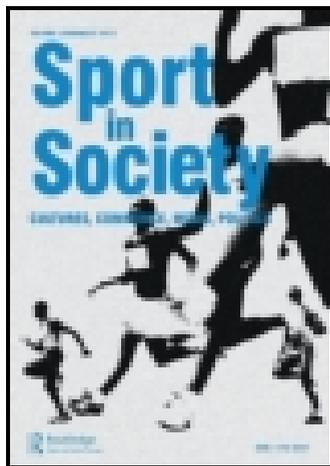


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### Body projects: making, remaking, and inhabiting the woman's futebol body in Brazil

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## Body projects: making, remaking, and inhabiting the woman's futebol body in Brazil

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Drawing on data from an experiential ethnographic project undertaken in Brazil, this paper explores how gender is being experienced and negotiated by women football players within the context of the game's incorporation into Western capitalism. Acceptance of women into this historically male sport is growing and opportunities are increasing, but access is heavily contingent on compliance with a new 'hyper-feminized' ideal of Western athletic femininity. Through empirical data, we look at the embodied experiences of a small cohort of professional women football players as they navigate this shifting terrain in Brazil. This paper explores the discrepancies between representation and lived experience and the implications for agency, empowerment, and self-expression among players as they confront new forms of constraint being imposed on their bodies. Through this microcosm of women's football, we get a glimpse at how global restructuring along the lines of Western capitalist development is affecting bodies and minds.

### Introduction

As Brazil emerges in the global economy heavily influenced by interpretations of Western capitalism, information, people, and products are taking on new meaning. At face value, we may see these shifts as an emancipating enterprise wherein 'globalism represents neoliberal capitalism as the only way to secure individual liberty, efficiency and social prosperity on a global scale' (Rupert 2005, 460). Yet, exploring social and economic implications of the free-market ideology within the context of women's futebol<sup>1</sup> in Brazil, we uncover a system of restrictive and limiting gender norms that suggest a different scenario. The outcome reveals how neoliberal capitalism relies heavily upon existing power structures of inequality for its survival, yet also revealed are the creative and innovative measures individuals are developing for navigating these shifts that allow for varying degrees of individual freedom, agency, and empowerment.

Drawing on empirical data, this paper explores the embodied experiences and gendered identities of women football players in Brazil at a time when they face both new opportunities and new forms of neoliberal constraint. Many of these women are part of a grass-roots community initiative in Brazil, called the [Guerreiras Project](#), which is an international gender justice initiative that uses images and discourse from football to create space – physical and mental – for players and the public to question unconscious gender bias in society. Within the project, female footballers develop the skills to become community ambassadors of women's rights and gender dialogue, and turn their football narratives into tools for gender justice. As part of better understanding the potential for this type of work within Brazil and beyond, we outline the present context and challenges for these female footballers. This paper considers the tensions between the continued

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challenges of developing sport for women in Brazil and an increased interest in sport *for* development and empowerment (Williams and Chawansky 2014). The perspectives of women athletes offered in this paper contribute important contextual information and insights, which can inform future studies on girl-centred Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) initiatives in Brazil and the development of women's sport more broadly.

We begin by examining gender and sport literature and concepts of agency, authenticity, and empowerment. We then outline the cultural significance and historical trajectory of women's football in Brazil, before sharing our findings. We find that dominant discourses based on social construction do not adequately facilitate an understanding of how women players experience the complexities of sport and social spaces in Brazil, and we emphasize the need to incorporate embodied knowledge. We conclude by considering how these women's embodied experiences are situated within broader global power structures and the implications for transformative change.

### **Gender and sport**

Sport can be a powerful site for reproducing norms, conventions, and dominant ideologies, as well as regulating and controlling bodies. Yet, simultaneously, sport can serve as a platform and mechanism for resistance and agency (Hall 1996; Hargreaves 1994; Woodward 2009).

Scholarly research has examined how sport can serve as a liberating vehicle for women through the opportunities it provides to develop physical strength, powerful movement, and kinaesthetic prowess (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning 2010; Cox and Thompson 2004; Roth and Basow 2004), as well as opportunities to build community among women (Hjelm and Olofsson 2004; Theberge 1995). As Theberge (1987) states, 'The liberatory possibility of sport lies in the opportunity for women to experience the creativity and energy of their bodily power and to develop this power in the community of women' (393).

