional, presents as a contradiction the strength and fragility of the same athlete who reached the peak of her career.

Another aspect that influences the portrayal of women in the reports is the conception that most sport modalities are perceived as typically masculine, with women practicing sports that are closer to art and esthetics. It is therefore explained the understanding of appropriate sports for men and women from gender stereotypes.<sup>15,18</sup>

A study carried out in the United Kingdom analyzed the television coverage of the events in which there was participation of women and identified that these were mainly composed of sports considered feminine, like gymnastics.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, it is observed that the Brazilian media analyzed in this research highlighted the performance of athletes practicing sports perceived as masculine, for example, judo and soccer. It is possible to affirm that this question can be related to the soccer culture characteristic of Brazilians.

Nonetheless, when analyzing from the gender perspective, it is noticed that, even when they receive the most prominent coverage, sports athletes considered as masculine are often compared to men and described from masculinity-related stereotypes.<sup>15</sup>

This reality reinforces heterosexism in sports. Athletes, when they do not adhere to the stereotype of femininity, either because they have a more muscular body biotype, or because they compete in sports considered masculine, have their sexuality questioned. This fact reveals the thought that, for a woman to perform excellence in a sports modality practiced historically by men, she must present masculine attributes that allow her to be equal to them, including with respect to sexuality.

Ratifying this thought, a study developed with 90 German female soccer players found that athletes presented a competitive level similar to that of the male players, as well as expressed stereotypes related to masculinity manifested by strength and dispute.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, despite the fact that women participate in different sports, gender stereotypes remain implicit in sports.

Although athletes are valued for their performance during games when they demonstrate a satisfactory performance, they have their result associated with overcoming a masculine result. This aspect was observed mainly in soccer, when it was mentioned that one of the main players of the Brazilian women's team is better than one of the men's soccer stars.

Pressure on athletes is not restricted to the results of competitions, but also to the attitude during training and disputes. Attitudes that express strength and aggressiveness as fundamental elements for winning victories are emphasized. A study carried out with female athlete coaches found that because they belonged to the female, they felt the need to present a superior preparation to the male, since they needed to be able to face and resist any situation. In addition, these trainers referred the guarantee of leadership linked to the sensitive image of femininity and to the aggressive behavior pattern of masculinity.<sup>20</sup>

In this way, sport as a constituent element of society can be understood as a propitious space for the production and reproduction of masculinity patterns, as well as being an institution that presents the possibility of symbolically carrying out patriarchal attitudes.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is verified that the sports culture is able to reinforce the differences and hierarchies of gender, in which the female bodies are usually subalternized to the masculine ones. Thus, it is reiterated that the representation of the sport is carried out by men and carried in the media for the male.<sup>16</sup>

The print media analyzed in this research, in addition to portraying gender inequalities implicit in the Olympic games, described situations of violence against female athletes, usually perpetrated by members of technical teams and fans. The violence practiced by the media itself was restricted to one of the newspapers, in which athletes who did not meet the standard of female beauty were

insulted. In view of this, there is a need for intervention measures to address gender inequalities in the sports media.

Deconstructing the view of athletes from the male and female perspectives presents itself as a challenge for professionals involved with the sports media. It is necessary to overcome this vision to minimize speeches that reinforce sexualization of female athletes and avoid aggression towards those who do not fit the standards attributed to gender.<sup>12</sup>

Limitations of this study refer to the use of reports of only two Brazilian newspapers of national circulation. Considering the pioneering nature of the research and the current tendency among the important newspapers to make content available both in print and online, this research can be expanded and replicated to other special reports and competitions.

In addition, the study presents an innovative character in the qualitative research, since it also used, in addition to texts, images in the composition of the analysis *corpus*. The images provided an illustrative context for the reports, since they registered the expression of athletes and made it possible to deepen the understanding about the studied phenomena.

## CONCLUSION

The reports analyzed in this research highlight the visibility of women and their role in the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. Although athletes were selected in the selected special reports, it is questioned whether this recognition would also be found in sports sessions outside the periods of major international competitions. The expectation of the good performance of the country in the Olympics did not correspond to the expectation that there would be greater number of reports on female athletes, mainly through their positive performance in the competition.

Even when there is visibility to the protagonism of athletes, it identifies the production and reproduction of gender stereotypes. Therefore, the need for deconstruction and confronting inequalities between men and women, which is not restricted to individual attitudes, is reinforced, but to the community. Furthermore, the desired changes to the achievement of gender equality will be located in different areas of society, such as sports and the media.

With regard to the discussion of gender issues, research has the potential to promote reflection and recognition of the differences between the female and the male and their implications in the relations of production and social reproduction, especially in the sporting context.

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## **NOTES**

### **CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORITY**

Study design: Fornari LF, Lourenço RG, Fonseca RMGS, Egry EY.

Data collection: Fornari LF, Lourenço RG, Santos DLA.

Data analysis and interpretation: Fornari LF, Lourenço RG, Santos DLA.

Discussion of the results: Fornari LF, Lourenço RG, Fonseca RMGS, Santos DLA, Egry EY.

Writing and/or critical review of content: Fornari LF, Lourenço RG, Fonseca RMGS, Santos DLA, Egry EY.

Review and final approval of the final version: Fornari LF, Fonseca RMGS, Egry EY.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

No any conflict of interest.

### **CONSENT OF USE OF IMAGE**

The images were extracted from two newspapers made available in a public way and with free access to information.

### **HISTORICAL**

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