

Different views of (dis)ability: Sport and its impact on the lives of women athletes with disabilities

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Published online: March 30, 2018

(Accepted for publication January 10, 2018)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2018.01007

Abstract:

The purpose of the study is to describe the role of sport in the life course of women athletes with disabilities. As a conceptual basis it used the life course theory, which is the path taken by the individual, marked by events over time. These events have a direct link with obtaining the necessary resources for their human development: good health, good knowledge, a certain level of economic security and good social relations. This is a descriptive research with a qualitative approach. Four (04) female athletes with physical disabilities and two (02) with visual impairment were interviewed. The coding and categorization was aided by the use of NVIVO software, version 11 pro, anchored in content analysis. From involvement with sports, social relations are being extended to the fundamental sense of belonging as well as the construction of its new identity, the athlete. The autonomy proven by the daily routine experienced by athletes in activity or who are already withdrawn from the sport is directly associated with the empowerment obtained by these athletes, it should be seen as a fundamental requirement for this group in double social vulnerability feel belonging to the city.

Key words: empowerment, people with disabilities, women, sport, social vulnerability.

Introduction

How does the city assist the disabled ones? The affirmative to this question comes into conflict with shortage of public policies directed to social construction of urban spaces in order to promote unity and coexistence of differences¹. Although, why does the city has difficulties on supporting people in socially vulnerable situation? Is this problem structural, political or social?

As a group that fits two (2) criteria of vulnerability conditions, being a woman and being disabled², this study used as its object of research female athletes with a disability. As such, in what manner can sport extend the living conditions of female athletes with disabilities? The study's purpose is to describe sports in the life course of sportswomen with disabilities.

Disability leads to a limitation of city accessibility, since this social space does not offer equal conditions and opportunities to its inhabitants to live with dignity – aside from social, cultural, ethnic, gender and age characteristics³. By addressing this issue as a fundamental right, it runs into city proposal accessible to all - from a universal design perspective to public spaces accessibility and to better urban mobility.

According to Levermore⁴, sport is an important manifestation for human development when related to physical, psychological and social aspects of individuals (improvement of self-esteem, independence to develop daily tasks, possibility of establishing new relationships, meeting people, developing potentialities and stimulating new skills). It is a significant event in the life course of female athletes with disabilities once it provides from their sports involvement the autonomy and empowerment needed for a more active participation in the society.

Onto theory of the course of life, the sequence of situations over time facilitates the understanding of changes impact promoted by events or transitions⁵. These transitions are important by opportunities expansion accentuated by the feeling of belonging (to be part of a group), by good education (level of study) and by family structure (to constitute family, to have family support). The course of life appears as a theory capable of monitoring the path taken by these women athletes, from the resources obtained to improve their living conditions.

Material & methods

It is a descriptive study, with a qualitative approach by allowing access to experiences, interactions and documents in their natural context, making room for particularities of each interviewee in relation to their life courses^{6,7,8}.

Athletes with disabilities

Six female athletes were interviewed for this study: two of which with visual impairment and four, motor deficiency. All of them presented more than four years of competitive activity, which, according to Trieschmann⁹, is a necessary time for adaptation, adjustment, acceptance and assimilation of the deficiency. This period is susceptible to variations depending on the type of disability, the form of manifestation (congenital or acquired), the process of rehabilitation/ stimulation and the sociocultural context insertion of the athlete.

The athletes selection occurred intentionally for a better understanding of the central phenomenon to be observed^{10,11}. According to Flick¹², it is essential to the selection process to be oriented to finding the right people, those who make their experience relevant to the study. For this, the study adopted specific criterias (inclusion and exclusion) of participation.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

As inclusion criterions: a) to have more than four years of competitive activity; b) to have participated in state, national or international sports competitions - focus on high performance athletes; c) to have cognitive mastery to understand the subjects to be developed and the ability to communicate and express themselves.

