

Women and competitive sport: perceived barriers to equality

Mujer y deporte de competición: barreras percibidas para la igualdad

Belén Donoso Pérez^{1*}, Amalia Reina Giménez¹, Alberto Álvarez-Sotomayor Posadillo¹

¹ Faculty of Education, Sciences and Psychology. University of Córdoba, España

* **Correspondence:** Belén Donoso Pérez, belen.donoso@uco.es

Short title:

Barriers to equality in competitive sport

How to cite this article:

Donoso, B., Reina, A., & Álvarez-Sotomayor, A. (2022). Women and competitive sport: perceived barriers to equality. *Cultura, Ciencia y Deporte*, 17(54), 63-86. <https://doi.org/10.12800/ccd.v17i54.1887>

Received: 04 march 2022 / Accepted: 25 July 2022

Abstract

Modern sport was conceived by and for men. It has been a forbidden territory for women, who are perceived as outsiders, especially those who choose to engage in competitive sport. Despite the social advances that have taken place, women's sport continues to be structurally and symbolically more precarious. This study aims to analyse the barriers women perceive to continue participating in competitive sport. A qualitative methodology framed in grounded theory was used. Forty-five women residing in Spain participated in the study. Five focus groups were formed according to the type of sport: futsal, volleyball, handball, swimming, track and field, and fencing. The participants' discourse points to the existence of multiple barriers due to the fact of being a woman, such as the differentiated perception of changes that occur in adolescence, the conciliation of sport and education, the difficulties in making a living from sport in the long term, and the work-life balance. At the same time, they identify other barriers that may also affect men, such as the sacrifice involved in competition, injuries, and competitive pressure. The results suggest that ensuring women's access to sport does not guarantee equal and barrier-free conditions for their participation.

Keywords: Gender, Inequality, Barriers, Sport, Competition.

Resumen

El deporte moderno fue concebido por y para hombres. Ha sido un territorio vedado a las mujeres, que han sido percibidas como outsiders, sobre todo aquellas que deciden practicar deporte de competición. A pesar de los avances sociales acontecidos, el deporte femenino continúa siendo estructural y simbólicamente más precario. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar las barreras que las mujeres perciben para continuar practicando deporte de competición desde una metodología cualitativa y desde la teoría fundamentada. Participaron en el estudio 45 mujeres residentes en España. Se realizaron cinco grupos focales configurados en función del deporte practicado: fútbol sala, voleibol, balonmano, natación, atletismo y esgrima. El discurso de las participantes apunta a la existencia de múltiples barreras por el hecho de ser mujer, tales como la percepción diferenciada de los cambios que acontecen en la adolescencia, la conciliación con los estudios, las dificultades para vivir del deporte a largo plazo y la conciliación laboral. Paralelamente, identifican otras que pueden afectar también a los hombres como el sacrificio que conlleva la competición, las lesiones y la presión competitiva. Los resultados sugieren que asegurar el acceso a la práctica deportiva no garantiza unas condiciones de práctica igualitarias y sin barreras.

Palabras clave: Género, Desigualdad, Barreras, Deporte, Competición.

Introduction

As a social and cultural phenomenon, sport is a reflection of the meanings of gender relations in daily life. In an analogous manner, the advancement of gender equality within a wider social context has been accompanied by a transformation of gender relations in sport (Martín et al., 2017). Such changes have not only enabled women to access sporting spaces traditionally dominated by men (Cooky & Messner, 2018), but even consider making competitive sport a way of life (Donoso et al., 2021). However, access to sport venues does not ensure that the conditions required to participate in sport, the meanings attributed to it, and the social perception of female athletes are understood and valued in the same terms as males, which is why women's sport is considered to be structurally and symbolically more precarious (Cooky, 2017; Pape & McLachlan, 2020). In this context, women, by virtue of being women, encounter more barriers to engage professionally in sport (Tjønndal, 2019).

By examining these barriers, the field in which this work is framed, we aim to identify and gain a better understanding of how such unequal spaces and practices function and suggest possible areas and lines of action for achieving de facto equality in competitive sport. Several previous studies have described three main problems that hinder young women's permanence in competitive sport: challenges to hegemonic femininity, the conciliation of sport and study, and the economic inequalities women face to continue competing in the long term. International and national research has shown that the traditional stereotype of femininity conflicts with and conditions girls' participation in competitive sport (Alfaro, 2004; Camacho-Miñano, 2013; Choi, 2000; Collado et al., 2021; Dwyer et al., 2006; Fernández-Lasa et al., 2019; Isorna et al., 2019; Martos-García et al., 2020; Rodríguez & Perrino, 2019; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Indeed, because 'winning' is not considered a characteristic of the hegemonic stereotype of femininity, women may find competing unattractive and prefer to choose practices more in line with their socialisation process (Martín et al., 2017). This can be even more problematic for girls who decide to participate in sports traditionally regarded as 'masculine' as they face the additional obstacle of having to overcome the gender typification of the activity itself (Camacho-Miñano, 2013). Moreover, adolescence is marked by changing priorities, which is more accentuated in girls as they attach greater importance to social life and are under more pressure to spend time with the peer group (Biscomb et al., 2000; Dwyer et al., 2006; Martínez de Quel et al., 2010; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008).

As previous studies have shown, the challenges faced by both adolescent girls (Dwyer et al., 2006; Fernández et al., 2003; Martínez de Quel et al., 2010) and young adult women (Alfaro, 2004; Galatti et al., 2019; Iglesia et al., 2013; Isorna et al., 2019) in balancing their sporting and academic commitments is another barrier that prevents them from competing. For young women, who tend to be more academically driven than their male peers, combining both spheres of their lives entail an enormous amount of effort and another 'conflict of interests' that leads them to abandon sports. For those who continue to participate in competitive sport, one of the main concerns is reaching the

end of their sport career without the sufficient training and preparation required for their professional development. The demands of high performance are so huge that these athletes often lack the time needed for their academic development (Álvarez et al., 2014; Barriopedro et al., 2016) and those who drop out of school find themselves without the specific training needed to pursue a professional career (Alfaro, 2004).

