

Journal

Journal of Gender Studies

Title

Juggling on the court: Exploring female Basque pelota players' Experiences and Empowerment Strategies

Authors and affiliations

Uxue Fernandez-Lasa

Department of Physical and Sport Education, Faculty of Education and Sport, University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU), Spain

Oidui Usabiaga Arruabarrena

Department of Physical and Sport Education, Faculty of Education and Sport, University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU), Spain

Susanna Soler Prat

Department of Physical Education, National Institute of Physical Education of Catalonia (INEFC Barcelona), University of Barcelona, Spain

Corresponding author

Uxue Fernandez-Lasa, Department of Physical and Sport Education, Faculty of Education and Sport, University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU), Spain

c/ Portal de Lasarte, 71, 01007 - Vitoria-Gasteiz

Email: uxue.fernandez@ehu.eus

Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Gender Studies, 29:5, 496-507 on 27 May 2019, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1618703>"

1

Juggling on the court: Exploring female Basque pelota players' experiences and empowerment strategies

Abstract

This paper focuses on gendered experiences of sportswomen in a traditional male dominated sport in the Basque Country, named Basque pelota. From the 1990s, women play in regular championships, occupying a central public space in the Basque culture and challenging the gender order. The aim of the study is to ascertain and comprehend the barriers these women face and how they manage to persist in this context. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with female Basque pelota players. Data were analysed through inductive codification. Players stressed being constantly obliged to face gender discrimination, feeling 'undervalued' and discriminated against as 'outsiders'. Even so, they persist in this sport by their human agency, thanks to their empowerment, fighting spirit and determination to surpass discriminatory barriers. The sense of belonging and mutual support is fundamental in order to become fully involved and make a stand for a better future for women.

Keywords

Gender, sexism, sport, empowerment, Basque pelota.

Introduction

Women are increasingly taking part in sports such as ice hockey, boxing, weightlifting and football, something that for many years was regarded as absolutely unthinkable (Hargreaves, 2000). In the Basque Country, a deeply rooted traditional sport, named Basque pelota, has been also a male preserve (Etxebeste, 2012; González, 2012). This sport is within the family of ball games. There are different disciplines (available in International Basque Pelota Federation's website) and female players play in a few of them. Playing pelota these women occupy one of the most important public spaces in the Basque culture, the *frontón* (pelota court). Their presence in this space is not only a challenge to the gender order in sports, it also contests the gender order in a central symbolic and public space in the Basque society.

In this setting, our paper analyses the gendered experiences and behaviours of female players in a sport context dominated by men. Our research addresses the following questions: what barriers and constraints to participation do women experience? What strategies do women employ to negotiate playing and persisting in Basque pelota? Answering these questions, this article contributes to the international literature examining how women *pelotaris* (pelota players) experience gender barriers and negotiate material and ideological constraints to challenge the gender order, not only individually, but also as a strong shared consciousness of structural inequalities.

To provide deeper understanding of women's experiences in pelota, different feminist theoretical approaches on women's involvement in male dominated sports are explored, contextualizing Basque pelota in a historical and cultural perspective of the Basque society. Before presenting and discussing the findings data collecting method and process are described. Finally, we reflect on the multiplicity, ambivalent and contradictory situations that women experience simultaneously in pelota, and the interplay between gender constraints and human agency to challenge the gender order.

Theoretical considerations: sports feminisms

Initially, and from the liberal-feminist stance, women's access to all kinds of sports may be seen as the achievement of equality between men and women in an area characterised by discrimination against the latter. However, sport sociology has increasingly questioned the disruption of the gender order and the broader power structures within sporting forms traditionally associated with and defined by hegemonic masculinity. According to this critical stance, this concept of equality fails to acknowledge the broader power structures (Hall, 1996; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister & Buñuel, 1999; Pfister, 2010). On the other hand, post-structuralist analysis reveals sport as a potential space for gender transgressions and a site for contestation and struggle (Hargreaves, 2000).

As we learned from literature specialised in gender and sport, from a liberal perspective, men and women are considered differently. Male achievements are deified while women's are undervalued through a variety of mechanisms (Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Hargreaves, 2000; Paul, 2015). This process of change is not an easy one for women, who have to rise above sexist prejudices and gender stereotypes, which apply not only to women who engage in male-dominated sports but also to men who do not conform to the stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity (Pfister, 2010; Tagg, 2008). As a result of the hegemonic heterosexual tradition, sportswomen need to overcome gender barriers, constraints and harsh criticism to persist in the game (Hargreaves & Anderson, 2016; McGinnis, McQuillan & Chapple, 2005; Scraton et al., 1999). Women who take part in 'men's sports' and men who compete in 'women's sports' have constantly to negotiate gender relations and their position in a cultural context in which power and privilege are related to men (Engh, 2011; Ezzel, 2009; Weaving & Roberts, 2012). Many women occupy contradictory positions in their sport experiences related to the gender norm, because of the fact that the normative categories of

4

whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity remain unquestioned (Cooky & McDonald, 2005; Hargreaves & Anderson, 2016).

However, although male hegemony has invariably prevailed, it has never been total. There have always been women who have stood out, thereby challenging the conventional images of femininity (Hargreaves, 1994; Markula, 2003). In this context, Pfister (2012) stresses that while sporting activity tends persistently to underpin hegemonic culture, it may also transform it. In this way, from a poststructuralist viewpoint, although women find themselves in a situation of discrimination they may also constitute a source of resistance and become active agents in the process of change. Consequently, as in other areas of culture, ways of experiencing sport vary considerably: some sportswomen conform to the dominant system of values and meanings, for example, accepting dominant notions of male strength and female weakness in spite of highlighting their own capabilities and achievements (Gilenstam, Karp & Henriksson-Larsen, 2008; Norman, 2010; Velija & Flynn, 2010). Others, however, opt for new cultural values and meanings, attempting to redefine femininities and create sources of empowerment and human agency to improve their situation (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Sisjord, 2012; With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011). Female sport is a major resource for feminist political, cultural and social action through organised opposition to the domination of men in sport, which may lead to a situation of freedom and empowerment of women's bodies (Cox & Thompson, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000; Hargreaves & Anderson, 2016; Weaving & Roberts, 2012). Markula (2003) concludes that bodily practices can empower women to become resistant bodies, transforming the cultural context acting in sports as a transgressive practice.

