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*Sports Science*

## Are there opportunities for women as head coaches in Brazil's national teams? The case of handball

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**Abstract - Aim:** This study aims to analyze the perceptions of women who hold leadership positions in sports on female participation as the head coach of the Brazilian women's handball national team. **Method:** We offer a qualitative case study. The collected data was through in-depth elite interviews. The interviewees' responses were analyzed and interpreted using the construction of categories. **Results:** The finds show perceptions of the categorization process. Three main categories emerged: 1) Prejudice. The interviewees affirm that the prejudice within the sport has been decreasing over the years. But it remains latent and continues to make difficult the continuity and rise of women in sports. 2) Professional and personal life. The interviewees affirm that Brazil is still a macho country, and even at a lower level, prejudice still exists in the universe of sports. The sport is known as a territory where men produce and demonstrate their masculinity; this favors the perception that coaches are usually men, having specific questions about the women's competence in that position, and that only men would be able to run teams. 3) Competence. The conciliation between family and professional life is a delicate situation, promotes conflicts, and does not favor the rise of women in positions of command. Nevertheless, the difficulty of reconciling personal and professional life, especially in high-performance sports, is necessary to leave home for extended periods for training or competition. **Conclusion:** The prejudice still is present despite its reduction over the years. The men domain the sports career, and for women, it is necessary to face the glass ceiling and prove their capacity constantly. Women's access to head coach teams, such as the Brazilian adult women's handball national team, is still a significant challenge.

**Keywords:** sport management, female, handball, command, underrepresentation.

### Introduction

Handball is a sport with significant participation of women in Brazil. Also, women's handball has attracted an increasing number of participants and is among the most practiced Olympic sports in Brazil. Furthermore, studies show that handball is the second most practiced sport in Brazil<sup>1</sup>. Some studies demonstrate a gradual increase in female participation in a leadership role in sport<sup>2-4</sup>. However, such positions in some areas are in those places that do not reach the top of the career. For example, the participation of women as head coaches of sports teams in colleges in the United States has consistently declined; however, the number of assistant coaches has steadily grown<sup>5</sup>. By 2014, the number of assistant coaches on female collegiate teams in the United States was 8645, representing 57% of all associate coaches; but the head coach position in women's teams was 4154, representing 43% of all coaches on women teams<sup>6</sup>. Thus, in theory, it could consider the

number of assistant coaches favorable since it would be a position that would precede the head coach role, but this has not taken place in recent years. In fact, from 1972 to 2006, there was a 90% decrease<sup>7</sup>.

A study by Shaw and Hoerber<sup>3</sup> in England found that men and male speeches strongly dominated the leadership functions in sports, highly valued in sports organizations. In contrast, it associates women and discourses of femininity with roles devalued within institutions. At the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, about 4,700 women represented their respective countries in 306 events. The participation of Brazilian women reached 44.9% of the athletes who competed in the Olympics: 209 women and 256 men. Delegations, such as China and the United States, brought female athletes outnumbered male athletes<sup>8</sup>. However, in sports leadership positions, women's participation is still low<sup>9-10</sup>. Thus, there is an excellent difficulty for women to access leading roles<sup>2</sup>. Studies show a women's underrepresentation at the leader-

ship level in high-performance sports served in a survey conducted in sports federations and confederations<sup>10</sup>. For Bourdieu<sup>11</sup>, ideological values about women's position in society are transmitted and reinforced through education. Incorporating the dominated habitus would favor the 'acceptance' of this masculine dominion in the places of command of the sport. The changes in women's living conditions were significant. However, they happened within the continuity of male domination since there is still a structural distance between men and women, with men continuing to occupy more privileged social positions<sup>11</sup>.

The history of Brazilian sports emancipation happened through masculine permission. However, by the force of habitus about women well demonstrated by Bourdieu, this inculcation process does not mean that it is passively accepted<sup>12</sup>. Women's performance as sports's head coaches compared to men is still very restricted. This author also records that sport played an essential role in female social participation<sup>9</sup>. However, one should note that women's achievements in this field were more due to individual effort or small groups than an inclusion policy<sup>13</sup>.

According to Devide<sup>14</sup>, when we look at the history of humankind, especially that of sport, we encounter innumerable times gender relations that revolve around the inequalities between men and women. We must return to gender differences rather than sex differences to understand these inequalities. The option of incorporating the gender issue into sports policies is relatively recent. It relates to the demands for research in the area, organized movements, and international organizations such as the International Olympic Committee<sup>15</sup>.