Regarding the exclusion criterion: a) the non-remembrance, recall or omission by the interviewees of specific moments of their life course (there being no possibility of identifying the athlete's life trajectory or life course).

The establishment of these criterions aims to give more credibility to the data collected, by managing to find the best representation of the sport in the life course of women athletes with disabilities¹³.

Letter A identifies an Athlete, following the order according to the interview accomplishment. The characterization from its socio-demographic profile is present in table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of women athletes with disabilities

Athlete	Age	Disability	Form	Educational Level	Occupation	Sports kind	Time (Years)
1	81	Physic	Acquired	Basic	Retired	Individual	13
2	40	Physic	Acquired	College	Athlete	Group	08
3	40	Physic	Acquired	High School	Athlete	Group	09
4	43	Visual	Congenital	High School	Motivational Agent	Individual	27
5	30	Physic	Acquired	College Dropout	Athlete	Individual	04
6	20	Visual	Congenital	High School	Athlete	Individual	08

Source: authors.

Procedures

The study follows 466/2012 resolution from National Health Council, referring to research with human beings. It is approved by Committee of Ethics in Research with Human Beings of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, under the nº 1.373,128 and CAAE : 50739915.6.0000.5347 on December 17, 2015.

For data collection an instrument for the semi-structured interview was used, based on a script that aims to control and standardize the conduction of the interview, facilitating the subsequent analysis and comparison of the information obtained¹¹.

Two moments guided the interview conduction:

1st moment - contact by phone or social networks the athletes who met the inclusion criterion for participation in the research and then, scheduling of the most appropriate day, place and time for the interview;

2nd moment - use at the time of the interview, a voice recorder to preserve the interviewee's speech. The device used was a Sony Digital Voice Recorder model PX-240.

Content analysis for data interpretation following as a three-step procedure: pre-analysis; exploitation of the material and treatment of results; inference and interpretation¹⁴.

The coding and categorization was through the use of NVIVO software, version 11 pro, which according to Bardin¹⁵ can provide "additional information to the analyst and is capable of serving as a basis for his interpretation or for the further development of a category system" (p. 178). It is important to emphasize that the analyst of the data, that is the research himself, should be the one to carry out the work of analysis, and discover the meaning of the discourses.

Results

Two main categories of analysis and discussion were established: the contact with sports and the events that improved the living conditions of women with disabilities.

The contact with sports

Being part of a community can mitigate or exacerbate the inequalities found throughout life. The search for places with better opportunities, according to Bertolucci Jr.¹⁷, is related to the search for support (education), care (health), co-residence and for a more accessible and comfortable environment.

Factors such as gender, the age of disability acquisition and its type are decisive, according to Pensgaard and Sorensen¹⁸, to identify the level of one's empowerment. Women with disabilities tend to be discriminated against and more prejudiced than men are, especially in a sports context¹⁹.

Some athletes have had the sport always present in their lives *"I was practically born in the sport, it is so ingrained in my life that now it went to my grandchildren [...] I started for fun, but then I took it so seriously that I even had a sponsorship"*(athlete A1). This deep involvement has generated such a sense of belonging that it became a problem to think of life away from the sport *"I do not know how it would be, everything in my life has revolved around the sport"* (athlete A2).

A5 *"before being amputated, I worked. I worked in a company for 11 years. It was a very stable situation, I was studying production engineering due to my work. I was well, I was doing well ... I was 25 years old, life planned, building some projects, I had a career built, why would I leave everything behind and start all over? It's different for a 15-to-18-year-old athlete who's already in the sport, because that's going to be his career. He did not care about employment; if he did, he already had through sport. For someone older getting a disability is difficult, the person has to make the decision 'If I go to the sport, who will support me?' At the beginning of 2015 I no longer had any money, I said 'I do have to go back to work now'. I returned to work in two companies; the sport was already in second plan because I could not handle working ten hours a day, and training still. I would train to keep myself, but the question of seeking a high income was already lagging behind. It was when a sponsorship came. I went for a media job, they ended up liking it and they intended to sponsor some Paralympic athletes, it worked. It was when I could return, I left the job that I was, to keep only in the sport and from there I was able to dedicate myself 100% "*

The process of acquiring a disability interrupts the routine and brings out a set of feelings, often related to exclusion, which may influence the notion of belonging. The sport is then seen as a way for disabled women to take back their course of life and get these feelings administered.