Simultaneously, scholars have shown how the oppressive dynamic of sport for women is perpetuated through the sexualization, trivialization, and marginalization of women athletes (Cooky et al. 2010; Messner 2002; Pfister 2010). Likewise, social expectations of 'hegemonic femininity' and the pressure to perform this gender ideal have been shown to leave female athletes struggling to reconcile their athleticism with their femininity – especially when their sport symbolizes a masculine space (Carlson 2010; Krane et al. 2004; Markovits and Hellerman 2004; Messner 2007).

We take the position in this paper that sport is a context of competing discourses where gender is being constructed in complex and often contradictory ways, producing various tensions in individual and collective identities (Messner 2007; Pringle and Markula 2005). Therefore, we argue that – in order to grasp the various forms of agency being exercised and empowerment experienced – we must turn to the athletic bodies and minds that feel and live these tensions. First, we interrogate and contextualize the terms.

### **Agency, authenticity, and empowerment**

The mainstream neoliberal notion of empowerment has been critiqued by some feminist scholars (Cornwall and Edwards 2010; Wilson 2008) as having been reduced to an equation. Empowerment becomes about inputs, like technical expertise and financing, being seen to secure certain outcomes, often measured in material terms like income generation and employment. A more holistic meaning of the word is presented by Kabeer

(1999), who supports empowerment as a process tied to the expansion of choice. For Kabeer (2010), agency is relevant to empowerment when it reflects the ‘operationalisation of strategic choices’, entailing consciousness as well as practice; she suggests that choice is only meaningful in the presence of alternatives. Mosedale (2005) builds on this notion by placing emphasis on empowerment expanding what is possible for not just the individual but also groups and populations. Parpart’s (2010) consideration of silences and secrecy as empowering tactics, reflecting choice and constraint in different contexts, is also an important contribution for framing agency and empowerment as relative and unpredictable. For example, she references women in Afghanistan wearing white socks, platform shoes, and painted nails under their *burqas* as a form of protest. We agree with Parpart (2010) that new ways of thinking about agency are needed so the interplay of context, location, relationships, and experiences are visible and reflect empowerment as a *process*.

An essential part of interpreting empowerment is understanding how power operates. Using a Foucauldian analysis of women’s football in Brazil is useful for considering the tensions and ambiguities expressed in identities and subjectivity formation within the broader context of social relations and political and economic power structures. For Foucault, discourses are where power and knowledge combine, and where power is not limited, nor zero sum. He suggests power is productive in that it allows things to come into being, described through the notion of disciplinary power (Foucault 1980). This has the logic of normalization built into it; individuals position themselves around a norm and subsequently monitor and order their own behaviour accordingly. Foucault’s (1988) notion of ‘technologies of the self’ implies we learn how to actively constitute ourselves as subjects within specific historical practices, reflecting responses to self-surveillance through forms of disciplinary power imposed upon us. According to Foucault (1972), our identities are constructed through social understandings and power relations that are changeable and unstable, and not grounded in bodies of an essentialized nature. What is difficult to manage is making the distinction between effective and ineffective forms of resistance when power, as Foucault argues, is always shifting and unstable.

The body is at the centre of this struggle. Exploring the interplay between the social body and the individual body, Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) illustrate how vast the spectrum of possible social influences are on an individual and how these influences affect different aspects of what might be considered an authentic self. In different cultural contexts, like women’s football, individuals can often find themselves juggling an external or social self and a more private self or hidden self. Bartky (1988) identifies social pressures acting on individuals in the social construction of femininity through what she calls ‘technologies of femininity’. She suggests that ‘a whole range of gestures, postures, movements and bodily comportments serve to restrain women . . . against a backdrop of bodily deficiency’ (Bartky 1988, 71). Orbach (2009) raises questions about what it means to have an authentic body, suggesting it is about an ongoing continuity and stability of the body, which stands in contrast to the sense of alienation that may come from routine corporeal modification.