The issue of gender inequality continues to be a matter of concern and discussion. Women continue to play a subordinate role in society and family relations. As a result, some international bodies felt the need for a differentiated approach for women, not only from sustainable development but also concerning human rights<sup>16</sup>. For example, in Brazil, when we look at women's handball teams in 2018 (adult, junior, and infant), the head coaches are all men<sup>17</sup>. We did a survey between 2014 and 2021 on the website of the Brazilian Handball Confederation, analyzing 68 calls from the Brazilian women's Olympic team. We found that all the coaches were men. We also checked out the coach assistants, and only in 2014, there was a woman coaching assistant.

In the entire Olympic period in which Brazilian women's handball participated, we never had a female head coach. Regarding the technical commission, it was possible to retrieve information from the technical commission of the Olympics in Japan. Of the nine members, 3 were women (one doctor, one physiotherapist, and another nutritionist). In the Olympics in Brazil, of the nine members, 6 were women (1 doctor, 1 supervisor, 1 physiothe-

rapist, 1 120 massage therapist, 1 psychologist, 1 nutritionist). In 2014, during the training phase of the Olympic team, the technical committee was composed of 8 members, 6 of them women (1 supervisor, 1 doctor, 1 physiotherapist, 1 nutritionist, 1 physical trainer, and 1 psychologist). These data demonstrate that women are required less for head coaches or assistant coaches in almost all roles. Furthermore, it is essential to note that more women on the coaching staff have been reduced in recent calls.

This study aims to analyze the perceptions of women who hold a leadership role in sports on female participation as the head coach of the Brazilian adult women's handball team.

### Materials and methods

This study was approved by Ethical Committee Board of the Universidade Salgado de Oliveira, (CAAE number 60091616.6.0000.5289 and process number 1738471).

We offer a qualitative case study to analyze the perceptions of women on the Brazilian adult women's handball team. The collected data was through in-depth elite interviews, with questions that addressed sports trajectory, access to the coaching position, performance, difficulties encountered, reasons for remaining in the place, and perceptions regarding the absence of women in the command posts.

The participants' selection was intentional. The inclusion criterion in the sample was based on the choice of three women who worked in the Brazilian Adult Women's Handball team from 2000 to 2016. The three participants were on the Olympic technical commissions of the women's handball team. Still, none of them held the position of the head coach or assistant coach in these events, despite having also exercised the role of a coach in clubs in Brazil. The interviews were individual and previously scheduled on a date and time indicated. The interviewees' participation occurred voluntarily after explaining the objectives and procedures of the study and signing the Free and Informed Consent Term. The analysis of the interviewees' profile allows us to verify that despite the three women have had a long history within handball, successfully managing their clubs on the national scene, none of them held the position of the command of the top Brazilian women's handball team. They received invitations to be part of the primary groups, such as the children's and junior teams. Still, they were only included in the main team as supervisor (two) and assistant coach (one). All the interviewees have a degree in Physical Education and work in the area.

We used the following interview script: 1. Tell me about your trajectory in sport; 2. How did you become a coach?; 3. How was the transition from athlete to coach?; 4. What are the difficulties encountered in this journey?;

5. Do you believe that women face more problems?; 6. Why do you think about few women in leadership positions in sports?; 7. What do you think no woman has ever assumed the coach of the Brazilian women's handball team?; 8. What is it like to work with a woman/man on the technical committee?; 9. What message would you leave for a woman who wants to be a coach?; 10. Would you like to comment on anything else?

After the transcripts of the interviews, we analyzed and organized them into categories according to the importance of the meaning that the interviewees gave to the research questions, extracting meaning, understanding, and better interpreting the data to then compose the results. Because this is a continuous process of understanding, interpreting, and composing the results, the forms and phases of this knowledge production process could change during data collection due to the multiple views that may emerge from the problem<sup>19</sup>.

All the interviews were recorded in audio and transcribed in full to preserve the original content, thus increasing registration power to interpret better the data's meaning. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, we decided to replace their true identities with these expressions: Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, and Interviewee 3. The interviewees' responses were analyzed and interpreted using categories proposed by Bardin<sup>20</sup>. The interviews received a floating reading, where when reading the content, one is allowed to invade by impressions and orientations to detect common and relevant themes among the discourses. As the adopted technique presupposes, after the first reading, we established categories based on the interpretations of the answers using words, phrases, or themes considered relevant and guiding analysis, promising to reach the research objective.