A1 *"sport for me started as a joke, a questioning ... [...] the first contact I had was when I was little. I played at home, I had a poor childhood, my parents were poor, so I had a racket and a ball, and then I kept playing. I loved it, when it was possible to start playing in a club that was on the corner of my street [...] I started playing, I started to like it. So when I started to work [...] they announced that I would have championships, I said 'I want to participate'.*

This first contact with the sport is very rich, thanks to the presence of teachers, either at school or in clubs, who sought to extend the motor experience from practice of different sports, a fact that determines the choice or enchantment for a specific modality. This orientation at early ages of life certainly was a great differential for these athletes trajectory:

A6 *"there was this presentation in my school, because a teacher used to visit schools encouraging children to practice sports [...] I was interested, was about six years old (2003), I got home I asked my parents to find me some class, some place to train. Coincidentally, the neighbors in my building also played it. My father spoke to them and they told him to go where their children trained, to see if I would like it or not. I went there, the teachers helped me, I took a class and I liked it a lot, a lot, a lot, [...] I started to train, then I started to participate in competitions, only with people who saw [...] when I participated of competitions with people who could see, sometimes I would won [...] In 2011, I got to know the Paralympic sport, I started to participate in some Paralympic competitions and I continued to participate in the regular. The coaches of the Brazilian team liked my games, they started calling me to the Brazilian team and my life started moving. "*

Social relations built from sports practicing opened new paths and the feeling of empowerment surfaced. A characteristic of this sports movement is to encourage more and more the participation and presence of people with and without disabilities in physical, sports, cultural or work activities, thus reinforcing its capacity to promote better conditions for other members of society:

A2 *"I met Paralympic sport through another athlete, I had doubts 'but, will I fit in?'. I decided to go, so I went in a day of intense work, not to say that the body really hurts, everything hurts. The coach 'you'd better leave, you'd better leave, you'd better leave,' cause otherwise tomorrow you will not get out of bed. ' I said 'no, let me sweat, because I'm loving it, I've found myself again' because really I was getting depressed, it lifted me up again, I was reborn. Wow, I do not know how to explain the pleasure I had, adapted sport made me really well ";*

A4 *"the president of an association, asked the Physical Education teacher to indicate athletes and she indicated me, because I always participated, I've always been electric, I liked to run since I was a child. I was one of the indicated to start practicing. In my first year I already competed, I was 13 years old, I already had beaten the Brazilian record of 200 meters, I won 100 meters and I made a jump in height, I was third. "*

By identifying with a sport and by assuming the identity of an athlete, new doors open and the feeling of incapacity gives way to belonging for women with disabilities. The possibility of achievement in sports brings a new meaning to the present limitation²⁰.

The construction of an athlete's identity is related to: the contact with the sport, the conquests, belonging to a certain social group, the hours dedicated to training, t being seen differently (high level athlete), the fact of having a support (multidisciplinary team) and being able to represent the country in international competitions. These moments played a fundamental role for the growth of these athletes in national and international sports scene. The word opportunity begins to appear as a determining factor for the constitution of this new identity:

A1 *"it was when I won the gold medal! I felt powerful. That medal was everything for me, because it raised my morals, people started to fear me, they already had a fear of me because I was always the oldest of them all. ";*

A2 *"I always considered myself an athlete. I got to the adapted sport in February 2010, in October I was already called to the Brazilian team. So I was already feeling on top. Best player in the world for me it's too much, because I'm a fan of others. To live with those people who had some difficulty in life and are happy today, for me that's the best. Being able to play, winning for it, doing what you love is the best. ";*

A6 *"at the time I entered for the Paralympic selection in 2012, at age 15".*

A strong athletic identity is related to better health, better sleep and nutritional habits, better physical fitness, global self-esteem, improved social relationships, greater confidence and greater participation in physical activity and exercise^{21,22}. The complex social interactions required in sport explores various roles in a team, which may give disabled women the opportunity to see themselves operating successfully in a context that may influence their own perceptions in other social domains^{23,24}. On the other hand, non-identification with sports can reduce their confidence to exploit or commit to several alternatives of identity in other domains²⁵.