Against such a backdrop we aim to move beyond discursive representation by incorporating embodied knowledge. We define embodied knowledge as the physical, intellectual, and emotional subjectivities as they are felt in the flesh, and which are constructed and reconstructed in response to a continuum of environments and experiences. We explore how developing and maintaining an ‘authentic self’ and operationalizing empowered choice as a woman playing football in Brazil can be the ultimate challenge.

### **Women and football in Brazil**

Since its introduction at the beginning of the twentieth century, football in Brazil has been perceived as a space reserved exclusively for men. Traditional gender roles have forcefully socialized women away from the football sphere, while socializing men into it (Lever 1995). As football began to grow in popularity women would occasionally play in unstructured settings – an act almost always met with disapproval. This disapproval was pronounced when the physical exclusion of women from football was enforced with legal prohibition between 1941 and 1979. When the ban was lifted a new form of exclusion emerged in its place – cultural stigma. The women’s game remained intimately tied to notions of masculinity and machismo (Rial 2012). Women players were seen to be transgressing acceptable gender norms – they represented a threat not only to male sport generally, but also to the national space of collective pride and identity.

Over the past two decades, women’s football in Brazil has witnessed a slow-rate progression of public acceptance (Rial 2012). This has included greater access to training fields, stadiums, and better quality resources; institutionalization into men’s clubs; sponsors and scholarships; and occasional media coverage. This growing acceptance has taken place simultaneously with the emergence of Brazil into the global economy. In 2012, Brazil’s economy grew to become the world’s sixth-largest. Macroeconomic stability, falling income inequality, and the global commodity boom have meant steady economic development for Brazil – until recently.<sup>2</sup> The implications of this growth for women’s football are neither direct nor explicit, as financial resources and investment in the women’s game have still been relatively minimal. However, the importation of globalized images of women’s football and the increasing presence of Brazilian women playing abroad have undoubtedly influenced the images and expectations around the female footballer, women’s bodies, and the women’s game in Brazil. Perhaps, one of the most highly visible signs of progress is Brazilian Marta Viera da Silva, better known simply as ‘Marta’, arguably the world’s best female player. Since the rise of Marta, Brazilian women’s football charts a story of significant success with Silver medals at two of the past four Olympics, players receiving contracts with some of the best international clubs, and a characterization of a game on the rise nationally.

Nevertheless, the increasing popularity and expansion of access and opportunities for women in football in Brazil are not automatically translating into positive outcomes. We focus our attention now on the incongruities between the way female players are being portrayed, counted, cast, and depicted and what it feels like to inhabit this space.

### **Method**

This paper draws on a series of informal discussions and semi-structured interviews undertaken in Brazil with professional female players and coaches. Fieldwork was conducted in three periods: 6 interviews were conducted in 2010, 14 in 2012, and 11 in 2014.<sup>3</sup> At the time of the interviews, the women were all playing professional football at club and/or national level in one of three states in Brazil – São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Pernambuco.

Evidence was gathered largely from the personal experiences of (C.D. Fisher) playing on women’s professional teams, using a qualitative approach called reflexive experiential ethnography. This type of postmodern ethnography represents an anthropological method that recognizes the researcher as a co-collaborator in a dynamic relation with those she or he studies. The researcher and researched, ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, become dialogical rather than oppositional (Behar and Gordon 1995). Ethnographer de Garis (1999) describes the experiential approach as the ‘totality of an experience that does not just

privilege the usual, the observed, and the verbal, but the kinaesthetic and the somatic bodily experience of the actuality as well' (67). While valuable in terms of research, such totality of 'being whom one studies' can create significant tensions and challenges for the researcher. Data collection, as (C.D. Fisher) describes, was 'often extremely tedious, tense and disorienting and there were periods when it was difficult to distinguish between *myself*, my experiences, my research, and my daily living'.

All the interviews were conducted in Portuguese by C.D. Fisher and translated by C.D. Fisher into English. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of the players.

### **Voices from the pitch**

The manner players spoke and related to their engagement in football suggests there are several distinct yet intersecting bodily experiences associated with being a female football player. These experiences are rooted in discourses and performances of gender, professionalism, and football. Emerging from these three categories are themes that illustrate how the women interviewed are continually negotiating ways of presenting, representing, making, and remaking themselves at the intersection of these identities to garner support, respect, opportunities, and resources. We therefore cannot look at any of these themes in isolation. Likewise, we are aware of the importance of considering how various identity categories, including ethnicity, race, age, class, and sexuality, are intersecting to shape players' experiences. While we do not address these topics, aside from sexuality, explicitly in this paper, they are critical underlying themes for further consideration.

