
Sexism and misogyny in sports

Sexisme i misogínia en l'esport

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Abstract

The practice of sports is framed in an unequal reality to the detriment of women, both at recreational and professional levels. This has been validated and promoted by society through hegemonic cultural constructions that promote sexism among athletes, as well as through the sports institutions themselves and through the training of the specialized teachers in the field. That is why this study, which is part of a research project, aims to analyze the sexist attitude of physical education pedagogy students in the recreational and professional sports contexts, in the light of the gender variable. To achieve this purpose, a pilot questionnaire was addressed to eighty students. The results showed that all the dimensions under study revealed sexist beliefs. It should be noted that in 86% of the dimensions, male respondents presented a greater sexist attitude than the female respondents, with the remaining percentage coinciding between genders. Consequently, it is essential to educate from a gender perspective.

Keywords

Physical education, initial training, sexism, gender, sports, physical activity.

Resum

La pràctica esportiva s'inscriu en una realitat desigual en detriment de les dones, tant en l'àmbit recreatiu com en el professional. La societat ha permès i fomentat aquest escenari mitjançant construccions culturals hegemòniques que promouen el sexisme entre els esportistes, com també a través de les mateixes institucions esportives i de la formació dels docents especialitzats en la matèria. Per tot això, la finalitat d'aquest estudi, que forma part d'un projecte de recerca, és analitzar l'actitud sexista dels estudiants de pedagogia de l'educació física en contextos esportius professionals i recreatius, tenint en compte la variable de gènere. Per assolir aquest objectiu, es va adreçar un qüestionari pilot a vuitanta estudiants. D'acord amb els resultats, totes les dimensions tractades van revelar creences sexistes. Cal destacar que en el 86 % de les dimensions els homes enquestats van mostrar una actitud més sexista que les dones, mentre que en el percentatge restant hi va haver coincidència entre els gèneres. La conclusió és que és fonamental educar des d'una perspectiva de gènere.

Paraules clau

Educació física, formació inicial, sexisme, gènere, esports, activitat física.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, sexism and misogyny are still visible in all social spaces where sport takes place (Milner & Braddock II, 2016). As an example, this problem was reflected in the recent Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, as the regulation of women's sports attire was justified by obsolete rules under the pretext of respecting "tradition" (Okada, 2021).

In this context, sport builds and perpetuates gender inequality since, as established by the regulatory bodies, it plays an unequal role in equalizing opportunities between athletes (Cepeda, 2021). In March 2019, the U.S. women's soccer team, led by Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan, sued the U.S. Soccer Federation for gender discrimination, alleging that the more successful women's team received one-third of the World Cup bonuses and one-fifteenth of the prize money of the less successful men's team (Amidon, 2021).

For organizational reasons, sports regulations have exercised paternalistic, discriminatory and sexist dynamics. Female athletes should be able to "move up" to the men's category and compete against male athletes if they so desire (Martínková, 2020).

Simply put, the social institution of sport in its different contexts is male-dominated, reproducing the ideology of biological sexual differences and maintaining the patriarchal order (Milner & Braddock II, 2016). For a better understanding of sexism in sport, two sport contexts (professional and recreational) and their respective problems are presented here.

1.1. *Context of professional physical-sports practice (PPS)*

Professional sport involves higher levels of sports practice and it is oriented towards the improvement of athletes' physical-technical qualities and conditions. According to González & López (2014), the most important characteristics of elite sport are the daily training of athletes as a priority activity, the results in competition as a *raison d'être*, the professionalization of sport, and its visibility as a spectacle. In this context, the following situations may be observed:

1. Gender segregation in sports practice

In the physical-sports culture, mainly at the level of professional sports, separation by sex is something totally naturalized and established, and what is even more sensitive, it is made visible and mediatized by hundreds of people in the world. According to Marqués (1997), gender-based segregation responds to the need of the patriarchal system to treat people as if they were all identical to those of the same sex and very different from those of the opposite sex. For Marqués, a renowned sociologist, the fact that men have an average of 50% more muscular strength than women does not mean that every man is stronger than every woman.