As Flintoff and Scraton (2013) suggested, the new 'waves' of feminist theories do not totally replace existing ones but contain aspects of the previous ones. They are not mutually exclusive; they can be complementary. In this article we argue that it is necessary to

1
2
3 comprehend the several ‘waves’ of feminism to understand the development of women’s
4
5 pelota and the multiple experiences that female pelotaris live.
6
7

8 Amongst the range of feminist theories, we used liberal and post-structural feminism
9
10 perspectives in this manuscript, as reality is fluid, contextualized and socially constructed. On
11
12 the one hand, liberal viewpoint is concerned about equality and the access of women to the
13
14 sports world. In this study, pelotaris need to know, identify and analyze the power structures
15
16 from which their sport context is constructed, how they are valued as sportswomen and what
17
18 gender discrimination and exclusion patterns they experience in relation to hegemonic culture
19
20 context. Identifying the social environment where they play is the start point to complement
21
22 the analysis. On the other hand, post-structural standpoint makes a step forward assigning
23
24 new values and meanings emerged from female players’ lived experiences, redefining the
25
26 hegemonic femininity and struggling against the gender order. This perspective
27
28 conceptualizes multiple and diverse women’s gender identities, creating new types of
29
30 subjective experiences due to their empowerment, struggling against the main gender order
31
32 and dominant structures of power, developing a social change. In this line, in this research
33
34 project, pelotaris become active change agents once they analyze their unequal and non
35
36 leveled playing field, creating difference by alternative gendered subjectivities to resist and
37
38 challenge their sport context and the hegemonic culture to ensure that women are included
39
40 and benefit from sport activities (Beal, 2018).
41
42
43
44
45

46 ***Basque pelota: a deep-rooted traditional sport***

47
48 Our study focuses on a traditional sport very popular in the Basque Country (northern Spain
49
50 and south-west France), a discipline within the family of ball games that originates from the
51
52 medieval *jeu de paume* (palm game), traditionally played by men. There are almost thirty
53
54 varieties. The most common version is handball, played exclusively by men, which accounts
55
56 for about 50% of affiliated players. The disciplines women play are those that use a wooden
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 racket called *paleta*, which are three: Argentine *paleta* played on what are known as
4
5 *trinquetes*, similar to real tennis courts; *paleta goma* (racket and rubber ball); and *frontenis*,
6
7 on a short pelota court. Today, despite access allowed to women to most modalities, female
8
9 players do not account for even 6% of federative licences (FEPV, 2013).
10

11
12 The *raquetistas* (female racket players) were the pioneers playing Basque pelota, from
13
14 the end of the nineteenth century until the last quarter of the twentieth century. These women
15
16 played all over the world. There were hundreds of them playing from Madrid to Havana or
17
18 Miami. They were the first licensed sportswomen in Spain, professionals from 1917 until
19
20 1980, when the last fronton was closed and the sport modality disappeared. General
21
22 Moscardó, president of the Spanish Federation of Basque pelota in the Franco dictatorship,
23
24 was directly involved in this disappearance. He decided that this sport was inappropriate for
25
26 women. Among other measures, he stopped giving new licenses and closed many courts. The
27
28 modality was lost when the activity of professional female racket players finally ended
29
30 (Urrutia & Sagastizabal, 2009). As already mentioned, Basque pelota ranks among those
31
32 sports that for many years were regarded as unsuitable for women (Etxebeste, 2012). Thus, to
33
34 be born a pelotari first you had to be born male, since the cultural notion of what femininity
35
36 means made it inconceivable for women to be players and fighters (González, 2012). The
37
38 idea of women pelotaris occupying a central role in one of the mainstays of the Basque
39
40 culture –frontón— was incompatible with the concepts that Basque society had acquired,
41
42 which excluded women from a leading role in sports and becoming public figures (González,
43
44 2013). Historically, gender relations were a barrier for female players, who were excluded
45
46 from organised structures and professional sport contexts due to male domination and
47
48 discrimination (Fernandez-Lasa, Usabiaga & Castellano, 2013), which they endured
49
50 particularly in the second half of the twentieth century (Urrutia & Sagastizabal, 2009).
51
52 Nevertheless, female players gained more social acceptance and in order to achieve gender
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 equity in sport Basque pelota federations are currently issuing licences to and organising
4 championships for women across the Basque Country, and the doors of pelota courts are
5 opened also for women to play the game as a leisure activity (Fernandez-Lasa, Usabiaga,
6 Martos-García, & Castellano, 2015).
7
8
9
10
11
12
13

14 **Materials and Methods**

15
16
17 The approach of this study was qualitative, as research methods form part of a systematic and
18 reflective process that develops knowledge that can be shared and challenged. The research
19 process was subjective and interactive, based on an interpretive-critical paradigm to
20 reconstruct understandings of the context of the study and its power relations (Denzin &
21 Lincoln, 2005). This paper is part of a broader study—approved by the Commission of Ethics
22 in Education and Research at the University of the Basque Country, UPV/EHU—, which
23 consists of a one-year ethnographic fieldwork project involving recreational women pelota
24 players and in-depth interviews with women who hold and have held federation licenses. The
25 research took place between 2011 and 2013. In this paper we focus on in-depth interviews
26 with ten female pelotaris from the Basque Country, aged between twenty-two and forty-five.
27
28 The methodological practices chosen, which enable understanding the experiences and
29 meanings of sportswomen, depended on the epistemological base of the research. The
30 interviewees were selected by purposive sampling and divided into two groups in terms of
31 their relationship with the game: pelotaris (those currently playing) and ex-pelotaris (those
32 who had been federated players but at the time of the interview had ceased to compete). The
33 decision to select the participants from different ages and backgrounds purposively, those
34 who started in the 90s as pioneers and those who were newer and younger in the context, was
35 taken to address the heterogeneity and diverse experiences of female players. Initially,
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 contact with the first interviewees was made through local pelota federations; the rest were
4
5 chosen by means of snowball sampling.
6