### ***The gender performance***

When one looks closely at the women's football pitch, from the spaces and resources *around* the players to the bodies of players themselves, it becomes evident that the expanding opportunities have been met with a new form of constraint. Material constraints have relocated onto physical bodies and acceptance has been contingent on a representation of the female body to fit an image of 'Western athletic femininity'. This is one that represents a 'respectable' and 'desirable' form or modern hegemonic femininity. It is characterized as slim, fit, toned – not too muscular but clearly strong – white, and *heterosexy* (Griffin 1998). This narrow script being cast on the women's game appears to be pushing out other gender expressions and identities through what one might call a 'feminization' of the women's game. Many women are striving tirelessly to achieve this image, but it is a constant struggle as their body types, skin colour, class, gender expression, and sexuality are often at odds with the narrow script.

In this ideal of the feminine footballer, an aspect that gets a great deal of attention from both inside and outside of women's teams is hair length. Repeatedly the women interviewed talked about long hair as being symbolic of being a woman and hair length is used as an indicator of how the women's game has progressed in Brazil in terms of media attention and commercial appeal. Pricilla, a 31-year-old player from the interior of São Paulo state, comments on how important appearance is in football, recognizing this as a relatively new aspect of the professional game:

There are girls today who are letting their hair grow. There are many girls who I knew from before who had short hair, who today have long hair. But it is not because of football, but because of appearance itself. You want to appear like a woman on the television, nobody

wants to look like a man. Before I used to have short hair ... but then I let my hair grow. I said, 'I don't want short hair'. Appearance matters a lot in futebol, it matters a lot.

Thaisa, 29 years old and from São Paulo city, says the image within women's football has been shifting and becoming more feminine as a way to gain public acceptance. She accepts that, for the players, this means sacrifices, but sees it is a necessary step. She believes that once women's football can attract sponsors and fans, then players will be able to express themselves as individuals:

I didn't feel comfortable at first wearing skirts and doing my nails. I liked wearing looser clothes and not doing my hair but my parents held me accountable and so I started taking on a more feminine image. It's a habit now and I feel more comfortable in this image.

Exploring this further, Thaisa observes how the girls who had a more masculine image in the past have changed too and she accepts this has probably not been easy. She sees the pressure to uphold a narrow image of femininity in football as part of the development process:

We use the US like a mirror, we look at ourselves through you, and we are usually behind your culture. The short hair, masculine 'jeito' (manner), started becoming unacceptable, so girls who looked like this started not being accepted, and started not feeling at home in the game, which prevented them from entering; the one's who did enter changed their ways. Whereas it was the reverse before: feminine girls felt like they couldn't enter women's futebol because they wouldn't feel comfortable so they chose other things.

Joanna, 27 years old, from Rio de Janeiro city, agrees with Thaisa about this as an essential step:

This feminine look is a necessary step to get people to accept the women's game; then once people see a positive/acceptable image, they will start to watch it more, appreciate it more, it will get more attention and more media and then the girls can start to dress/look more how they please.

However, the flip side of using such an image of femininity in developing the game is the exclusion of those who do not see themselves fitting, as Alisa, 28 years old, from São Paulo city, observes:

It does no good to think we are going to gain a space with one try ... no, we have to give a little here and there. The uniforms today are feminine. I think this was a natural process this change by the girls, also because the girls who are still very masculine or who still have this masculine style from the past end up being excluded naturally.

Collusion with an image of women's football that fits with a narrow version of femininity appears to be a sacrifice many women deem worthy of making in order to satisfy the clubs, fans, and sponsors who are integral to sustaining women's football on a professional level. However, not all players view it so clear-cut and some are willing to sacrifice more than others. Pricilla shares her personal experiences of femininity:

I am feminine, but I do not like the same things that she likes. You have your feminine that is different from other people's feminine. I am feminine because I like to wear tight pants, but I don't wear skirts, I don't wear dresses, I don't wear high heels; I wear sneakers, I wear flat shoes. I do my hair, but I don't like to wear my hair down. So I am just a different feminine.