The shortfall of incentives and supports means that sports for people with disabilities need more attention for its development²⁶. Linked to this, we have the prejudice still present, the difficulty of accepting the disability and the use of it as an excuse in difficult times, the financial problem and the lack of information and support. Managing all these barriers and seeking, through sport, a way for their development was what some athletes did:

A4 *"the challenge was the lack of training structure, I had to overcome this; the injuries close to competition, I had to overcome; the lack of recognition. Paralympic sport today is a little better known, but it is missing a lot, I do not know if one day will be recognized as the Olympic sport is. People think so, in a closed tv channel they talk a lot about Paralympic Sport, but in the open tv channels there was no transmissions about it. I do not know how Sportv's channels were, but it was only one, for you to see, it was already different and the Paralympics were not as publicized as much as the Olympics ... and what about the legacy for people with disabilities, families with people with disabilities at home? [...] all of us always have to be better in Paralympic sport: lack of support, lack of recognition. I managed to get a good phase, but some failed even with good results";*

A3 *" At Paralympic sport challenges consist of amateurism. Suddenly to draw attention of someone and the person dislike, they are a very difficult people, because in fact, close to many people, my handicap is minimal, I think they use a lot of their deficiency, so my biggest challenge was this and it continues to be, because in fact I do not have much patience. It is not because a person has lost a leg, it is very difficult, because for me it is also difficult, but what can you do? You have a physical disability, so I think they often use it. Even I used mine after my accident that I stopped playing, I used this a lot, that I was lying on the sofa, looking at the ceiling 'poor me'. Until one day, you talk or you get up from there and go on with life or else you're going to be pissed off your whole life. "*

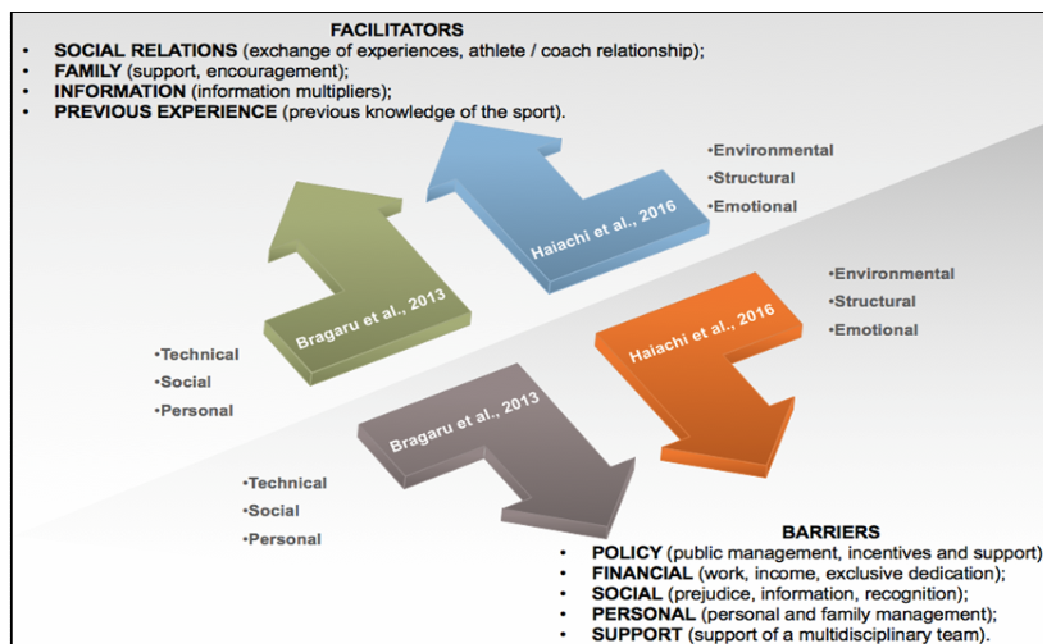
A5 *"look, honestly the first big challenge is the financial one, I usually say it, for me amputated and for the wheelchair users, the biggest challenge is the financial issue because we depend on the equipment. Just to start, I need R\$80 thousand, or I will not start, not even for fun, aside from maintenance. So I got the prostheses, but now? The maintenance. Am I going to get a prosthesis and keep it? Today, concerning the maintenance of prostheses, there is an orthopedic clinic that does it and exchanges of some components for me. If it were not for the clinic's support, I would not be in the sport, I need to have a team, a support, otherwise it is impossible to train and compete. It has many challenges, not only financial, it is more relevant because the equipment depends on it, but so, there are other normal challenges as all athletes do. The psychological issue, the question of having a team behind you, the sport I practice is very new to the world, it is not very traditional and it is a very expensive sport. "*