The economic precariousness experienced by female athletes is perceived as yet another barrier for them to remain in competitive sport in the long term (Bowes et al., 2021; Isorna et al., 2019). In this line, Clarkson et al. (2020) highlighted how elite women football players are offered shorter contracts and lower salaries than their male counterparts and no possibility of maternity leave, thus forcing them to look for an extra job to achieve a certain economic stability (Bowes et al., 2021; López & Álvarez, 2019). In this regard, female athletes often complain about the fatigue and exhaustion involved in attempting to reconcile both spheres and how this affects their sports performance (Jaeger et al., 2010; Harrison et al., 2020).

The aim of this study is to explore the barriers female athletes perceive to continue competing. The results aim to fill the gap of empirical qualitative studies in the literature on conflicts women experience in the Spanish sports context.

Method

This study forms part of broader research (Donoso, 2021; Donoso et al., 2020) to determine how the identity of women who participate in competitive sport is constructed and the role sport plays in this process from a psychosocio-cultural perspective. This reality is approached in the framework of the interpretative paradigm (Taylor & Bogdan, 1986) and feminist research (Flores, 2014; Harding, 1987). To do so, we start from an epistemology capable of retrieving and validating the discourses of women in the world of competitive sport as scientific knowledge (Cala, 2004) in line with Harding (1987) and Harstock's (1983) standpoint theory. This approach allows exploring different phenomena that essentially and directly influence these women through the situated knowledge they have of their own lives (De la Mata et al., 2018), a 'feminist point of view' that can only be achieved through a process of individually and collectively articulated awareness (Flores, 2014). This perspective enables the use of a qualitative methodology that does not limit the possibilities of response and heeds women's own voices (Cala, 2004). The design was based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2002) to capture the meanings that these women attributed to the issues raised. In this framework, the representation of social reality and the generation of the theory required an inductive method supported in data analysis (Andréu et al., 2007).

Participants

Forty-five women residing in the province of Cordoba (Spain) aged 18 to 58 ($M = 28.22$, $SD = 11.06$) with 3 to 41 years of experience in sport ($M = 13.58$, $SD = 6.99$) participated in the study. Additional sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of participants

		n	%
Sport	Track & Field	12	26.7
	Handball	11	24.4
	Volleyball	10	22.2
	Futsal	8	17.8
	Swimming	3	6.7
	Fencing	1	2.2
Age	< 25 years	23	51.1
	25-45 years	15	33.3
	> 45 years	7	15.5
Level of education	Primary education	1	2.2
	Secondary education	33	73.3
	Undergraduate	9	20.0
	Postgraduate	2	4.4
Employment status	Student	27	60.0
	Employed student	3	6.7
	Employed	14	31.1
	Unemployed	1	2.2
Relationship status	No partner	24	46.7
	Partner	21	53.3

The criteria for participating in the study were being female, over 18 years of age and, as a sport criterion, having participated in at least one Spanish championship in the case of individual sports or, in the case of team sports, having played in a national division or aspiring to be promoted. Individual athletes were selected by non-probability purposive snowball sampling (Taylor & Bogdan, 1986), while those on teams were contacted via their coaches. After identifying local teams that met the established criteria, the research was explained to the coaching staff and permission was asked to contact the players. Meetings were then held with the players to explain the study objectives and procedure in detail. After a period of reflection and doubts were clarified, 48 athletes decided to participate in the study, although three of them (one soccer player and two volleyball players) chose not to take part in the focus groups. The fieldwork concluded when theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Participation was voluntary and all the athletes signed an informed consent form. The participants' contributions appear under a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity.

Data production technique

The data production technique was the focus group. Five face-to-face focus groups were used, which were set up according to three criteria: type of sport, whether the

sport was played individually or in teams, and the age of the participants. Three groups were comprised of team players: the first one included 9 futsal players, the second 11 handball players, and the third 10 volleyball players. The other two groups included individual athletes: one with younger women (20-38 years) in track and field, swimming, and fencing and the other with veteran track and field athletes over the age of 45. These athletes were included to detect possible intergenerational differences in the discourse.

The groups were conducted by a female researcher who acted as the moderator. All the focus groups were structured around the same script in line with the initial objectives of the research and based (in an open manner) on the following questions: Does participating in competitive sport influence women's process of identity construction?; Do women who participate in competitive sport perceive themselves differently from those who do not?; What motives and barriers do women in competitive sport perceive? Can female athletes be feminine?; Is there an association between certain sports and sexual orientation?; Do female athletes feel that they are supported and understood by their social/family environment?; How are competitive female athletes viewed externally? The script was reconstructed in line with the participants' interventions and discourse interactions. This led, for example, to the inclusion of themes of great

relevance to the discourse, such as the inequalities women face in Spanish sport; an issue that emerged in relation to the perceived barriers to sport participation.

This technique (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997) allows creating a space in which women can freely express their perceptions and experiences. The focus groups were designed and implemented in such a way as to facilitate an open and spontaneous discourse and accommodate any contradictions and differences that might arise between the participants or distinct positions held by the same participant. The groups lasted approximately an hour and a half. All the discourses that emerged in each of the groups were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Analysis

The data were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 2002) through a process of inductive open coding based on the subjectivities of the participants. Prior to the analysis, the participants' discourses were transcribed verbatim in their entirety.

Simultaneously, axial coding was used to systematically construct and make connections between the subcategories until they were integrated. This finally led to the explanatory scheme presented in the results section around the main category 'Barriers to competitive sport'.

The units of meaning were operationalised in turns of talk and discourse excerpts. Turns of talk are individual interventions that are meaningful in themselves, while discourse excerpts are interactive sequences of several participants around concrete analytical content and integrated by turns.

The validation strategies included data triangulation using different data sources (focus group and sample variability) in relation to the problematic issues under study and the triangulation of the researchers in the axial coding process to introduce other observations and increase the interpretative depth of the analysis (Denzin, 1970, cited in Flick, 2014). The rigour of this qualitative research is supported in criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ruiz-Olabuénaga, 2012).

NVivo 11 Plus software was used throughout the process.

Results

The discourse around perceived barriers to women's participation and continuity in competitive sport is represented proportionally in Figure 1 as a hierarchical map by type of sport. It should be noted that this is the most salient category and the one alluded to most often by the track and field athletes, followed by the swimmers and futsal players. It is striking to note how the participants that engage in individual sports perceive a greater number of barriers as indicated by the larger areas of the figure. These areas include a greater number of coded references and correspond to the sum of the individual sports of track and field, swimming, and fencing according to this grouping criterion.