7
8 The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, in the mother tongue of the
9
10 interviewees, in Basque or Spanish language, each lasted approximately sixty minutes and
11
12 they were structured around three key aspects: social dimension, cultural dimension and
13
14 training and competition. Each interview consisted of two rendezvous: the first to conduct the
15
16 in-depth interview itself and the second to confirm the information gathered during the course
17
18 of the same. Between both encounters the interviewees were given a literal transcription of
19
20 the first session so that they might examine it and make any necessary modifications and/or
21
22 corrections at the second. This strengthened the credibility of the research, since the accuracy
23
24 of the texts prepared throughout the process was checked by both interviewer and
25
26 interviewee, along the same lines proposed by Fetterman (1998). Lastly, a field diary for each
27
28 interviewee was consulted containing a record of what occurred during the interviews and the
29
30 impressions of the interviewer as a supplement to what the latter had gathered verbally.
31
32
33

34
35 On the basis of the interview transcriptions, data codification and analysis process based on
36
37 inductive approach, conducted in bottom-up format (Peace, 2003), which was carried out in
38
39 order to identify the key emerging themes. Information in reference to sexism and
40
41 discrimination was analyzed by codes such as men's or women's sport, gender differences,
42
43 difficulties and stereotypes (tomboy), as well as struggling, resistance strategies, leadership
44
45 and empowerment against barriers. The main categories were created during data codification
46
47 process and finally constructed with contributions of literature review. The ensuing reports
48
49 were analysed by the authors of this paper as well as by two people who participate in the
50
51 study, thereby reinforcing the *credibility* criteria on the basis of critical opinion and
52
53 verification of each component (Sparkes & Partington, 2003). Other trustworthiness criteria
54
55 followed in this study were worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity and reflexivity (Tracy, 2010).
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 These criteria were used in different stages of the research process. Firstly, worthy topic is
4 related to the choice of a personal relationship of the principal researcher with the sport,
5 being a pelota player previously. At the same time, the study was significant because of the
6 fact that Basque pelota is an understudied sport context. In terms to achieve rich rigour, data
7 collection supported the understandings and experiences of the pelotaris' by their
8 meaningfulness, the principal researcher spent as much time as it was needed on the field and
9 used several procedures to collect the information, such as in-depth interviews and field
10 notes. It was the saturation of the information what established the final number of interviews
11 and the time on the field. Thirdly, sincerity was achieved by self-reflexivity in the whole
12 process, examining the field researcher's impact on the scene and reactions of others' to it,
13 including, for instance, subjective feelings on the field notes. Transparency, another practice
14 of sincerity, was achieved getting into the context with honesty, being aware of the level of
15 participation and the great amount of details in the transcription process. Finally, all the
16 authors reflected upon pelotaris' understandings and meanings showing their deep knowledge
17 of the sport context. Their experiences influenced their interpretation of the findings in a way
18 that they interrogated their own meanings and understandings and ask for feedback from
19 participants.
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41

42 To ensure participants' anonymity pseudonyms were assigned, proposed by the interviewer
43 and selected by the interviewees. ATLAS.ti 6.2. software (Friese, 2012) was used during the
44 codification and analysis process.
45
46
47
48
49
50

51 **Results and Discussion**

52
53 Our findings analyze female Basque pelota players' experiences. References to traditional
54 forms of gender and male domination greatly prevailed in the interviews. Furthermore,
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 players also reveal several forms of challenging gender dichotomies and the gender order
4
5 becoming active agents of change.
6

7
8 ***Gendered experiences: First steps towards involvement in the sport***
9

10 For all the interviewees, Basque pelota is still considered a game for men in the broad
11 society, as concluded in several research studies on this sport (Etxebeste, 2012; González,
12 2013).
13
14

15
16 In their childhood, when they began to play this sport, the fact that there were female
17 pelotaris was regarded as absolutely bizarre or, in the best of cases, rather unusual: ‘I
18 remember that I was the only girl among the boys and some people laughed at me. I was the
19 weird for them’ (Itxaro, ex-player).
20
21
22
23

24
25 Every participant expressed concern with their having been looked upon as outsiders, which
26 had a significant impact on their battle for access to opportunities. Many players were beset
27 by contradictory feelings since Basque pelota was regarded as an unsuitable sport for them,
28 due to the established idea of female-appropriate and male-appropriate sports (Hargreaves,
29 1994; Hartmann-Tews & Pfister, 2003; Pfister, 2010; Theberge, 2002). These early
30 experiences occurred generally in a nearly exclusively male world, where girls were neither
31 welcome nor encouraged. It was at this stage that opportunities for girls to choose this sport
32 were often disapproved of, with little or no access for them: ‘When we began, in 2002, it was
33 out of the ordinary. I think we still have some way to go, it still isn’t looked upon as very
34 normal to see a six-year-old girl with a paleta’ (Haizea, currently playing).
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 Many authors concluded that girls and women are seen as outsiders in many sport contexts,
50 experiencing fewer prospects to be skilled and athletic in comparison with boys and men
51 (Cooky & MacDonald, 2005; Paul, 2015; Pelak, 2005; Skogvang, 2013; Velija & Flynn,
52 2010). That is why every player in our research felt as if they were ‘other’ to female or
53 feminine, being labelled or labelled themselves as ‘tomboys’, as occurs in traditional games
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 such as rural sports (Egibar & Garai, 2009), or else in male contexts or sports, like football
4
5 (Scraton et al., 1999; With-Nielsen & Pfister, 2011). This quote is an example for it: ‘I’ve
6
7 always been a “tomboy”. I just played pelota, that’s all. I always played with boys. The girls
8
9 did their own things’ (Eider, currently playing).