Maira, 34 years old, from Rio de Janeiro city, says, wearing make-up should be a choice, but that no one should feel obliged:

If a person wants to put on make-up, shoot, do it! It would be even better to watch on TV, in the images, it is going to have another appearance ... If you do not feel comfortable with this, no, but for those who like it, then yes use it.

Some of the women interviewed discussed sexuality, but for many this was a taboo subject. Historically, women footballers in Brazil have been charged with the label of lesbian because a transgression of gender norms is readily associated with a transgression of sexual norms. The label has served as a disciplining device to control women's participation and keep them out of the sport. But Thaisa makes a distinction between gender image and sexuality, seeing them as separate: 'This image has nothing to do with sexuality; you can be with whoever and look feminine or not; it has nothing to do with who you are'.

Joanna explores the need to balance sexuality and image within the context of being a footballer and a role model. She describes a complicated spectrum of influences that are at play:

It's not a problem if girls are lesbian or whatever, but when they go around with that 'jeito' [manner] then that is where the problem is. Sissi had a shaved head and looked like a boy – so then of course she becomes the role model for women's football and all the girls who play want to look like her/or feel they need to look like her. Then all the more feminine girls end up feeling like they don't fit in or don't feel inclined to play the sport because they don't look/feel like that. Just like Mia Hamm who had long hair and was super feminine – then all the girls in the US wanted to be like her.

Kaká, 29 years old, from Curitiba city, acknowledges that the association between football and homosexuality made her feel embarrassed in the past, and says that her own prejudice was a part of this:

Actually, it was difficult to say that you played football ... I think I had prejudice myself ... when you said it, people would always take it to mean something else, which was homosexuality.

However, she notes how things have changed for her now:

Today I have huge pride to say [I am a football player] because I have managed to overcome all of these difficulties ... Sometimes when people say, 'You really play?' I say, 'Well, let's play over there to see'. I approach it more in the sporty sense; if somebody says something, I don't get offended.

Her description of 'overcoming' the difficulties illustrates how agency can grow with experience and self-confidence. Yet, it is also important to consider how the intensification of the hyper-feminine image has been serving to disassociate the sport from the label of homosexual, and thus perhaps making it easier for players to talk about their engagement in the sport without feeling the need to fend off suspicions around their sexual preference.

Fernanda, 35 years old, from Salvador, playing in São Paulo, acknowledges that while gender prejudice around the women's game has improved, it has shifted locations from inside to outside the house:

There is much less prejudice today than when I started ... Today it is easier for women to play football in Brazil. In the previous era, the critiques came from inside the house ...

Today it is different, today parents take their daughters to find a football school. There is no longer that fight of 'My daughter has to stay in the kitchen, has to help her mother ...' No! And I thank God for this. But I feel bad for the players before us who suffered so much prejudice, and then to see that today we still do not have support, it is sad. But I believe that one day we will get there. All of this prejudice is going to end.

### ***The professional performance***

While a feminine image that fits this Western athletic script is acknowledged as clearly important by players, it is intimately tied to the *professional* image, which is also regarded as extremely important for the women's game gaining acceptance. However, it is not one

that is easily attained or achieved by female players. Without a professional environment in terms of facilities, coaching, salaries, and structures in place, top women players are not taught or supported to become professionals on or off the field. The perception that players do not act professionally further complicates the stigma.

According to Marcelo, a coach of a women's professional team in Rio de Janeiro, one of the first things he teaches the girls is no swearing on the pitch because it is not what the media or public expect. He also tells the girls that walking hand in hand on the field is not acceptable because it is not considered professional. He believes that their personal lifestyle choices off the field must be respected, but as players they must be professional.

For Gisele, 26 years old, from Rio de Janeiro city, the problem is the lack of any real possibility for a professional lifestyle as a woman player:

We have to work other jobs too, take care of the kids, the house AND play – men don't have to do this; so how are we going to get ahead in the game; working and playing?

Alisa is very clear about the link between professionalism and the progress of women's football in Brazil, in which she believes that upholding the feminine image is less important than upholding the professional image:

When you are joining a club to play you have a responsibility, you cannot walk around dressed improperly; you have to be concerned with what you say . . . what you do, because you have an image to uphold. I think that as soon as the girls within football understand this, things will move forward a little more.