Figure 2 shows the relationships between the barriers faced by female athletes distributed by age group, with the oldest age group (over 45 years old) having the least variety of barriers. This focus group comprised a real group of 'survivors' who were able to overcome the adverse circumstances they faced to make competitive sport their way of life.

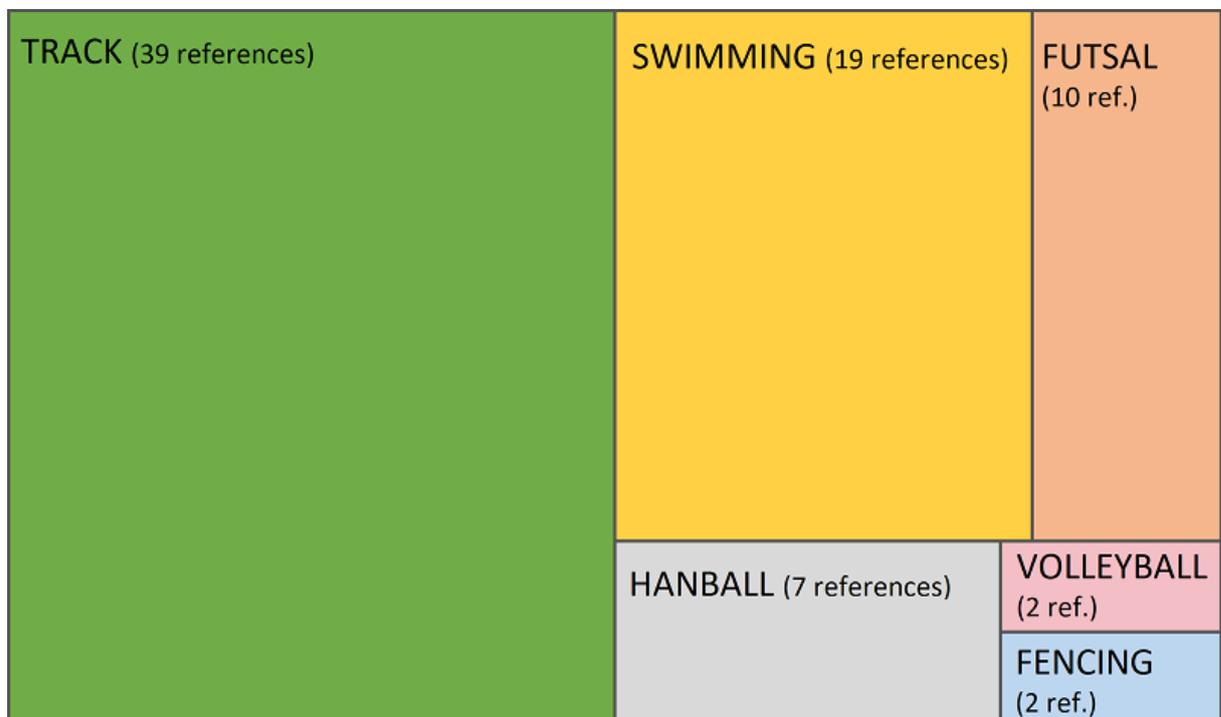


Figure 1. Hierarchical map of the category 'Barriers to competitive sport' by number of references per sport

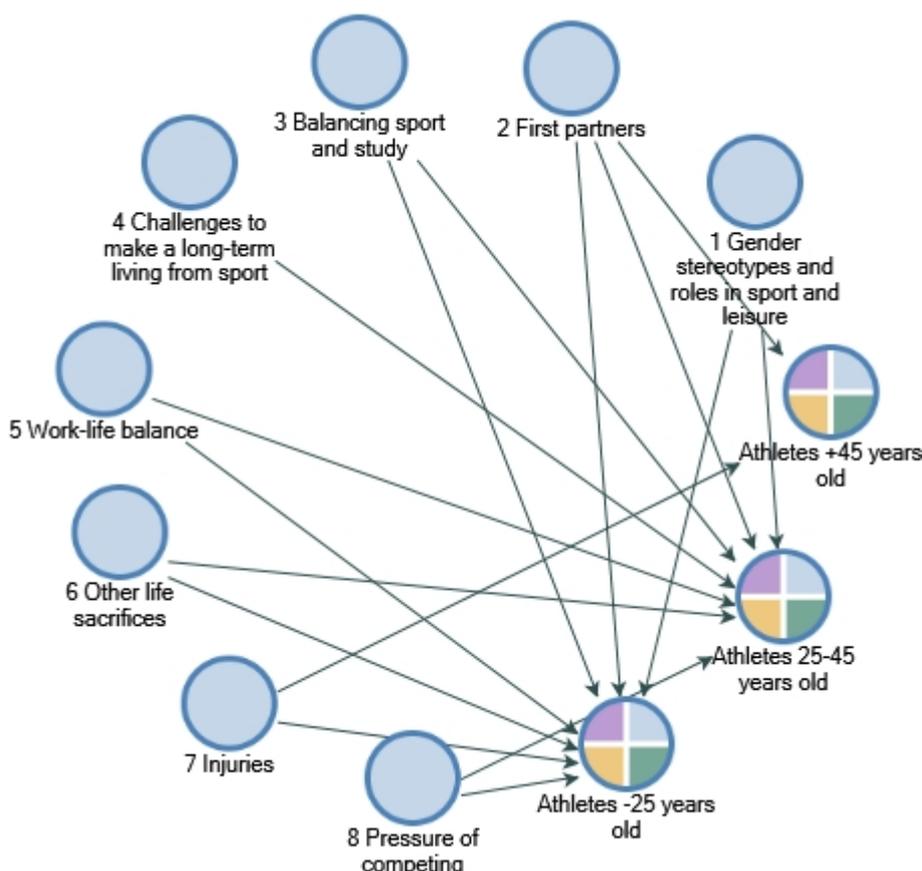


Figure 2. Relationships between female athletes by age group and barriers in competitive sport

Social life, leisure and sport participation

Gender stereotypes and roles seem to play a specific role in the reasons why female athletes drop out of sports, especially during adolescence. The participants view sport as part of the repertoire of leisure and social activities traditionally associated with men, and that the group nature of sport prevents them from disengaging to a greater extent. This is not the case for women, who are more likely to opt for other types of activities. For those who have continued to participate in competitive sport and seen many girls abandon sport at an early age, the distinct role sports play in the social life of men and women is perceived as a differential element:

And at that age, yes. Men's leisure time is always associated with..., sport is part of that leisure time, and for women perhaps not so much... The guys meet up on Sundays, their little match is a must, the girls don't... We meet up for coffee, go shopping..., interests change... I'm starting to dress cute, wanting to go out, flirt with the guys..., and well, men, maybe it's more common... [Susana, track and field athlete, 35 years old].