The predominance of these ideologies in society has led to the fact that sport is one of the contexts in which binary sexual separation, segregation and the consideration of women as "inferior beings" are considered socially acceptable (Fontecha, 2016). In this context women have been relegated to the category of a subordinate sex (Milner & Braddock II, 2016).

The logic of sport suggests that “men and women” are different “biologically” and, for this reason, they should be separated. This discourse is absolutely legitimizing. The law professor Nancy Leong (2018) explicitly ratifies the sexism that exists in sport. She states that sex-segregated sports rules simply clarify the fact that the female physical nature is inferior to the male, without giving women the chance to develop, arbitrarily assuming that they are inferior and will never become as “skilled” and “strong” as their male counterparts. Moreover, separation by sex generates discrimination against those who do not biologically conform to the traditional binary classification system. The dominant ideology in sport suggests a “natural” and complementary sexual division of “women and men”, excluding those sexual dissidences that have transgressed the normative gender, since sport uses the male referent as a human symbol of perfection, leaving behind everything that is “different”, i.e. women, people of the LGBTIQ collective or those with any disability (Milner Braddock II, 2016). Likewise, Milner & Braddock II (2016) make an interesting analysis of sex segregation in sports in their book *Sex Segregation in Sports*. These authors link sex segregation with racial segregation, considering its differential treatment. Blacks were believed to be biologically inferior to whites. For these American authors, sports are human social inventions and not natural phenomena, for which reason a group, whether biologically defined or not, cannot be better or worse than any other in sports. In this respect, there is no biological marker that coexists in humans, such as a gene that makes them more prone to success or failure, because sports consist in games that do not exist organically.

2. The omission of the female athlete in the media

First of all, it should be mentioned that women’s sports are undervalued by the mass media (Vega & Ávalos, 2016). The media have an androcentric gaze that ensures and protects the dominant values of masculinity, fostering sexist prejudices through sports news (Rojas, 2010; Gómez-Colell, 2015; Muñoz-Muñoz & Salido-Fernández, 2018).

Regarding the visibility of female athletes in the written press, cover images appearing in the Spanish regional and national sports press in 2018 were analyzed in a study conducted by Rojas & Jimeno (2019). In this study, sports sections of the press media of the greatest national and international prestige were selected, such as *Marca* and *La Vanguardia*, to name but two. The research found that sports information does indeed show exclusive behavior with respect to professional women athletes, giving them little media visibility, even though great success has been achieved by women athletes in recent years.

This phenomenon was also evidenced in Chile through a study conducted by Mujica-Johnson & Concha-López (2020), which analyzed the presence of men and women in the sports section of the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio*. The results of the study showed that more than 90% of the sample collected featured news and photographs related to men’s sports, with a visibility of over 75% in the case of individual men’s sports. On the other hand, it was shown that the press transmits pessimism in the face of female sporting defeat, but optimism in the face of male sporting defeat.

The research shows the symbolic violence of which women are victims in the media, something that translates into omission of their existence, lack of interest in their

competitions and objectification of their image. The studies conclude that the media have become the guardians of patriarchy.

3. The objectification of elite women athletes' bodies

Sports entities have eroticized women's bodies, often forcing them to wear underwear or bikinis to perform sporting activities (Milner Braddock II, 2016). In the case of Women's American Football, athletes wear tiny garments: they themselves recognize that women's sports do not attract attention and for this reason they wear "sexy clothes" to attract more spectators.

The idealization of exhibiting women's bodies found its place in beach volleyball. Up until 2012, female athletes were obliged to wear bikinis because, according to the official organizations, "the athletes played more comfortably" when dressed in that way. However, in the men's leagues, the athletes wear t-shirts and shorts to play. Something similar happened with the Russian tennis player Anna Kournikova, who burst into the tennis world in the late 1990s and became a worldwide fetish and phenomenon. This was not because of her game, as she did not win any titles, but rather because of her physique. Her beauty made her the most famous tennis player on the circuit, which meant more publicity and sponsorship. Notoriously, the bodies of female athletes revolve around male needs.