However, taking on a more professional role is immensely challenging when there are few role models. Nevertheless, the professional image was not everything either; there was a third element of the footballer identity that seemed to take clear precedence over the gender and professional image: the skilful player. Players expressed the importance of proving their talent and discussed how displaying their skill is a powerful tool for moving minds and bodies.

### ***The football performance***

The word 'preconceito' (prejudice) is how many of the players express the barriers to women's football. When asked how to counter prejudice, the common answer is 'you have to change/move minds'. When asked how to move minds, a common response is 'you have to [get to] know it'. These women believe that as soon as people 'get to know' women's football and see the skills of the women who play it, then the prejudice starts to fade. This is often experienced first in the family.

For many women playing in Brazil, a lack of support from their families is not uncommon, especially initially. Negative stereotypes and stigma associated with women's football tend to influence the attitudes of parents who often express concern that their daughters will become too masculine or 'manly' if they get involved with football. Yet, family support often appears to develop concurrently with the playing career of the individual woman. Many negative attitudes started to diminish as they began to watch their daughters, nieces, and sisters play, improve, excel, and gain respect and recognition in the sport.

At age 12, Alisa began attending a football school in her São Paulo neighbourhood, against her father's wishes. She describes how she argued a lot with her father during this time because she was the only girl playing with all the boys. He was concerned not only about her out there with all the boys, but also about what other people were going to say

about his daughter. However, things began to change in the relationship when Alisa started playing with 20 other girls, and playing well. She comments:

My father started to feel more at ease and he would secretly hide and watch my games, never saying that he was watching . . . he would show up and stand behind a tree. He started to see me performing as the best on the pitch and he heard other people saying, ‘Wow, that girl can play’.

Alisa notes how the prejudices her father had were primarily the result of external pressures he had to face because he had a daughter who played football:

He would step into the elevator of the building and hear the neighbor say ‘Wow, that girl hangs out in the middle of all the boys, she looks like a boy’, and this would bother him a lot. He was concerned about what others were going to think.

Maira experienced similar prejudice from her mother, who too was concerned about other people’s opinions:

My mother used to say, ‘No, a girl has to play with girls. This [football] is not something for girls, this is what boys do’. And the neighbors used to say to my mother, ‘You are going to let your daughter play with the boys?’

But Maira said these attitudes did not stop her. She would jump out the window to play in the street with the boys. When she made the national team, she called and told her parents to watch her on television. From that moment on her parents started supporting her:

Despite the initial prejudice and major pressure that my family felt from others saying, ‘What are you going to do about your daughter playing with all the boys’, I overcame it, we overcame it together. And today they [my family] are my air.

Fernanda also overcame prejudice through perseverance and drive. Her brothers had disapproved of her playing when she was younger, but she says now this has changed:

Today my brothers are so proud of me. And I say to them, ‘Imagine if I had stopped because of your prejudice?’ But I think it was also based on a bit of their anger because I was the only girl amongst five brothers, and I was the one who ended up having more skill. So it was jealousy . . .

Similarly, Pricilla experienced the prejudice of neighbours as a girl playing with boys. But all of these women refer to showing people how prejudice can be effectively challenged with their football skills. Pricilla notes:

When people actually take a moment to watch me playing in the midst of all the men they would say, ‘You play much better than the men’. This is because many people speak without knowing. They think that you don’t know how to play. When you go out there and show them, they realise that you are better than the men. And this feels really good because people say one thing, then when they actually watch you, they see another.

Maira says the Brazilian Women’s National team’s performance and success on the international stage has also helped their image:

We won another Silver medal, and lost only by a little, and then the World Cup, we lost only by a little too . . . We are most well-known because of the Pan-American Games (2007) in Rio, which was when everyone started to watch and say: ‘Today I am going to watch because the girls play well’. There was another image of us, you know?

One player whose skills encapsulate the idea of moving minds is Marta. The recognition of her skill has contributed to women’s football gaining acceptance in Brazil, but unfortunately this has not necessarily translated into better conditions for women playing in Brazil. Fernanda comments:

We are not asking just for bread crumbs, we have done more than prove that we know how to play football. We want women’s football at a higher level, not where it is. We want respect,

we want the right to play in good stadiums ... We don't want to reach the level of the men, but we want respect. We want a right to everything that professional football has. Today they still treat women's football as amateur. We are not amateur any more. We need to be called professionals and treated as professionals.