Yeah, but for men it's like Susana says, it's their hobby, it's their... 'we go cycling on Saturdays', you're doing sport, 'on Sunday, their little game of...' [...], of course, it's a way of relating on a social level... It's not the same as us, it's rare for us to relate socially by doing sport, so obviously you finally give it up... [Teresa, swimmer, 32 years old]

In this context, the participants report that they feel pressured, perhaps unconsciously, by peers that do not do sport. Not being able to adapt to the leisure schedules of

their peer networks because they coincide with training sessions, or not even being able to participate in leisure activities with their peers because they involve a series of habits that are incompatible with doing sport (drinking alcohol, going to bed late, etc.), causes feelings of doubt and discomfort, although it has not kept them from doing sport.

Having to tell your group of girlfriends that, for example, they don't understand this world, having to tell them on a Friday: "Well, no, we can't meet at nine o'clock at night, we can meet at twelve o'clock at night because I finish training at eleven or eight and I have to take a shower..." [Patricia, handball player, 26 years old].

The fact that my classmates went to the park every afternoon, and that at the weekends they started drinking, partying had a large influence... going here, going there... And it's clear that this has an influence... [Teresa, swimmer, 32 years old]

You're there and everyone else is with their boyfriend or going out partying... [Susana, track and field athlete, 35 years old].

First romantic relationships

Some young female athletes abandon competitive sport upon engaging in their first romantic relationship. The amount of time required, as well as the sacrifices involved in training and competitions, may cause female athletes to question their sport participation and give priority to initial romantic relationships over training. One veteran athlete stated that 'boyfriends' were one of the main reasons for dropping out of sport:

I quit, of course..., boyfriends, if it's not one thing, it's another, you stop going and then I started to run when I could... [Manuela, track and field athlete, 47 years old].

Several participants in the focus group of individual athletes expressed similar feelings. The following discourse excerpt shows how Teresa is critical of women who abandon sport for their partners using a solid argument with which she tries to refute Alejandra: men also have relationships and do not drop out. Susana tries to justify her opinion by alleging that women's interests change, which makes them prioritise their partner more than men:

[laughs] Boyfriends are my coach's biggest fear... [laughs], because everything gets mixed up a bit... [Alejandra, track and field athlete, 19 years old].

They both have relationships, I mean, what I want to say is..., men also have [partners] [Teresa, swimmer, 32 years old].

Women get more involved..., I think their interests change... [Susana, track and field athlete, 35 years old]

It is interesting to note that no intergenerational differences were observed regarding the influence of partners on the decision to remain in competitive sport. In this regard, the participants' discourse suggests that first romantic relationships continue to have a stronger effect among the younger athletes, who seem to prioritise them over sport.

Balancing sport and study

According to the participants, the difficulties of reconciling the academic and sporting spheres are one of the main reasons young female athletes drop out of sport, unlike their male counterparts.

In their discourse, they identify several factors that make it difficult to balance these two areas of their lives: the enormous responsibility and effort required of female athletes to excel in both spheres, the location of training venues, and the economic resources that can be obtained from sport. These factors condition the ability to reconcile or prioritise one sphere over the other and may lead athletes to abandon sport and dedicate themselves to their studies. Female athletes are perceived to be more committed to their studies than the male athletes with whom they have shared training sessions and competitions:

The dropout rate of females is notable, I've noticed it in teams. I'm the only one of my team who is still in my [academic] year, and from my year all the men are still in my team... [...], the dropouts when they entered university..., women [drop out] more, they quit more than men... [Paola, handball player, 31 years old].

In my case, when I was training at the club, little by little the girls gradually stopped swimming because of their studies and not because they wanted to, but because the family forced them to make a decision: 'either this or that'. So, they really threw themselves into their studies and the degrees they chose, well at least in my case, which is not necessarily the case for everyone [...] [Mercedes, swimmer, 31 years old].

Women tend to be more responsible in this regard, don't they? So maybe we have a clearer idea... 'I want to be a lawyer and I'm going to pursue that, and if I have to give up sport and everything, I'll give

it up, and I'll focus more on it' [...], I think that's also a conditioning factor. [Susana, athlete, 35 years old].

However, in the case of female athletes who were unable to balance their academic and sporting commitments, fears and uncertainties emerge about their adaptation to a professional career as they approach the end of their sporting careers. According to the participants, these feelings are caused by insecurity about their academic and professional qualifications. As one athlete stated:

Another thing about it is that you seem to be wasting your time, you know... And you are wasting it... In terms of your future career, you're totally socially handicapped [...], in terms of work and socially, because you get a job and say: 'because I am the fastest... the fastest in the world'... 'Well, so what...' [...], 'Well, look, I was told that I was going to be the champion and that I wouldn't lack anything...' it's a lie, you know? Then you're dedicating all these years of your life, some people manage to balance it, other people don't balance it... Normally, those who win the super medals don't balance it. I have friends who have balanced it and they are the chosen ones, or super-responsible... [Raquel, track and field athlete, 37].

Raquel's account suggests that the difficulties involved in combining academics and sport require optimal planning and time management. At this point, a conflict of interests arises which forces them to pit their sporting objectives against their academic ones, in some cases due to the circumstances and lack of academic support:

Where I was training, I couldn't do a degree... but if I had been living in Madrid or in a place with a bigger university, maybe I could have done both, but not there [...] [Mercedes, swimmer, 31 years old].

It also depends on that, on the help you can count on, because I also know [people like] those you say, medalists, and it's not the same. For example, in Madrid, in the CAR [high performance training centre], I have lots of friends in the BLUME [athletes residence], and if they help you, for example, there when you are in secondary school, you have the same school right there, you have..., then it's okay, but then there's the case of L, the athlete from Barcelona who, in fact, didn't participate in the university championship because she says: 'I've done championships, I'm not talking about a control, but a European championship that coincided with an exam and the university couldn't help me', do it [the resit exam] in September..., so it depends on the means, on the help they give you [Alejandra, track and field athlete, 19 years old].