4. The absence of women's leadership in sports management

Sport has historically been a men's space, both in its practice and in its management, thus preventing the participation of men and women in terms of equity (Alfaro et al., 2012; Vega, Pérez-González, Fernández-Luna & Burillo, 2019).

The abolition of certain prejudices and stereotypes achieved the integration of women in positions in the more representative institutions of sport. Nevertheless, their presence is still scarce in management positions in most sports and Olympic organizations (Fernández, 2015). The Spanish Olympic Committee itself, whose president is currently Alejandro Blanco, consists of eighteen members, of which only three are women. In the sports field as in other social spheres, there are still barriers that hinder women's access to management positions, establishing a generally male model of management and leadership.

Basically, in a working world made up mainly of men, women are unable to reconcile their socio-family roles with their working life, so they are subjected to a higher level of demands in order to achieve the same levels of recognition. Similarly, in addition to standing on lower levels of hierarchy, women are also the group of workers with lower salaries, less security and fewer opportunities for promotion within their field of work (Alfaro et al., 2012).

The privileges of maleness in terms of leadership are legitimized in the physical-sports culture. A study by Pérez-Villalba, Vilanova & Soler (2018) sought to analyze the sources of professional integration and working conditions of graduates in Physical Activity and Sport Sciences (CAFyD) from Catalan universities. This study showed the existence of an indirect and intrinsic discrimination, in which men tend to occupy more jobs compared to women (60% more), in addition to being linked to high performance and extracurricular sport. The cause of this situation lies in the masculinization of studies, which has been increasing in a concerning way in recent years. Another

relevant fact in relation to integration and multi-occupation is that among the female graduates there is a higher unemployment rate and multi-occupation is much less frequent. With respect to the monthly salary received by female graduates, it is also somewhat lower (7%) than that received by male graduates.

Another study conducted in Chile sought to identify female representation in managerial and administrative positions in the Chilean Sports Federations (Chihuailaf-Vera & Nanjarí, 2022). The study showed that the representation of women in Chilean sports federations is practically nil, with 12% of women holding positions on the boards of directors of sports federations as compared to 88% male participation, which represents a difference of 76%. Likewise, the few women who manage to enter this space do so in roles stereotyped for the female gender, such as secretarial functions or other areas of assistance.

1.2. Context of physical-recreational sport practice (PRS)

In this study, as in the PRS context, the dimensions of sexism which are presented come under the umbrella of PRS practice, although this does not mean that the phenomenon is not present in other contexts or areas in which sport is practiced.

Recreational practice aims at the physical and mental well-being of the practitioners during their free or leisure time. As stated by Camerino (2000), through physical activity or recreational sport, the recreational capacity of people can be manifested, its purpose being the expression of human biological nature, the enhancement of survival the achievement social recognition and self-esteem, and the channeling of the impulse for adventure.

1. Physical-sports practice in women: in search of stereotypical beauty

The motivations of masculinities to engage in physical exercise are different from those of femininities. Masculinities are motivated mainly by competition and social recognition, as well as by the enhancement of their physical strength and endurance. Femininities seek to improve their body image and aesthetics according to the stereotype of beauty (Domínguez, López & Portela, 2018). Hurtado (2018) states that feminine beauty is experienced as a natural gift that contains the idea of perfection and as a norm of practice in the feminine.

Wolf (1992), in her book *The Myth of Beauty*, postulates that a fundamental goal for women is to lose five kilos of weight, or to obtain enough money to undergo abdominal liposuction and show off a longed-for flat abdomen. Wolf goes on to say that beauty and youth are a must for women but not for men.

In general, the offer of physical-sports programs for women is based on promoting stereotypes, i.e., non-competitive activities of an individual nature, mainly oriented towards slimming and maintaining the figure (Puig & Soler, 2004; Chacón et al., 2016).

Different studies (Arrayás, Tornero & Díaz, 2018; Martínez-Baena, Mayorga-Vega & Viciano, 2018; Domínguez, López & Portela, 2018) point out that adolescent women are quite concerned about their body image, i.e., the “way they wear their clothes” or “weighing and grooming themselves”. Teenaged girls show a greater “obsession with thinness” and with the maintenance of their body image. However, a study conducted by Ornelas, Solís, Solano & Rodríguez-Villalobos (2020) showed that non-athletic adolescents show greater body nonconformity. These authors concluded that, in

general, active people have a better perception of their body image than sedentary ones.