10
11
12 This identification as ‘tomboy’ was particularly significant in many sportswomen. However,
13
14 despite the negative connotations of this term, many studies confirm that this identification is
15
16 often accepted (Harris, 2002; Scraton et al., 1999). That is also the case in some statements of
17
18 this study, where the term ‘tomboy’ is accepted and approved. This positive consideration is
19
20 not really surprising taking into account that in Basque pelota behaviours associated with
21
22 masculinity are valued. Nevertheless, this self-identification as ‘tomboy’ and the valuation of
23
24 the hegemonic masculinity do not transform existing gender-power relations. On the
25
26 contrary, many women reaffirm and reproduce these gender-power relations and the binary
27
28 system of male/female, masculine/feminine and suitable sports for men or women. Playing a
29
30 sport labelled as male meant that some female players, like Saioa, felt out of place in pelota.
31
32 They had doubts about the suitability of this sport for them: ‘In my childhood I always played
33
34 with boys. But when I was playing I felt as if this wasn’t my sport, that pelota wasn’t made
35
36 for me’ (Saioa, currently playing).

37
38
39 As we learn from the pelotaris’ experiences, at an early age some of the players faced major
40
41 barriers to their participation. Moreover, many authors concluded that practices which
42
43 transgress gender order are costly in terms of identity construction, particularly during
44
45 adolescence (Chimot & Louveau, 2010; Velija & Flynn, 2010). Female players are viewed as
46
47 deviants, struggling as children with the expectations of being feminine (Scraton et al., 1999).
48
49

50
51
52 The players comment that not complying with society’s gender order has
53
54 repercussions on them and influences them, since the girls engage in an activity regarded as
55
56 inappropriate for women (González, 2013). Breaking the male-female dichotomy engenders
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 preoccupation and negative thoughts in several sportswomen, because they engage in
4 contradictions with heteronormative femininity. Girls renegotiate their participation within
5 the framework of gendered structural barriers they face in society and in the field of physical
6 activity and sports (Azzarito, Solmon & Harrison, 2006).
7
8
9

10 ***Undervaluing: gender discrimination on the court***

11
12 Different aspects of pelotaris' experiences, barriers to their participation, stereotypes and
13 gender discrimination were highlighted during the study. Gender discrimination was
14 considered one of the main constraints to their participation in Basque pelota. These findings
15 are similar to those of many research works about sportswomen's experiences which
16 concluded that women were stereotyped as a result of their participation choices (Brown &
17 Young, 2015; Dorken & Giles, 2011; Hall & Oglesby, 2016; Hargreaves, 1994; Mennesson,
18 2012; Pfister, 2010; Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2012).
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29

30
31 Difficulties linked with gender transgression have negative impact on players'
32 valuation and social image. The pelotaris perceive that many agents in their environment
33 exert a negative influence. In relation to the mere fact that they are women, they perceive
34 attitudes, comments and opinions that do not encourage them to play pelota, as the sport
35 continues to be associated with men and masculinity. Saioa mentions how such attitudes
36 made her feel undervalued: 'Some told me to my face: "If you'd been a boy, you'd be good"'
37 (Saioa, currently playing).
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45

46
47 In Saioa's previous statement, the idea that women's playing is dependent on men's sport
48 (Scraton et al., 1999; Scraton, Caudwell & Holland, 2005; Weaving & Roberts, 2012) is
49 reinforced, as many people did not share the same viewpoint regarding the social image
50 related to female players. They are not accepted in the same way as male players (Kaelberer,
51 2018).
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

13

1
2
3 Furthermore, every interviewees agreed that when they play sports like pelota they are
4 regarded as second rate, as many mention talking about their experiences. They feel
5 discriminated against simply because they are women. These discourses treat women's pelota
6 as a different and inferior game to men's sport:
7
8
9
10

11
12 My view is that, in general, we're always looked on as second-rate. You know. Well,
13 girls know how to play, too. I think people like to see something different, but they
14 always look down their noses as if it were second-rate. (Itziar ,ex-player)
15
16
17

18
19 Although sportswomen's access opportunities and participation are growing, women's sport
20 remains influenced and controlled by men (Skogvang, 2013). In this context, Ibone felt that
21 women must be encouraged to manage their own environment or, at least, focus on their
22 needs and context:
23
24
25
26

27
28 Most pelota clubs are run by men. So women should come in to look after the needs of
29 women, I think. What I see as missing is someone to take care of women pelotaris'
30 needs. (Ibone, currently playing)
31
32
33

34
35 Women have inferior facilities and resources available to them (Skogvang, 2013), which has
36 an impact on public perception and valuation of the game (Scraton et al., 1999; Weaving &
37 Roberts, 2012). As Ibone stated before, this fact is related with the underrepresentation of
38 women in sports organizations, specifically in decision-making positions. This lack of
39 women strengthens and maintains the current gender skewness, becoming an obstacle for
40 significant changes (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012).
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

48
49 Female pelotaris reported that they are undervalued as players; they are not taken seriously
50 and their prowess as sportswomen is challenged. The prevailing opinion is that women
51 pelotaris cannot be as serious or determined as men:
52
53

54
55 Unfortunately, I think we're still under-regarded. If you say you're a pelotari people
56 think you go to the pelota court and do the best you can, without taking it seriously, you
57 know? To put this another way, boys go to play with their girlfriends one Sunday, when
58
59
60

1
2
3 they're bored, and just let us play any old how. They don't see you as serious or skilful
4 enough to play. I think that still today lots of people think this way, which means that
5
6
7 we're still not taken seriously. (Janire, currently playing)
8

9
10 Directly linked to this undervaluing is the fact that women are forced constantly to prove
11 their worth and prowess (Norman, 2010; Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2012). Many
12 people refuse to take them seriously (Paul, 2015). Pelotaris also have to face such
13 undervaluing and discrimination and listen to disparaging comments which are the product of
14
15
16
17
18
19 ignorance:

20
21 'There are still lots of people who don't know us, who don't know that women play
22
23 pelota. I think that those who do know are aware of the level we attain, but those who
24
25 don't think 'what are these women doing playing pelota'. (Eider, currently playing)
26

27
28 Due to invisibility and playing a sport that society's opinions and prejudices regard as
29 'unusual' or 'unsuitable' for women, the latter are forced constantly to prove their worth
30 (Norman, 2010). What is more, however, sometimes this is not enough when it comes to
31
32
33
34
35 gaining the acknowledgement and support they need.