Challenges to making a long-term living from sport

The realisation that they will not be able to make a living from sport without a secure salary raises athletes' doubts about remaining in competitive sport and they start to consider their future from a different perspective:

Me, in my case, I know that in my sport you can't make a living unless you're Mireia Belmonte, that is, if you don't win many international medals in a row... because there are also people who win international medals, one, and that's it and nothing happens. In my case, I earned enough to live on and I felt privileged because I was working in my job, in what I liked, my passion... So, until I could keep it.... When my head was about to explode and I knew that I wasn't going to be able to support myself the next year, that's when

I started having doubts and decided to continue in another way, but in the case of swimming, either you are very, very, very good, or it's not worth it..., I mean, to support yourself for many more years, no, I lived from month to month, you know, from month to month [Mercedes, swimmer, 31 years old].

In addition to the difficulties associated with the type of sport, there is the added constraint of being a woman. Female athletes perceive that men who do sports considered masculine have a better chance of playing sports their main source of income and 'making a living from it'. However, women face two problems: playing a sport that 'does not benefit them' and being a woman, as they explain:

If it's men's basketball, men's football, maybe... but in women's basketball I don't think I'd earn much more, so... [Mercedes, swimmer, 31 years old].

Since mine is such a minority sport, you don't get paid anything, nothing, nothing, nothing, but I know people who have been on the verge of going to the Olympics and nothing... working... [Clara, fencer, 27 years old]

Work-life balance

The start of working life presents one of the largest barriers to continuing in competitive sport. The athletes highlight the incompatibility of timetables, added energy expenditure, and even changes in lifestyle as factors that lead them to consider whether to continue in competitive sport. They think it is easier to find a balance with their academic lives than with their professional lives:

I think it's also because of the lifestyle we lead; the fact that all of us, most of us, are studying, so it's not the same to combine this with... [Patricia, handball player, 26 years old].

A job. [Gema, handball player, 25 years old]

A study timetable with a work timetable. [Patricia, handball player, 26 years old]

And because in any kind of job, they don't make it easy for you... [Ana, handball player, 23 years old].

Nobody is going to give it to you on a platter... [Paola, handball player, 31 years old].

Come on, it's the first thing they say to you... [Gema, handball player, 25 years old]

The fact that only players of team sports referred to this issue suggests that having to adhere to a fixed training schedule shared with other players makes it difficult to achieve a work-life balance; something that does not occur in individual sports where, depending on their work schedule, athletes can better organise the time they dedicate to training.

Female players have also internalised the idea that they will not be able to make a living from sport, an assumption that is presumably more widespread among women due to the fewer possibilities they have compared to their male counterparts. As a result, they must opt for employment at some point in their sport careers. Yet working is associated with an energy expenditure that takes a toll on sport performance:

You can't live off handball..., so you have to find something else [...], obviously, anyone who not only plays handball, but who has an additional expenditure [referring to energy] such as working

in a hospital as a doctor from eight to three, for example, that expenditure of being there all morning is reflected in your training... What happens? Well, if that person doesn't have to work and is only training, then physically they will be better and all that... [Bea, handball player, 23 years old].

Other life sacrifices

As the participants' discourse reveals, the pathway to competitive sport involves sacrificing other aspects of life. They are fully aware of the sacrifice, and some say that they have rationally evaluated at some point in their lives (or think they will do so in the future) whether it is worth it. In particular, not being able to spend their weekends doing other activities because they are attending competitions and being away from their families are perceived as obstacles that may deter them from participating in competitive sport in the long term. As several players report:

Maybe having to travel at weekends... [Lucía, volleyball player, 29 years old]

Or a weekend, organising a getaway in the countryside or whatever and you go to Madrid all weekend by car or bus and arrive on Sunday, for example [Patricia, handball player, 26 years old]

For me, maybe it's being away from my family. And it's true that sometimes it makes you wonder, well, a lot of things, like, is it worth it to be here suffering in that sense, missing out on a lot of things in my life, my family? Is it really worth it? That's what demotivates me the most. [Gloria, futsal player, 22 years old]

Me, for example, I have my work, my life in the morning, which is totally the opposite of when I come to train; it's hard for me to sacrifice my weekends, you don't have a life aside from this, I don't know what it's like to go away for a weekend.... because from August until now, to have a weekend off, we have to thank the Lord [...] So, when you train so many days, then the weekend too and there comes a point... For me, it's been getting very hard these last few years... [Miriam, futsal player, 26 years old].

Injuries

Injuries are yet another barrier that female athletes perceive as a demotivating factor in competitive sport. Indeed, if injuries persist over time, they can force athletes to drop out of competitive sport. Those who withdraw from training and competitions have a feeling of depersonalisation that affects them deeply. Significantly, the veteran athletes most often mention injuries as an obstacle to remaining in competitive sport in the long term. In this context, we have detected how age plays a decisive role in the construction of their narratives. The veteran athletes compare their 'sporting childhood' with the opportunities available to female athletes today, and consider that having to work so hard to succeed has given them the strength to overcome the barriers they have faced throughout their careers:

I've had an injury since March and haven't been able to run for a long time..., I just couldn't... [...], I have to get well to continue doing what I like, otherwise..., sitting at home.... And it eats you up inside..., and then that, you start..., in my case, you start to put on weight..., I don't feel like I look good... and I need to buy clothes... I don't look good... [Manuela, veteran track and field athlete, 47 years old].

I think that the point we're at now and our age, there are obstacles in our lives that prevent us from running..., no, it's just an injury, because our partner can ask, they can ask at work, and we've overcome it all... [Claudia, veteran track and field athlete, 54 years old].

The pressure of competing

The elite nature of high-performance sport, the lifestyle it entails, and the pressure to achieve sporting results are perceived as barriers to remaining in competitive sport. Although the participants consider themselves privileged to have been able to endure the demands of high-performance sport, they recognise how hard it is. This is illustrated by the interventions of the individual athletes:

And it's also true that people [snorts]... That we see it as normal, but I also often think about it coldly and say, man, competing, that's not something that just anyone can do, putting on pair of cleats, entering a race, jumping into a pool... It's just not easy... [Alejandra, track and field athlete, 19 years old].

When I was in Barcelona at the CAR [high performance training centre], people stopped swimming there because competing wasn't really their thing, people realised that the constant pressure wasn't for them... [Mercedes, swimmer, 31 years old].

I feel privileged because I've been able to compete in high-performance sport, but it's not for everybody... [Teresa, swimmer, 32 years old].