2. The postponement of physical-sports practice by women, immersed in the “social roles” of motherhood and care

There are undoubtedly sociological reasons for a person to engage in physical sports activity. In this regard, Timón & Hormigo (2010) point out that in order to practice any physical activity or sport, it is necessary to have leisure or recreation time, which is greatly reduced in the case of women and especially in the case of married women with families, who are responsible for household chores and care.

In the 21st century, many women work every day of the week and may devote their free time to housework and caregiving, seeking to reconcile the new role of “worker and housewife”. Working women face a “double working day”, since they continue to be responsible for most of the domestic work, even when they are employed (Artázcoz et al., 2001). A study conducted in Chile on the feminization of fatness (Energicia, Acosta, Huaiquimilla & Bórquez, 2016) evidenced that women in their “caregiving role” during marriage or motherhood are socially authorized to be fat. In other words, the norm on body size is less strict after marriage and/or in motherhood, which basically means that the domestic space of care, in general, has a negative impact on the care of the caregiver, resulting in the caregiver’s detriment. Different studies agree that the caregiving function is highly erosive for the one who performs it (Arriagada, 2010; Rogero-García, 2010; Tobío, Agulló, Gómez & Martín, 2010 cited in Energicia et al., 2016), since caregiving translates into a lack of time for self-concern.

The innumerable social roles that women appear to have, above all in adulthood, make it difficult for them to perform other activities, such as devoting themselves professionally to sports (Isorna et al., 2019), which are stigmatized primarily by stereotypes and gender roles.

3. Public spaces for physical-sports practice made for male needs

At this point, it is striking how public spaces for socialization respond to the physical sports preferences of males. School playgrounds are play spaces where girls and boys deploy their motor skills. Nevertheless, the design of these spaces contributes to gender differences by segregating boys and girls in games, i.e., school playgrounds are mostly based on an androcentric model (Saldaña, 2018), being basically laid out as a soccer field. In this context, it is considered that, in sports games and activities, the differentiation in the use of space is clearly reflected. Girls play in the smaller and/or marginal spaces, staying in the corners, while boys use the central spaces (Vilanova & Soler, 2008; Garay, Vizcarra & Ugalde, 2017).

In this context, the predominance of hegemonic masculinity over public educational spaces is demonstrated, where clearly the sport “soccer” is reserved for “boys”. This phenomenon not only affects educational spaces, however, but also urban public spaces in cities, where it has been found that these spaces tend to favor male socialization (Vilanova & Soler, 2008). Along the same lines, men manifest a preference for outdoor spaces, while women, practically “by tradition”, show a tendency to prefer indoor spaces to practice sports or physical activity (Lamoneda & Huertas, 2017).

2. Material and methods

In relation to these questions, this study, which is part of a broader research project, uses the data from a pilot study based on a questionnaire on “sexist beliefs, attitudes and practices in physical-sports culture”. Its general objective is to analyze the sexist attitude of physical education pedagogy students according to professional and recreational physical-sports context as a function of the gender variable. To do this, two specific objectives have been set: 1. To determine the sexist attitude in the physical-recreational sports context (PRS) according to gender. 2. To describe the sexist attitude in the professional physical-sports context (PPS) according to gender.

In order to measure sexist attitudes from a quantitative standpoint, a Likert scale questionnaire was used (Blanco & Alvarado, 2005) with the aim of interpreting empirical variables on which information is desired, with specific questions apt to provide reliable, valid and quantifiable answers (Casas, Repullo & Donado, 2003). The typical Likert format was used with five response levels (5 points), that is to say, there were five options for each reply : 1) totally disagree; 2) disagree; 3) neither agree nor disagree; 4) agree; 5) totally agree.

To validate the content (Escobar-Pérez & Cuervo-Martínez, 2008), once the dimensions under analysis were established and the items for each dimension were defined, we proceeded to search for specialists in gender, education and physical-sports education who wished to participate in the validation process. In turn, a document was prepared to allow the experts to establish an appropriate conceptualization and operationalization of the construct.