The facilitators found by athletes throughout their trajectory are directly related: to social factors, such as empathy with athletes and coaches/teachers; to the support of family and friends; to the information produced by the agents involved, to the athletes (multipliers) and to the previous sports experience.

The barriers ratification and the facilitators pointed out by Bragaru et al.²⁷ and Haiachi et al.²⁰ are amplified by Haiachi's study²⁸, giving a voice to the athletes to broaden this discussion, as shown in figure 1.

These aspects run into global problems identified by Mauerberg-DeCastro et al.²⁹ of societal vulnerability regarding accessibility (undressing the stigma of disability), political vulnerability (representative organizations do not offer opportunities for all), and economic vulnerability (lack of training opportunities, technology and sponsorships).

Despite this, we emphasize the importance of sport as it enables women athletes with disabilities to overcome these barriers by breaking the sense of limitation that comes from disability, which contributes to their empowerment.



Source: Haiachi²⁸

Fig. 1. The barriers and the facilitators for athlete with disability sports career development

Marked events that improved condition of life

The deficiency presents itself as a milestone in the lives of the athletes who acquired it, being considered a divisor, a turning point in their life course:

A2 "I think this injury caused my life to become real, because it was enough for me to be where I am today. I usually say that there are evils that come for good. The pain I felt was a deathly one, anyone who ever felt this pain in the knee, the ligament rupturing, I even had delirium. So I think that the pain that I went through was to make me happy today. I believe in this, that I had to go through it, to be where I am, to be completely happy";

A5 "today after my amputation, that is a giant trauma, any kind of trauma that a person goes through, she's got have a structure to maintain herself, otherwise she can not stand it. One thing I value as positive was that since I was new, I have always been very independent, I have always had independence, my parents have always worked on this issue with me, it has helped me a lot to deal with disability. "

In this manner, disability and sport are considered as important events in the life course of female athletes with disabilities, increasing opportunities and obtaining resources for their development as individuals capable of making their own decisions and having a more active participation in the community in which she is inserted. The emergence of the sport as a work activity is recent, being declared as a profession by the women of this study (66%). When we relate income and sport, we find a situation that can be seen both positively and negatively.

Positive in a way that some athletes started to receive for their sports results amounts that changed radically their social situation and of their families. The athletes, who were the burden of the family, became the providers. The downside lies in the difficulty of understanding what many call disability. It is hard to be considered invalid for work and example of life by the vehicles of communication.