The lack of structural support for the women's game reflects the institutional prejudice. Women's teams and leagues can often fold overnight, as witnessed with the collapse of the Santos women's team in 2012, arguably the best team in Latin America. This instability can end up exploiting the women who are passionate and committed to playing. And there is a deafening silence from the players who just feel lucky for the little they have. This is exacerbated by a vicious cycle of invisibility due to limited media coverage, tied to a lack of sponsors, and linked to a lack of investment in audience development. And as talent remains hidden, it can only do so much to break down barriers. There is a general sentiment among players that more needs to be done structurally to move minds. Maira comments:

Women's football in Brazil is in need of care; we are trying to succeed; we earned two Silver medals and nothing changed, actually it got worse. We do not understand why they so dislike women playing football. I know that the companies will not gain returns at first, but I think that before long the stadiums will fill up because the people like women's football ... but we appear little in the media; each day our situation is a bit more precarious.

There are more opportunities for women today, but the game still has a long way to go and what does this mean for young girls? In simple terms, girls are being robbed of adequate spaces and important role models like Maira, who shares her wisdom:

For us women, everything is difficult, and everything comes with difficulty. I think that if you have an objective, if you have a dream, don't give up on this dream no matter how hard it is. Don't give up because you will get there, because us women, we are 'guerreiras' [female warriors] and we never give up ... So, fight for it always and you will succeed.

There is an air of optimism in Maira's message rooted in a sense of agency that individual hard work and dedication pays off, a sentiment also present among many players. But these women also acknowledge that their strength and passion as individuals are not enough. As Fernanda comments, 'We took a step forward, but those at the head, our confederation, took a step back. They more or less abandoned us'. While players have been instrumental in expanding access to the sport for women and young girls, without the backing of institutions and those in positions of authority, the women's game will remain on the margins – as will the women who play it.

### **Pride, passion, and pleasure**

At this stage in the cultural acceptance of the women's game in Brazil, many players do not feel they can overtly reject or challenge societal norms that prescribe certain gender expectations for them. Instead, they traverse the unsteady ground, making all sorts of accommodations and compromises along the way. One could argue that the small and subtle forms of agency enacted on a daily basis by players, such as taking off one's make-up or changing one's hairstyle after leaving the pitch, are not significant resistance strategies, but rather more in line with coping mechanisms. One could also argue that there is minimal, if any, critical engagement with the norms of Western athletic femininity. But as Cornwall and Edwards (2010) point out,

contestation may provide women less scope for the exercise of agency than tactical accommodation and, indeed, compromise; choices that transgress societal norms may be

especially hard to make, with risks that are particularly high for women who can least afford to take them. (7)

These players fear losing the little public support they have gained under the confines of pressure from the football industry, the media, and cultural norms imposed by family, friends, and the general public.

While there is agency in the tactical accommodation as players consciously mould their bodies to support their interests and goals, it is cumbersome and laborious process heavily shaped by disciplinary power. Players are positioning themselves around the feminine norm and constantly monitoring their image in relation to it, reflecting self-surveillance. Although many players expressed senses of empowerment, they were also limited in terms of their ability to be who they feel they truly are. These technologies of femininity (e.g. encouraging each other to grow their hair or use more feminine attire) have also resulted in increased discrimination among players towards more masculine-identifying girls who are being increasingly cast out. Simultaneously, as the younger generation of players are exposed to these technologies of femininity from the beginning, becoming part of a 'new norm', opportunities for authentic selves to be developed and determined in the future may be potentially hindered. These younger girls may not see or feel this identity as temporary or malleable in the way the older generation of players have. The question of agency emerges explicitly via Kabeer's (2010) notion of choice. Younger players appear to be increasingly internalizing this script as the seemingly only choice for expression, and alternative choices do not appear readily accessible.