Discussion

The participants' discourse reveals the multiple perceived barriers that prevent female athletes from remaining in competitive sport. Specifically, five of the barriers they described are partially or entirely due to gender inequalities in different life domains, mainly the socio-affective, work, and academic domains. Within this framework, we consider that gender stereotypes and roles neutralise adolescent female athletes' desire to continue participating in competitive sport. The participants perceive that, contrary to the case of female athletes, sport forms part of the repertoire of male athletes' leisure activities, as previously reported by Macías and Moya (2002). The participants added that, during adolescence, social life took on increasing importance and the pressure to spend more time with their peer groups (Biscomb et al., 2000; Dwyer et al., 2006; Tekavc et al., 2015; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008) and first partners increased; aspects that hindered them from continuing to practice competitive sports (Alfaro, 2004). It is notable how this perception is strongest among the individual athletes (both young and veteran). The 'loneliness' and demands of individual sports may be factors that are progressively driving young women away from sport. In this sense, we have detected that sport is largely incompatible with the social roles ascribed to women (Alfaro, 2004) and although the social imposition of hegemonic gender stereotypes is not as explicit today, the hegemonic model of femininity continues to be transmitted daily in society and remains in the collective imagination, although it is not institutionalised (Martín et al., 2017).

As the participants reported, the economic inequalities between male and female professional sports and the minority nature of certain sports constitute major barriers to continue participating in professional sport in the long term (Bowes et al., 2021; Isorna et al., 2019). To a certain extent, this situation forces female athletes to combine competitive sport with new life roles, such as the start of

working life, as other studies have also found (Bowes et al., 2021; López & Álvarez, 2019; López de Subijana et al., 2021). In line with previous research, such as Jaeger et al. (2010) and Harrison et al. (2020), female athletes complain about the effort, difficulty, and fatigue involved in balancing these life domains, which is consequently reflected in their sport performance.

Having to reconcile studies with sport also hinders the permanence of girls in competitive sport, as the participants stated. The data produced suggest that females have a greater sense of responsibility in terms of their education, as previously noted by Tekavc et al. (2015). This situation causes a conflict of interest that 'pushes' them to drop out, as previously reported (Choi, 2000; Dwyer et al., 2006; Fernández et al., 2003; Isorna et al., 2019; Martínez de Quel et al., 2010; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). In this sense, female athletes appear to have internalised the idea that they will be unable to make a living from sport and therefore give priority to academics since they view education as being more important for their future (Barriopedro et al., 2016; Fernández, 2011; López de Subijana et al., 2021). Added to this set of circumstances are the expectations of the athletes' families, who consider an academic career as a means to gain status, become independent, and enter the world of work (Fernández et al., 2003).

In line with the results of previous studies, the participants were aware of the importance of academic training for their future professional careers (López & Álvarez, 2019; López de Subijana et al., 2021; Tekavc et al., 2015).

The three professional high-performance female athletes participating in this study were unable to balance their sport career with their academic commitments. According to Pérez-Rivases et al. (2020), one of the competencies that athletes say they need to successfully combine studies and sport is efficient time management, which is in line with one of the accounts of an athlete in this research. As identified by Selva et al. (2013), retiring from sport and the subsequent adaptation to a professional career causes feelings of fear and uncertainty. In contrast, the 11 female players analysed in Harrison et al. (2020) were able to successfully combine both facets of their lives. They internalised the idea of education as a 'back-up plan' after retiring from sport and felt supported by the university, family, and clubs.

The results also suggest that, in some cases, no measures are taken to help athletes combine study and sport, as one participant reported. Some of the most frequent demands in this regard are changes in class groups to allow them to train, problems with compulsory internships, the adaptation of continuous assessment systems, and academic tutoring (López de Subijana et al., 2014).

The participants' discourse also points to barriers not associated with being female. They indicate that the commitment, determination, dedication, and effort involved in balancing time spent in competitive sport with their personal and social development may be a barrier that leads them to question whether it is worthwhile to continue in competitive sport, as was also noted in previous studies such as Iglesia et al. (2013) and Taylor et al. (2019).

Frequent injuries and difficulty recoveries are further barriers to remaining in competitive sport (Isorna et al., 2019). Participants report how the injuries they have suffered often take an emotional toll on them due to their deep attachment to sport, as previously identified by Roessler and Muller (2018).

The intense and continuous competitive pressure athletes are subjected to over time is another factor that causes them to retire from competitive sport, as previous research has also shown (Dwyer et al., 2006; Galatti et al., 2019; Isorna et al., 2019).

The main theoretical contribution of this work to the scientific literature on women and sport is the use of a qualitative methodology that enables identifying the principal barriers female athletes perceive to participate in egalitarian sport. Specifically, their discourse reveals that gender stereotypes and roles associated with leisure time, first romantic partners, achieving a balance between sport and studies and/or work, and the difficulty of making a living from sport in the long term affect them because they are women. As for the practical implications, we believe this study could aid sports institutions in designing equality policies that take into account the needs, concerns, and interests of female athletes. In this regard, we intend to disseminate this work to sports federations and other administrations involved in promoting equality in sports to ensure that the voices of female athletes are heard, and scientific knowledge is transferred to the social agents involved.

The main limitation of this study is the number of participants we were able to recruit. It also would have been interesting to include a larger number of sports to broaden the scope of the research, especially individual sports typified as female, such as rhythmic and artistic gymnastics or synchronised swimming, as this would have allowed for an empirical and theoretical analysis of great interest. Likewise, it would have been desirable to further investigate the participants' attributes and delve more deeply into these differences, which we have not been able to explore due to the word limit of the manuscript.

As future lines of research, we propose the implementation of mixed designs that enable using quantitative methods to increase the sample and thus complement the data produced in this study. In this line, we consider that it could be interesting to extend the sample to include women from other provinces of Andalusia and those who reside or were born in other regions of Spain to enable comparisons in different contexts.