In order to ground the problem of sexism to specific social segments, an instrument was elaborated from the physical-sport recreational practice (PRS) and physical-sport professional practice (PPS) standpoints. The scale of sexist beliefs, attitudes and practices in the physical-sports culture of recreational physical-sports practice (PRS) consisted of three dimensions comprising eight items for each dimension, where 50% of these correspond to the positive zone of the attitude and the other half to the negative zone, with a total of 24 items. On the other hand, the scale of sexist beliefs, attitudes and practices in the physical-sports culture of professional physical-sports practice (PPS) consisted of four dimensions of eight items for each dimension, where 50% of these correspond to the positive zone of the attitude and the other half to the negative zone, with a total of 32 items for the scale.

After the application of the instrument, the results were analyzed with descriptive statistics using the Excel program. First, the responses were filtered according to gender (male, female, non-binary) to calculate their means. Since there were only four non-binary persons, their responses were not considered because of the low significance of the sample. Subsequently, the information was grouped according to dimensions to obtain the total sum and to calculate the mean of each dimension. After that, the differences between genders were identified. The total figures for each dimension according to context were arranged in tables for later analysis.

2.1. Access to participants

During the month of March-April 2021, contact was established with Chilean universities in the northern part of the country, specifically with the faculties of

physical education. The collaboration of the Universidad de Atacama was achieved. At the request of the researchers, a collaborating teacher from the university sent the pilot questionnaire to the entire student body of the physical education course of studies, which was answered voluntarily by eighty students. These students belonged to all the years of the course of studies, with ages between 19 and 45 years, identifying themselves as men, women or non-binary. Together with the questionnaire, they were sent an informed consent form, which was completed by all the participants, in order to comply with the applicable ethical criteria.

3. Results

The results of the study are presented below, in accordance with the stated objectives. In relation to the first specific objective, Table 1 shows the dimensions studied in the context of the PRS together with their respective means (M) and standard deviation (SD) according to gender. With respect to this point, it should be noted that a higher score corresponds to a lower sexist attitude, and vice versa. In addition, the figures corresponding to the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) are shown.

TABLE 1
Dimensions of sexist beliefs in PRS context and their M and ST according to gender

<i>Dimensions</i>	M		r
	Male gender	Female gender	
1. Women who are slaves to stereotypical beauty (thinness) use physical-sports activity to achieve this end (Arrayás, Tornero & Díaz, 2018; Martínez-Baena, Mayorga-Vega & Vicianá, 2018; Domínguez, López & Portela, 2018).	3.90 ST = 0.49	3.94 ST = 0.76	0.030
2. Women must fulfill “social roles” related to maternity, care and domestic work, which prevent them from engaging in physical-sports practice (Artázcoz et al., 2001; Isorna, Felpeto, Alonso, Gómez & Rial, 2019).	4.22 ST = 0.60	4.45 ST = 0.43	0.211
3. Public spaces for physical-sports practice respond to male needs (Vilanova and Soler, 2008; Garay, Vizcarra & Ugalde, 2017; Saldaña, 2018).	4.38 ST = 0.45	4.59 ST = 0.49	0.214

Source: Compiled by the authors.

As may be seen in the table above, the dimension that reflects a greater sexist attitude is dimension 1 (M = 3.92 between genders), i.e., it is mostly believed that women practice physical activity in order to conform to the stereotypes of beauty and the

ideal of thinness. On the other hand, the least sexist dimension is the third one, scoring $M = 4.48$ between genders. Therefore, it may be inferred that the idea of “the use of public spaces for physical-sports practice responds to male needs” is not widely held by the participants.

At a general level, the PRS context obtained $M = 4.23$ in its three dimensions. Consequently, a low sexist attitude is identified, considering that its nullity has a value of 5. Table 2 deals with the second objective. It is based on the total values obtained following the statistical analysis of the various dimensions in the PPS context according to gender.