The A5 athlete reinforces the need to glimpse the opportunities that appear throughout life. Being prepared and willing to make a difference is a decisive question for living a more dignified life:

A5 "I see Physical Education as an opportunity, even in the form of helping me as an athlete and helping other people afterwards, because by entering this area, I see that we are very poor of professionals [...] the issue of amputation has no experienced professional, unfortunately has not. So why not us? Since we are in practice, we have the experience. Why not go forward? I see that I will gain a lot from this. My future plans, even for the financial issue, because I do not know how far sponsorships go, so it's a way that I can see myself in the future." In addition, the ability to relate to people and be welcomed is the key to a successful development as a participatory member of an egalitarian society. It becomes a way to establish new friendships, gain visibility and be recognized by the work they develop:

A4 "I also thank the sport, the friendships, the people who know me today, my story, the friends I made after I retired, through the sport, which has to do with street races and before, many colleagues who joked and knew. I always liked to talk, to make friends, so the sport only added to it, to have this opportunity to meet other cities, people from other countries. Even now in Rio I found an athlete who competed with me [...] she gave me a bracelet, which has her name in Greek and I took a shirt that I have with my mark for her, but it was very cool to meet her again. Even the athletes in Brazil, too, there were many that I could not find, after I stopped, ours, they were very happy to see me and that was very cool. I have always had a good relationship, but thank God the majority was very happy to see me";

Having the ability to develop common activities, established on a daily routine, expresses the degree of autonomy conquered by these athletes throughout their lives. The athletes, in their totality, were able to build life history with vicissitudes, but they pointed to a life of: a) dedication to sports; b) conciliation between sport and work activity; c) mobilization through movements for the rights of people with disabilities; and d) effective and present participation in society, in short, routines common to any citizen.

Regarding psychosocial aspects, sports practice has shown an expansion in social domains and experience of individuals by encouraging them to trust more in their body, to improve their physical self-concept and their self-esteem^{17,30}. Empowerment comes from the understanding people's needs to increase control over their own lives from situations of equity, guaranteeing in a fair way, better conditions of equality:

A1 "disability mentalities are very different. I started in the cause with a group of people with very different minds. Then it was day that I came all joyful and they barred me. I was very expansive; I got a program on the radio, a space to make a program of my own. First it was 15 minutes, then 20 minutes, then half an hour. Then I expanded. I left the association to make my entity. I created wings, I flew, and I founded an association. With the entity, I grew up. I got many things, that will I had to do things and that the people from the other entity would prune me, it is over. I always continued in the sport even though I did not have much access. I have no more health to start all over again, there have been many disappointments and in our midst is very difficult, there are no more people with idealism, they just think about money. "

Having the opportunity to express their feelings and transmit a message to the people was a concern of the authors, in the sense of giving them voice to express their anxieties, anguishes and positive moments throughout their trajectory. Reviving striking moments has caused some athletes to feel ashamed, stressing the importance of not being excluded from sports practice, of having a reason to leave home and seeking to take over the course of their lives, to feel and to be part of society in which they are inserted.

This message left by the athletes is full of adverse feelings, such as indignation at the exclusionary situations that amplify the situation of vulnerability that some find. But also a joy for being able to share their history and show people that it is possible to live one dignified life, with quality, making and being part of the society in which they live.

Conclusions

Cities need to assist their residents properly. Accepting differences is a way to diminish the inequalities among its members. This issue, answering the initial question, is structural by not offering: a) an universal design (design of products, environments, programs and services to be used by all people, without adaptation or specific design); b) policy due to the high amount of regulatory marks to reduce social inequality, but in practice they are unable to make progress, hindering the routine life of vulnerable people; c) social because society still does not accept the different and consequently does not welcome the handicapped.

Sport definitely emerges as an impactful event in the life course of women athletes with disabilities by opening up new perspectives and shifting the focus from disability to functional capacity required from engagement with the competitive environment.

From the involvement with the sport, the social relations are amplified being fundamental for the feeling of belonging as well as the construction of its new identity, that of athlete. The autonomy proven by the daily routine experienced by the active athletes or those who have already withdrawn from the sport is directly associated with the empowerment obtained by these athletes, should be seen as a fundamental requirement for this group in social double vulnerability to feel belonging to the city.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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