Conclusions

The data presented in this study suggest that equal access to sport does not ensure that the conditions for participating in sport are egalitarian, as is clear from the discourse of the participants, who highlight that barriers still remain due to the fact that they are women. In short, the perception that males participate more in sport than females in adolescence because it is a socially accepted leisure activity, pressure to spend more time with the peer group, first romantic relationships, balancing study and sport, and the challenges to making a long-term living from sport constitute a set of barriers which are conditioned, according to the results of this study, by deep-rooted gender stereotypes that are still in force and have a profound impact on the sporting sphere. However, the sacrifice involved in competitive sport in relation to other areas of life, injuries, and the pressure to compete over time are barriers that can affect both women and men equally. In line with Martín et al. (2017), we believe that the challenge for our society does not end with guaranteeing access to sport, but that the main objective should be to achieve effective equality. In other words, the barriers that the results of this study point to and that still persist in social structures and individual beliefs must disappear. In this sense, we believe that it is necessary both for society to continue advancing towards a cultural change which, although slow, is modifying gender relations in

sport, and for sports institutions and administrations to be more aware of their responsibility in banishing stereotypes and gender roles that hinder women's participation in competitive sport. Only in this way will athletes no longer have to face certain barriers for the mere fact of being women.

References

- Alfaro, É. (2004). El talento psicomotor y las mujeres en el deporte de alta competición. *Revista de Educación*, 335, 127-151. http://www.revistaeducacion.educacion.es/re335/re335_11.pdf
- Álvarez, P., Pérez-Jorge, D., González, M.E., & López, D. (2014). La formación universitaria de deportistas de alto nivel: análisis de una compleja relación entre estudios y deporte. *Retos: Nuevas Tendencias en Educación Física, Deporte y Recreación*, 26, 94-100. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=4771756>
- Andréu, J., García-Nieto, A., & Pérez, A. (2007). *Evolución de la teoría fundamentada como técnica de análisis cualitativo*. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.
- Asociación Médica Mundial (2013) (2017, 1 de febrero). Declaración de Helsinki de la AMM. Principios éticos para las investigaciones médicas en seres humanos. <https://www.wma.net/es/politicas-post/declaracion-de-helsinki-de-la-amm-principios-eticos-para-las-investigaciones-medicas-en-seres-humanos/>
- Barriopedro, M., Muniesa, C. A., & López de Subijana, C. (2016). Perspectiva de género en la inserción laboral de los deportistas olímpicos españoles. *Cuadernos de Psicología del Deporte*, 16(1), 339-350. <https://revistas.um.es/cpd/article/view/254691/192321>
- Biscomb, K., Matheson, H., Beckerman, N.D., Tungatt, M., & Jarrett, H. (2000). Staying active while still being you: Addressing the loss of interest in sport amongst adolescent girls. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 9(2), 79-97. doi:10.1123/wspaj.9.2.79
- Bowes, A., Lomax, L., & Piasecki, J. (2021). A losing battle? Women's sport pre- and post-COVID-19. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 21(3). doi:10.1080/16184742.2021.1904267
- Cala, M.J. (2004). Metodología y procedimientos de análisis. En Barberá, I. Martínez y A. Bonilla (Eds.), *Psicología y género* (pp. 81-106). Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Camacho-Miñano, M.J. (2013). Contradicciones del significado de la actividad físico-deportiva en las identidades corporales de las chicas adolescentes. *Feminismo/s*, 21, 15-35. <http://rua.ua.es/dspace/handle/10045/39683>
- Choi, P. Y. (2000). *Femininity and the physically active woman*. Routledge.
- Clarkson, B. G., Culvin, A., Pope, S., & Parry, K. D. (2020). Covid-19: Reflections on threat and uncertainty for the future of elite women's football in England. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 27(1-2), 50-61. doi:10.1080/23750472.2020.1766377
- Collado, M., Robles, J. A., & Álvarez del Palacio, E. (2021). Mujeres olímpicas en el descenso internacional del sella: Evolución de su participación. *Revista Internacional de Medicina y Ciencias de la Actividad Física y del Deporte*, 21(81), 99-116. doi:10.15366/rimcafd2021.81.007
- Cooky, C. (2017). Gender, sport and media between the mid-1980s and early 2000s. In L. Mansfield, J. Caudwell, B. Wheaton, & B. Watson (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of feminism and sport, leisure and physical education* (pp. 133-148). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Cooky, C., & Messner, M. A. (2018). *No slam dunk: Gender, sport and the unevenness of social change*. Rutgers University Press.
- Donoso, B. (2021). *La identidad de la mujer y el deporte de competición desde una perspectiva psico-socio-cultural* [Tesis de Doctorado, Universidad de Córdoba]. <https://hdl.handle/10396/21432>
- Donoso, B., Álvarez-Sotomayor, A., & Reina, A. (2021). Los significados del deporte de competición para las mujeres deportistas. *Sociología del Deporte (SD)*, 2(2), 81-92. doi:10.46661/socioldeporte.6370
- Donoso, B., Reina, A., & Álvarez-Sotomayor, A. (2020). La sexualidad en entredicho: nuevas negociaciones del significado de ser mujer en el deporte de alto rendimiento. *Movimento*, 26. doi:10.22456/1982-8918.96527
- Dwyer, J.J., Allison, K.R., Goldenberg, E.R., Fein, A.J., Yoshida, K.K., & Boutilier, M.A. (2006). Adolescent girls perceived barriers to participation in physical activity. *Adolescence*, 41(161), 75-89. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/195937749?pqorigsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>
- Fernández, E. (2011). Comprendiendo el abandono del deporte de las chicas adolescentes. *Pensar a Práctica*, 14(2). doi:10.5216/rpp.v14i2.12932
- Fernández, E., Contreras, O., Sánchez, F., & Fernández-Quevedo, C. (2003). Evolución de la práctica de la actividad física y el deporte en mujeres adolescentes e influencia en la percepción del estado general de salud. *Colección ICD: Estudios sobre Ciencias del Deporte. Serie Investigación*, 35, 21-60. <https://revistasdigitales.csd.gob.es/index.php/ICD/article/view/197>
- Fernandez-Lasa, U., Usabiaga, O., & Soler, S. (2019). Juggling on the court: exploring female basque pelota players' experiences and empowerment strategies. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 29(5), 496-507. doi:10.1080/09589236.2019.1618703
- Flick, U. (2014). *La gestión de la calidad en investigación cualitativa*. Morata.
- Flores, A. (2014). *Metodología feminista: ¿una transformación de prácticas científicas?* [Tesis de Doctorado, Universidad Complutense de Madrid]. <https://eprints.ucm.es/id/eprint/24645/>
- Galatti, R., Marques, R.F., Barros, C.E., Montero, A., & Rodrigues, R. (2019). Excellence in women basketball: Sport career development of world champions and olympic medalists brazilian athletes. *Revista de Psicología del Deporte*, 28(1), 17-23. <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/219106>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Publishers.
- Harding, S. (1987). Introduction, Is there a Feminist Method? En Sandra Harding (Ed.), *Feminism and Methodology* (pp. 1-14). Indiana University Press.
- Harstock, N. (1983). The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. En S. Herding y M. B. Hintikka (eds.), *Discovering reality* (pp. 283-310). Reidel Publishing Company.
- Harrison, G. E., Vickers, E., Fletcher, D., & Taylor, G. (2020). Elite female soccer players' dual career plans and the demands they encounter. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 34(1), 133-154. doi:10.1080/10413200.2020.1716871
- Iglesia, M.J., Lozano, I., & Manchado, C. (2013). Deporte e igualdad: las voces de las deportistas de élite. *Feminismo/s*, 21, 77-90. <http://rua.ua.es/dspace/handle/10045/39686>
- Isorna, M., Felpejo, M., Alonso, D., Gómez, P., & Rial, A. (2019). Mujer y piragua: Estudio de las variables moduladoras del abandono deportivo de las mujeres piragüistas en modalidades olímpicas. *Retos: Nuevas Tendencias en Educación Física, Deporte y Recreación*, 35, 320-325. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6761687>
- Jaeger, A. A., Gomes, P. B., Silva, P., & Goellner, S. V. (2010). Trayectorias de mujeres en el deporte en Portugal: Asimetrías, resistencias y posibilidades. *Movimento*, 16(1), 245-267. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/303957035.pdf>
- Krueger, R.A., & Casey, M.A. (2015). *Focus groups. A practical guide for applied research*. Sage.
- López de Subijana, C., Conde, E., Porrás-García, M., & Chamorro, J. L. (2021). Explorando la carrera dual en tenistas: Diferencias según género y nivel competitivo. *Cultura, Ciencia y Deporte*, 16(47), 95-106. <https://ccd.uca.m.edu/index.php/revista/issue/view/87>
- López de Subijana, C., Conde, E., Barriopedro, M.I., & Gallardo, L. (2014). Eficacia en la aplicación de las medidas de formación para los deportistas de alto nivel en el territorio español. *Revista de Psicología del Deporte*, 23(1), 41-48. https://www.rpd-online.com/article/view/v23-n1-lopez-de-subijana-barriopedro-et-al/pdf_es
- López, D., & Álvarez, P.R. (2019). La construcción de la identidad personal y profesional de los deportistas de alto nivel. *Educar*, 55(2), 361-379. doi:10.5565/rev/educar.1018
- Macías, V., & Moya, M. (2002). Género y deporte. La influencia de variables psicosociales sobre la práctica deportiva de jóvenes de ambos sexos. *Revista de Psicología Social*, 17(2), 129-148. doi:10.1174/021347402320007564
- Martín, M., Soler, S., & Vilanova, A. (2017). Género y deporte. En M. García Ferrando, N. Puig, F. Lagardera, R. Llopis y A. Vilanova (Eds.), *Sociología del deporte* (pp. 97-123). Alianza Editorial.
- Martínez De Quel, Ó., Fernández, E., & Camacho-Miñano, M.J. (2010). Percepción de dificultades para la práctica de actividad física en chicas adolescentes y su evolución con la edad. *Apunts Educación Física y Deportes*, 99, 92-99. <http://www.redalyc.org/pdf/5516/551656927012.pdf>
- Martos-García, D., Fernández-Lasa, U., & Usabiaga, O. (2020). Coeducación y deportes colectivos. La participación de las alumnas en entredicho. *Cultura, Ciencia y Deporte*, 15(45), 411-419. <https://ccd.uca.m.edu/index.php/revista/issue/view/76>
- Mata De la, C., Luque, B., & Freixas, A. (2018). Estrategias para la vida en la cuarta edad: Mujeres que viven solas. *Prisma Social: Revista de Investigación Social*, 21, 1-27. <http://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6521448>
- Morgan, D.L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Sage.
- Pape, M., & McLachlan, F. (2020). Gendering the coronavirus pandemic: Toward a framework of interdependence for sport. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 13(3), 391-398. doi:10.1123/ijsc.2020-0237
- Perez-Rivases, A., Pons, J., Regüela, S., Viladrich, C., Pallarès, S., & Torregrossa, M. (2020). Spanish female student-athletes' perception of key competencies for successful dual career adjustment. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 1-15. doi:10.1080/1612197X.2020.1717575
- Rodríguez, C., & Perrino, M. (2019). Inequalities in female combat sports. *Journal of Human Sport and Exercise*, 14(4proc), 1342-1344. doi:10.14198/jhse.2019.14.Proc4.82