36
37 The power structures of most sports in general, as in the case of Basque pelota,
38
39 downgrade women's achievements. Women who play 'men's sports' have continually to
40
41
42 negotiate their position and struggle for recognition in traditional cultural contexts of male
43
44 power and privilege. This is why female players are relegated to an inferior social status
45 (Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Paul, 2015; Pfister, 2010). Furthermore, the discrimination and
46
47
48 sexual harassment that sportswomen have to put up with in different fields is bolstered by
49
50
51 lack of support from a number of different agents, such as the media, which reinforce gender
52
53
54 inequalities (Hargreaves, 1994). The media provide them with hardly any coverage, although
55
56
57 women have gained some ground in this area (Bernstein, 2002; Hall & Oglesby, 2016),
58
59
60 thereby fostering the invisibility and undervaluing to which these sportswomen are exposed.
Men's sports are still dominant in commercial value and in the media (Dworkin & Messner,

2002; Hall & Oglesby, 2016; Kaelberer, 2018; Skogvang, 2013). All pelotaris shared the same feelings of exasperation at the treatment they receive and the lack of support from the media:

‘The media, well, they show what they want and what interests them. It’s true that men’s pelota gets a lot more coverage. Really, the way we girls are treated is, like in everything else, shameful’. (Haizea, currently playing)

Women pelota players’ competitions and experiences are invisible on television and they hardly have any coverage on the radio: ‘On television you only see men. Men everywhere’ (Nora, currently playing).

Media coverage is one of the key areas to explain women’s participation and involvement in sport, where equity would contribute to legitimising women’s achievements and advancing public acceptance (Pfister, 2015). However, sportswomen are not treated equitably, which contributes to their invisibility and undervaluing.

Resistance and human agency: players’ commitment to become active agents

Despite the fact that female pelotaris feel discriminated against and have to negotiate their gender identity and rise above a host of obstacles in order to play, sportswomen strive to continue breaking down barriers and retain a positive attitude. Thereby, many of them become active agents in the process of change (Hargreaves, 1994; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; McGinnis, McQuillan & Chapple, 2005; Paul, 2015; Pelak, 2005).

In some cases they are determined to carry on doing what they do and to help all women who want to be pelotaris. They endeavour to become empowered and make their own decisions, building up their stance on the basis of positive experiences and contending with the obstacles and difficulties they encounter on the way. That is the reason why sport is an opportunity for a freedom situation for women, who convert their power in the power of the community of sportswomen due to their belongingness (Theberge, 1987).

1
2
3 Women *pelota* players have a strong sense of belonging to their group of team mates,
4 which is fundamental when it comes to breaking down all the barriers they struggle against.
5
6 Playing Basque *pelota* is a pleasurable activity, an enriching experience for every player
7
8 thanks to their connectedness as women and as a community (Fernandez-Lasa et al., 2015).
9
10 For example, Nekane, for many years a *pelotari* and trainer, had on more than one
11
12 occasion had to confront the federation governing board, so that more women may be
13
14 allowed access to facilities, regardless of their level, and dedicated hours of training to
15
16 aspiring women players:
17
18
19
20

21 ‘Men in governing boards are concerned with the result, while what concerns me is that
22
23 there should be young girls, young people who are just beginning to play, who become
24
25 motivated and get hooked here, since we’ve been on our own for a long time. I want
26
27 there to be a group. When I started I gave my training hours to train those who were not
28
29 familiar to the sport. So we devoted those hours to them and they came in, but the board
30
31 still said “But, how can they come in? They are not good players”. That’s the way we’ve
32
33 been doing it, it’s worked, and that’s it’. (Nekane, currently playing)
34
35

36 Resistance and empowerment foster ways to face situations of discrimination and
37
38 sexism in sports from a poststructuralist perspective (Paul, 2015; Pelak, 2005; Theberge,
39
40 1987). Furthermore, resistance and empowerment constitute active and effective means by
41
42 which to change reality with a better and more egalitarian future in view for Basque *pelota*.
43
44 Of great help here is creating a subculture in which all the members share a sense of
45
46 belonging to the group and the milieu in order to confront the situation thanks to their
47
48 determination: ‘The relationship with other *pelotaris* is very important to face discriminatory
49
50 situations. Acting as a group is easier to face all the barriers to participation and overcome
51
52 them’. (Olaia, ex player)
53
54
55

56 Women’s participation and legitimacy in football are also rooted in persistent stereotyping
57
58 and an associated paucity of resources (Pfister, 2015). The same problems face *pelota*
59
60

1
2
3 players, but they attach other values to the game related to sharing and supporting each other
4
5 (Fernandez-Lasa et al., 2015).
6

7
8 I've kept up a good relationship with my pelota friends - both to play from time to time
9
10 and to get together three or four times a year. We arrange a lunch in a cider house every
11
12 year. Nine of us who used to play at the same time got together a couple of weeks ago. I
13
14 love keeping up that friendship with some of those who started playing pelota in the
15
16 nineties. (Itxaro, ex player)
17

18
19 The group and social relations contribute to ensuring that equality and empowerment will be
20
21 stronger, as well as shared, as they work collectively to challenge gender inequalities and
22
23 discrimination (Hargreaves, 2000). This is directly related to the aim of offering something
24
25 better to those female pelotaris who come afterwards. Meanwhile, the pioneers are committed
26
27 and determined to strive towards improving the current situation so that girls will no longer
28
29 have to face discrimination in the sphere of Basque pelota:
30