TABLE 2

Dimensions of sexist beliefs in PPS context and their M and ST according to gender

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>M</i>		<i>r</i>
	Male gender	Female gender	
	Male gender	Female gender	
1. Gender separation in physical-sport activity (Milner & Braddock II, 2016; Fontecha, 2016; Leong, 2018).	3.14 ST = 0.87	4.04 ST = 0.69	0.489
2. The omission of the female athlete in the media (Rojas, 2010; Gómez-Colell, 2015; Muñoz-Muñoz & Salido-Fernández, 2018).	4.29 ST = 0.82	4.68 ST = 0.49	0.264
3. The objectification of the body of elite female athletes (Barreto, da Conceição & Ferreira, 2015; Fontecha, 2016).	4.08 ST = 0.71	4.66 ST = 0.42	0.58
4. The absence of women’s leadership in physical-sports activity (Alfaro et al., 2013; Marta Pérez-Villalba, Anna Vilanova & Susanna Soler, 2018).	4.33 ST = 0.56	4.46 ST = 0.57	0.13

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The sexist attitude is expressed in all four dimensions, the most sexist dimension being number 1 (Separation by sex in physical-sports activity), with $M = 3.59$ between genders. By contrast, the dimension involving the least sexist attitude is dimension 2 (Omission of women athletes in the media), with $M = 4.49$ between genders.

It should be noted that in the values presented for dimensions 2 and 3 of the PRS context, as well as for dimensions 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the PPS context, the scores of those who considered themselves women are higher, that is to say, the sexist attitude is expressed to a lesser extent. On the other hand, those who identified themselves as male obtained lower figures, which means a greater sexist attitude.

4. Conclusions and discussion

The results of this study show that there is a relationship between physical-sports practice and the search for stereotypical beauty in women. This has been conceptualized by Domínguez, López & Portela (2018) as “classic beauty in femininities”, which in this case and according to the respondents is what is sought through sports practice.

An important aspect to consider is the significance for people of the female and male genders of the belief in separation by sex in physical-sports activity. In this regard, people identified with the male gender present a more sexist attitude towards this idea, since they affirm the existence of two types of identities (female and male), ignoring the multiplicity of these identities (Milner & Braddock II, 2016). Likewise, as Bourdieu (2000) rightly states, they encourage sexual division and the social construction of the biological inferiority of femininities through the practice of sports. Along the same line, the idea of the objectification of elite women athletes' bodies points to a greater sexism in the people who identified with the male gender. This may be deduced from what was stated by Milner & Braddock II (2016), according to whom men seek to control the bodies of female athletes through clothing that eroticizes the latter's bodies.

Significant beliefs in relation to gender-based differences are reflected by the sexual division in professional sports practice, that is to say, gender stereotypes are based on the consideration that female biological weakness is a stable-permanent phenomenon, thereby recognizing male superiority. This is evidence that the future physical education teachers, who are mostly men, consider that biological differences are stable phenomena and that, biologically, “every woman athlete” – including all persons whose gender identity is feminine – is weaker than every male athlete, even in the same discipline. Another relevant asymmetry between genders is that people who considered themselves masculine believe that female athletes are recognized mainly for their beauty and not for their sports performance. This belief favors the idea that women's physical-sports practice has the purpose of achieving the desired stereotypical beauty (thinness, reduction of cellulite and abdominal fat, etc.).

Lastly, we may conclude that sexist beliefs, attitudes and practices are present in the physical education students surveyed. Although in some dimensions they are present to a greater extent, in others they are expressed to a lesser extent, and the people who identified themselves with the male gender always stood out for their greater sexist attitude. Therefore, this study has evidenced gender inequality in physical-sports practice as a belief, which implies the need to deconstruct hegemonic sexist norms and stereotypes in the training of physical education teachers. Not only should academia re-educate in these respects, but it should also help to do away with these beliefs by seeking to establish public policies that allow athletes, regardless of their gender, to practice physical activity or sports in safe and equitable spaces. This would promote a

culture of physical activity and sport in equality, which should be encouraged from an early age. Indeed, this is why it is important for physical education teachers to be trained to form part of this culture of equality. To begin with, considering the high degree of existing sexism, emphasis should be placed on promoting more active, strong, empowered and healthy femininities.

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