- Roessler, K. K., & Muller, A. E. (2018). "I don't need a flat tummy; I just want to run fast" – self-understanding and bodily identity of women in competitive and recreational sports. *BMC Women's Health*, 18, 146. doi:10.1186/s12905-018-0639-4
- Ruiz-Olabuénaga, J.I. (2012). *Metodología de la investigación cualitativa*. Deusto Publicaciones. Universidad de Deusto.
- Selva, C., Pallarès, S., & González, M. D. (2013). Una mirada a la conciliación a través de las mujeres deportistas. *Revista de Psicología del Deporte*, 22(1), 69-76. https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/revpsidep/revpsidep_a2013v22n1/revpsidep_a2013v22n1p69.pdf
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (2002). *Bases de la investigación cualitativa: Técnicas y procedimientos para desarrollar la teoría fundamentada*. Editorial Universidad de Antioquía.
- Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1986). *Introducción a los métodos cualitativos de investigación*. Paidós.
- Taylor, T., O'Connor, D., & Hanlon, C. (2019). Contestation, disruption and legitimization in women's rugby league. *Sport in Society*, 23(2), 315-334. doi:10.1080/17430437.2019.1631803.
- Tjønndal, A. (2019). "Girls Are Not Made of Glass!": Barriers experienced by women in norwegian olympic boxing. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 36, 87-96. doi:10.1123/ssj.2017-0130
- Tekavc, J., Wylleman, P., & Erpič, S. C. (2015). Perceptions of dual career development among elite level swimmers and basketball players. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 27-41. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.03.002
- Whitehead, S., & Biddle, S. (2008). Adolescent girls' perceptions of physical activity: A focus group study. *European Physical Education Review*, 14(2), 243-262. doi:10.1177/1356336X08090708.