31
32 I don't want to see girls having to face these problems anymore and having to fight all
33
34 the time. 'No, not you, you're a girl, so stay here, or over there'. Ever since they decide
35
36 to take up pelota I want to be able to smooth things out for them, to make things much
37
38 easier than we ever experienced. (Nekane, currently playing)
39

40
41 As in football, the emergence of women pelota players and the pleasure they derive from
42
43 their involvement in the game (Fernandez-Lasa et al., 2015), plus the prevailing discourses of
44
45 liberal feminism, have acted as productive forces enabling them to endure and eventually
46
47 challenge gender inequalities (Cox & Pringle, 2012; Scraton et al., 1999).
48

49
50 A strong movement therefore exists in favour of allowing women access to Basque
51
52 pelota. Some have had to take action to make sure this option remains a feasible one and to
53
54 contribute, as far as possible, to securing a better future:
55

56
57 As I see it, we've got to do this, like in our day we had to do it, because if not everything
58
59 will have been in vain. I've always felt that we were there from the beginning, those of
60

18

1
2
3 us who've been involved for many years, and we have to keep up the struggle until new
4 people come onto the scene. Well, now there are a few more, but we still have to carry on
5 making the transition. (Eider, currently playing)
6
7
8

9 Furthermore, they become aware of multiple gender identities and break gender dichotomies.
10 That is, for example, the next case. Eider transgressed the boundaries between hegemonic
11 masculinity and femininity becoming a female pelotari in her childhood, constructing an
12 alternative subjectivity, apart from the ideal masculine and feminine image:
13
14
15
16
17

18 Until I began to play with other girls, I felt like the only girl on an island. It was as if
19 there were no more girls and I found it strange. I told myself: 'Well, I'm not so strange'.
20
21
22 (Eider, currently playing)
23
24

25 Providing a space, challenging heterosexist ideology and facilitating empowerment, in
26 benefit of all women who are interested in playing Basque pelota, regardless of how
27 they are, is essential:
28
29
30

31 They can play in championships, like the boys, and nobody is scandalised by this, so they
32 don't have to hear comments about whether or not they're tomboys. They're girls, and as
33 feminine or more so than any other girl. Right? Well, some are the way we are and others
34 another way, but what does that matter?' (Nekane, currently playing)
35
36
37
38
39

40 Playing and getting access to traditional male-dominated sports, because of their
41 empowerment and agency, a new generation of sportswomen are challenging the gender-
42 power relations and doing a step forward to participate in sport on their own terms, not in the
43 shadow of men or in comparison with them (Hargreaves & Anderson, 2016). That is the
44 reason why pelotaris emphasized the significance of difference and engaged in the sport
45 context from their own perspective, becoming agents of change and transformation.
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55

56 **Conclusion**

57
58
59
60

1
2
3 The multiple experiences of women pelotaris show a paradoxical picture where oppression,
4 conformity, resistance, agency and empowerment interplay simultaneously. This complex
5 and constantly fluid picture reflects the need of the different lenses of feminist theories to
6 understand the ambivalent and often contradictory situations these women experience.
7
8
9

10
11
12 As the initial liberal feminist approach illustrated, this study points to the numerous
13 and varied ways in which pelotaris are discriminated in terms of resources, facilities,
14 economic support and social recognition. Despite the limitations of this perspective, the
15 stories of pelotaris in this study show that gender discrimination still influences their
16 experiences as barriers and constraints are very common in this context.
17
18
19

20
21
22 Furthermore, as women pelotaris explain, it is not only related to the distribution of
23 resources. Women access to a sport challenges the gender boundaries, but it does not
24 transform them automatically. Having the opportunity to access to a sport is not synonymous
25 with achieving equality, as Pfister (2010) confirms. The gender order also appears by
26 undervaluing their practice and being seen as outsiders. As hegemony theorists argue, sport
27 can be a site of both reinforcing and reconstituting dominant gender structure (Hall, 1996;
28 Hargreaves, 2000; Pelak, 2005; Pfister 2015).
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40
41 Our research suggests that even though women resist the gender order through
42 participation in physical activity and entering 'male' sports, they remain in a disempowered
43 position in the hierarchy of power and possibilities. Moreover, these women are regarded as
44 inferior, are underestimated and invisible in comparison with men. Their participation is
45 stereotyped because of the fact that they do not act as expected in terms of society's cultural
46 view of femininity. Therefore, they must prove their ability time and time again, their results
47 are considered to be second or third-level and they are not legitimized to play.
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55

56
57 Despite recognising their situation, the participants of this study do not assume the
58 victim role, conforming to the gender boundaries or developing resistance attitudes,
59
60

1
2
3 renegotiating and challenging the gender boundaries. In their every-day live, interviewees
4 developed strong resistance levels to the gender order and became active agents in
5 negotiating ideological constraints and challenging structural inequalities, breaking with the
6 gender relations and performing alternative identities and meanings. As Pfister (2015) points
7 out, alongside conformity with the gender order, resistance attitudes and empowerment
8 situations run parallel to prevailing sport ideologies, structures and practices.
9

10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17 This research study ascertains that although women Basque pelota players face many
18 difficulties in their sporting context, they develop successful strategies to ensure full
19 participation in Basque pelota. Like post-structural perspective highlights, women's agency
20 and the diffuse nature of power are also necessary to comprehend women's experience in
21 sports (Pelak, 2005).
22
23
24
25
26
27

28
29 In this study, women persist in the sport with tenacity, a strong commitment and a
30 shared group consciousness of structural inequalities. Some of the pelotaris promote new
31 meanings to the sport challenging the traditional male values, which focus on competition.
32 The recognition of the gender order mechanisms makes possible a sense of belonging that
33 challenges the hegemonic order. Women pelotaris resist negative stereotypes that restrict
34 women's choices, enabling them to feel empowered by becoming part of this community.
35 The women's collective consciousness, recognizing and respecting differences among
36 women, and sharing their experiences are empowerment tools for challenging and
37 transforming the sport for more women.
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48

49
50 This study might advance our knowledge of different ways to be a sportswoman and
51 challenging the gender order, as well as how players renegotiate and deal with the gender
52 order. Results of this study, situated in the sport of Basque pelota, offer a new insight into the
53 body of literature on women's experiences in sport. Considering these findings, transforming
54 gender relations in traditionally male-dominated sports is not enough to 'open doors' for
55
56
57
58
59
60

women. It is also necessary to empower sportswomen to challenge the traditional gender order, structures and values collectively, creating new environments where they might play the leading role and feel valued, as well as exploiting their potential to empower fellow group members, both the pioneers and the newcomers.