Nevertheless, nuances and possibilities for negotiation within this supposedly uniform script of acceptable femininity are highlighted. For example, when Pricilla states that her femininity is different from other girls' femininity, but this does not mean she is not feminine, it reminds us of the importance of not grouping all women together. We must not assume that what is empowering for one is always empowering for other women (while context is crucial, a broader discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper). It also reminds us that we must not discount the way players are finding room to manoeuvre within these tight confines and outlets for expressing themselves, even if they are partial, subtle, and incremental.

The topic of sexuality seldom emerged in these conversations. Many players entirely disassociate from the topic and some take extreme measures to avoid the discussion even when it may be relevant. Bypassing sexuality and placing a focus on the professional image is an understandable response and fits with a need to keep the private and public spheres separate. However, creating and developing a sense of authenticity as a professional footballer and a 'real [heterosexual] woman' are revealed as site of tension that is repeatedly experienced among these athletes struggling to reconcile femininity with their football identity.

While there may appear little empowered choice in many of these women's realities, the display of talent on the pitch is an area that allows women to undermine negative stereotypes. It is also on the field that we witness an outlet of expression, pleasure, and passion. This dimension of empowerment did not emerge overtly in the discourse and was difficult to capture in the interviews, but it is felt in the flesh. This is the indescribable feeling that gets you out on that field everyday – the sweating, sprinting, scoring – an underlying driver of joy and self-creation. Players train their bodies to be strong, enduring, agile, rhythmic, and skilful. Maira evokes a feeling of pleasure and artistry:

You don't need to have *ginga* (rhythm) [to play], but just a little bit of Brazilian happiness. You just let it flow and go with it. You don't need to dance, but just play with a little of that Brazilian joy and that makes all the difference.

A freedom of movement comes uninhibited via the body as one steps out on the field; there is a stage of endless possibility, choice, and invention as an agent of football artistry. According to C.D. Fisher, this creative self-expression, spontaneity, and enjoyment manifests off the field, as well, as witnessed and experienced on the bus, at practice, or in the locker room before games with samba dancing, singing, and improvising with candid performances.

Another dimension of empowerment that does not emerge explicitly in the interviews, but which is also felt in the flesh is the community and supportive relationships that players offer one another. This community allows for solidarity, connectedness, and a sense of security. It exists as the fundamental, unspoken, safety net of support, collective identity, belonging, and purpose. It is a survival mechanism defined by family, companionship, love, laughter, friendship, and respect; and it is one of the most cherished and valued aspects in many of these women's lives. 'As a member of this community myself' notes (C.D. Fisher), 'these bonds are also one of the most cherished and valuable aspects of my life as well; this solidarity and support intertwined with an omnipresent appreciation and love for one another, on the part of every woman, runs so deep'.

### Conclusion

In moving past discourses solely focused on representation and social construction, we can also move beyond the conclusions that uncritically associate women's participation in sports with empowerment or the uptake of a hyper-feminine image with disempowerment. Understanding the manner in which these experiences and scripts are felt, inhabited, and performed by female players reveals the contradictions and complexities of women's engagement in this male-defined sport and social space.

This study finds the parameters within which these women can manoeuvre as narrow and confining, bound deeply within the broader power structures that continue to hold players back. Nevertheless, between the surfaces of constraint and limitation, there is agency and expression occurring within the fissures and cracks through physical bodily and emotional expression. This is underpinned by a community of kinship, grounded in a love for the game and a freedom to play. But the implications of these findings must also drive us towards larger questions about transformative change for girls and women in the context of neoliberal capitalism. While women players are developing mechanisms for navigating and coping with this pressure – a pressure driven by the interests of the free-market economy, rooted in strong ideals of individuality, characterized by a devaluation of the collective, and fuelled by inequalities – one also needs to ask about the potential for deeper structural change that can begin to *remove* this pressure in the first instance.

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### Notes

1. The term 'futebol' is the Brazilian Portuguese word for 'soccer' (in the USA) and 'football' (in the UK). For the remainder of this paper, we use the word 'football' to refer to the sport.

2. Brazil's economic growth has slowed over the past couple years and the economy slipped into recession in 2014; economists have reduced their economic-expansion forecasts for Brazil in 2014.
3. The research complied with ethical standards as outlined by London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE), Gender Institute (the researcher was independent at the time of the fieldwork; and a period of the fieldwork was part of a Fulbright Scholarship).

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