References

- Azzarito, L., Solmon, M. A., & Harrison, L. (2006). "...If I had a choice, I would..." A feminist poststructuralist perspective on girls in physical education. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 77(2), 222-239.
- Beal, B. (2018). Feminist ethnographies in sport and leisure. In: L. Mansfield, J. Caudwell, B. Wheaton & B. Watson (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of feminism and sport, leisure and physical education* (pp. 227-242). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bernstein, A. (2002). Is it time for a victory lap? Changes in the media coverage of women in sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 37(3-4), 415-428.
- Brown, A., & Yang, F. (2015). Does society underestimate women? Evidence from the performance of female jockeys in horse racing. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 111, 106-118.
- Chimot, C., & Louveau, C. (2010). Becoming a man while playing a female sport: The construction of masculine identity in boys doing rhythmic gymnastics. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 45(4), 436-456.
- Claringbould, I., & Knoppers, A. (2012). Paradoxical practices of gender in sport-related organizations. *Journal of Sport Management*, 26(5), 404-416.
- Cockburn, C., & Clarke, G. (2002). "Everybody's looking at you!": Girls negotiating the "femininity deficit" they incur in physical education. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 25(6), 651-665.

- 1
2
3 Collins, L. H. (2002). Working out the contradictions: feminism and aerobics. *Journal of*
4
5 *Sport and Social Issues*, 26, 85-109.
6
7
8 Cooky, C., & McDonald, M. (2005). "If you let me play": young girls' insider - other
9
10 narratives of sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 22(2), 158-177.
11
12
13 Cox, B., & Pringle, R. (2012). Gaining a foothold in football: a genealogical analysis of the
14
15 emergence of the female footballer in New Zealand. *International Review for the*
16
17 *Sociology of Sport*, 47(2), 217-234.
18
19 Cox, B., & Thompson, S. (2000). Multiple bodies: sportswomen, soccer and
20
21 sexuality. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 35(1), 5-20.
22
23
24 Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of
25
26 qualitative research. In: N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of*
27
28 *qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
29
30
31 Dorken, S., & Giles, A. (2011). From ribbon to wrist shot: an autoethnography of (a)typical
32
33 feminine sport development. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 20(1), 13-
34
35 22.
36
37
38 Dworkin, S., & Messner, M. (2002). Just do...what? Sports, bodies, gender. In S. Scraton &
39
40 A. Flintoff (Eds.), *Gender and sport: A reader* (pp. 17-29). New York, NY:
41
42 Routledge.
43
44
45 Egibar, M., & Garai, B. (2009). Emakume sokatiratzailleekin elkarrizketan: kirol sozializazioa
46
47 [Conversations with tug-of-war female players: sports socialization]. In: O. Usabiaga,
48
49 J. Castellano & J. Etxebeste (Eds.), *III International Congress Virtual-Presential of*
50
51 *Investigation in Physical Activity and Sport* (pp. 385-402). Vitoria-Gasteiz:
52
53 gidekit.com.
54
55
56
57 Engh, M. H. (2011). Tackling femininity: the heterosexual paradigm and women's soccer in
58
59 South Africa. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 28(1), 127-152.
60

- 1
2
3 Etxebeste, J. (2012). *Á Cloche-Pied. Les jeux sportifs traditionnels et la ocialisation des*
4 *enfants basques* [Hopping on one leg. Traditional sporting games and Basque
5 children's socialization]. Sarrebruck: Editions Universitaires Européennes.
6
7
8
9
10 Ezzell, M. B. (2009). "Barbie dolls" on the pitch: identity work, defensive othering, and
11 inequality in women's rugby. *Social Problems*, 56(1), 111-131.
12
13
14 Fernandez-Lasa, U., Usabiaga, O., & Castellano, J. (2013). *Gu ere bagara: emakumeak eta*
15 *pilota* [Here we are: women and Basque pilota]. In: J. Aldaz, A. Dorado, P. J. Jiménez
16 & A. Vilanova (Eds.), *AEISAD XII Congress. Social responsibility. Ethics and Sports*
17 (pp. 111-119). Madrid: Ibersaf Industrial.
18
19
20
21
22
23
24 Fernandez-Lasa, U., Usabiaga, O., Martos-García, D., & Castellano, J. (2015). Creating and
25 maintaining social networks: women's participation in Basque pilota. *International*
26 *Journal of Sport Science*, 40(11), 129-144.
27
28
29
30
31 Fetterman, D. M. (1998). Ethnography. In: L. Bickman & D. J. Rog (Eds.), *Handbook of*
32 *applied social research methods* (pp. 473-504). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
33 *Publications*.
34
35
36
37
38 Friese, S. (2012). *Qualitative data analysis with ATLAS.ti*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
39
40 Gilenstam, K., Karp, S., & Henriksson-Larsen, K. (2008). Gender in ice hockey: women in a
41 male territory. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, 18(2), 235-
42 249.
43
44
45
46
47 González, O. (2012). *Basque pelota: a ritual, an aesthetic*. Reno, NV: Center for Basque
48 *Studies – University of Nevada*.
49
50
51 González, O. (2013). Cuerpos desplazados. Género, deporte, y protagonismo cultural en la
52 plaza vasca [Displaced bodies: gender, sport, and cultural domination in the Basque
53 court]. *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, 8(1): 83-110.
54
55
56
57
58 Hall, A. (1996). *Feminism and sporting bodies*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
59
60

- 1
2
3 Hall, R. L., & Oglesby, C. A. (2016). Stepping Through the looking glass: the future for
4 women in sport. *Sex Roles*, 74(7), 271–274.
5
6
7 Hargreaves, J. (1994). *Sporting females: critical issues in the history and sociology of*
8 *women's sports*. London: Routledge.
9
10
11
12 Hargreaves, J. (2000). *Heroines of sport: the politics of difference and identity*. London:
13 Routledge.
14
15
16 Hargreaves, J., & Anderson, E. (Eds.) (2016). *Routledge handbook of sport, gender, and*
17 *sexualities*. New York: Routledge.
18
19
20
21
22 Hartmann-Tews, I., & Pfister, G. (Eds.). (2003). *Sport and women. Social issues in*
23 *international perspective*. London: Routledge.
24
25
26 Heywood, L., & Dworkin, S. (2003). *Built to win: the female athlete as cultural icon. sport*
27 *and culture series*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
28
29
30
31 Kaelberer, M. (2018): Gender trouble on the German soccer field: can the growth of women's
32 soccer challenge hegemonic masculinity? *Journal of Gender Studies*, DOI:
33 10.1080/09589236.2018.1469973
34
35
36
37
38 Markula, P. (2003). The technologies of the self: Sport, feminism and Foucault. *Sociology of*
39 *Sport Journal*, 20, 87-107.
40
41
42
43 McGinnis, L., McQuillan, J., & Chapple, C. L. (2005). I just want to play. Women, sexism,
44 and persistence in golf. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 29(3), 313-337.
45
46
47
48 Mennesson, C. (2000). «Hard» women and «soft» women: the social construction of
49 identities among female boxers. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*,
50 35(1), 21-35.
51
52
53
54 Mennesson, C. (2012). Gender regimes and habitus: an avenue for analyzing gender building
55 in sports contexts. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 29, 4-21.
56
57
58
59
60

- 1
2
3 Norman, L. (2010). Bearing the burden of doubt: female coaches' experiences of gender
4 relations. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 81(4), 506-517.
5
6
7 Paul, J. (2015). Sport and bodily empowerment: female athletes' experiences with roller
8 derby, mixed martial arts, and rugby. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social*
9
10
11
12
13
14
15 Peace, P. (2003). Balancing power: the discursive maintenance of gender inequality by
16 wo/men at university. *Feminism and Psychology*, 13(2), 159-180.
17
18
19 Pelak, C. F. (2005). Negotiating gender/race/class constraints in the new South Africa. A case
20 study of women's soccer. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 40(1), 53-
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31 Pfister, G. (2010). Women in sport – gender relations and future perspectives. *Sport in*
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
- Pfister, G. (2012). It is never too late to win - sporting activities and performances of ageing women. *Sport in Society*, 15(3), 369-384.
- Pfister, G. (2015). Assessing the sociology of sport: on women and football. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 50(4-5), 563-569.
- Scraton, S., Caudwell, J., & Holland, S. (2005). 'Bend it like Patel'. Centring 'race', ethnicity and gender in feminist analysis of women's football in England. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 40(1), 71-88.
- Scraton, S., Fasting, K., Pfister, G., & Buñuel, A. (1999). It's still a man's game? The experiences of top-level european women footballers. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 34(2), 99-111.
- Scraton, S., & Flintoff, A. (2013). Gender, feminist theory, and sport. In: D. L. Andrews & B. Carrington (Eds.), *A Companion to sport* (pp. 96-111). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

- 1
2
3 Sisjord, M. K. (2012). Networking among women snowboarders: a study of participants at an
4
5 International Woman Snowboard Camp. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science*
6
7 *in Sports*, 22(1), 73-84.
- 8
9
10 Skogvang, B. O. (2013). Players' and coaches' experiences with the gendered sport/media
11
12 complex in elite football. In: G. Pfister & M. K. Sisjord (Eds.), *Gender and sports.*
13
14 *Changes and challenges* (pp. 103-122). Wanmann: Münster.
- 15
16
17 Sparkes, A., & Partington, S. (2003). Narrative practice and its potential contribution to sport
18
19 psychology: the example of flow. *The Sport Psychologist*, 17(3), 292-317.
- 20
21
22 Tagg, B. (2008). "Imagine, a man playing netball!". Masculinities and sport in New Zealand.
23
24 *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 43(4), 409-430.
- 25
26
27 Theberge, N. (1987). Sport and women's empowerment. *Women's Studies International*
28
29 *Forum*, 10(4), 387-393.
- 30
31
32 Theberge, N. (2002). Challenging the gendered space of sport: women's ice hockey and the
33
34 struggle for legitimacy. In S. Scraton & A. Flintoff (Eds.), *Gender and sport: A*
35
36 *reader* (pp. 292-302). New York, NY: Routledge.
- 37
38
39 Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: eight 'big tent' criteria for excellent qualitative
40
41 research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851.
- 42
43
44 Urrutia, J. M., & Sagastizabal, J. (2009). *Erraketistak–Las raquetistas* [Basque racket female
45
46 players]. Durango: Durangoko Arte eta Historia Museoa.
- 47
48
49 Velija, P., & Flynn, L. (2010). "Their bottoms are the wrong shape" female jockeys and the
50
51 theory of established outsider relations. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 27(3), 301-315.
- 52
53
54 Weaving, C., & Roberts, S. (2012). Checking in: an analysis of the (lack of) body checking in
55
56 women's ice hockey. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 83(3), 470-478.
- 57
58
59 With-Nielsen, N., & Pfister, G. (2011). Gender constructions and negotiations in physical
60
education: case studies. *Sport, Education and Society*, 16(5), 645-664.