The interviews were analyzed and organized into categories according to the interviewees' importance to the research questions, extracting meanings, understanding, and better interpretation of the data. Due to this continuous learning process, performance, and composition of results, the forms, and phases of this process of knowledge production could change during the data collection in the multiple views that emerged from the problem. Therefore, we asked respondents to evaluate the content of their responses and the interpretations made in the transcription process.

## Results and discussion

The interpretation's data occurred in a categorization process. The category construction was *a posteriori*, based on the semantic field the interviewees looked for to reflect their perceptions. In this way, three main categories emerged: 1) Prejudice, 2) Professional and personal life, and 3) Competence. The interviewees had a pass through the handball as athletes. Soon after, they began their

careers as techniques in clubs where they disputed numerous state and national championships, possessing several titles in the curriculum. The following are the reports that portray this moment of transition from the closing of the career of handball player and the beginning of the handball technique. The interviewees demonstrate that the transition in their career was a process woven during their phase as athletes. As they signaled the end of athletic life, they became more and more involved with their coaches and clubs<sup>21</sup>.

"I played in one category and worked in another category. I worked on the U-18 team and played for the adult. When the sponsorship was over, the athletes stopped playing. The adult team is gone. I continued working with the youth team"(Interviewee 1).

"I've always liked handball. I played a little but I was very dedicated. I was able to set up a very competitive team in a college. I was chosen to defend the city in regional and open games (In Portuguese, "Open Games/Jogos Abertos" means a type of tournament), later invited to work with the São Paulo team, later with the Brazilian female child selection [...]" (Interviewee 2).

"I did a little of everything and also played handball. I was always very skillful. I started to practice handball in college, I got involved with the team, and when I saw it was already the assistant coach of the team, and I stayed there since then ... then came the invitations to work in the Brazilian women's U-18 team and currently in the national team Brazilian female adult" (Interviewee 3).

Noticing the presence of former male athletes as coaches is ordinary. However, becoming a coach represents, for many athletes, a possibility of prolongation and continuity in the sport. The transition period of an athlete's career closure is inevitable and can become difficult; therefore, continuing in the sports environment can help better deal with this phase<sup>22</sup>. Leadership positions require a highly dedicated professional profile. Thus, we believe that this activity attracts a profile of women who can and want to save themselves entirely to work in the sports field. However, when questioned as to why no woman had taken on the head coach position of the Brazilian adult women's handball team, they could not answer the question directly but reported some difficulties. The following are the three main categories that have emerged in the speeches.

### *Category 1: prejudice*

The interviewees affirm that the prejudice within the sport has been decreasing over the years. But it remains latent and continues to make difficult the continuity and rise of women in sports. According to Oliveira<sup>23</sup>, club coaches carry out their work with great restraint, and even with all the advancement, there is still hesitation in hiring them. Interviewee 1 states that the cultural issue inserted in our society strengthens prejudice and that it is not present only in handball, but in all sports, especially in high-income sports. "That it has a cultural and prejudiced ques-

tion involved in it certainly has. Moreover, this is not just in handball. At the Olympic Games, how many female coaches did they have?" (Interviewee 1).

The Interviewee 2 is optimistic about a change in behavior regarding prejudice against women. Although she has suffered from discrimination, she believes there is progress in this picture by working together for men and women. "I suffered prejudice within the sport but stayed behind. I think nowadays not, of course, there is, but it is very little. Things are changing. Men who are working with women are going through this process as I told you to recognize, and the trend is to improve" (Interviewee 2).

The Interviewee 3 also notes an improvement in mistrust regarding female competence but affirms that there is still discrimination; she says that discrimination goes beyond sports and in all other work areas. "[...] how can a supervisory woman be? However, when a person happens to live together, she realizes why ... I think we are getting better at the level of competence, but the logical discrimination still exists for sure, but we still have discrimination in all jobs ... by who would not have in handball?" (Interviewee 3).

Discriminatory culture about women in leadership positions pervades the interviewees' discourse. These perceptions corroborate the studies conducted by Whisenant et al.<sup>24</sup> and Souza and Knijnik<sup>25</sup>, reflecting on the difficulties and barriers encountered by women to ascend to higher positions in society. However, the interviewees' discourse shows some optimism, even though they recognize the barriers. A study carried out in Israel highlights the nature of the obstacles faced by women in terms of their participation in decision-making in sports and proposes some strategies to overcome them. Betzer-Tayara et al.<sup>26</sup> focus on creating the National Volleyball Academy for talented young people as a significant successful political initiative for women to rise to higher sports positions.

Actions like these have contributed to lessening the inequality of opportunities in some countries. However, as mentioned before<sup>7</sup>, sometimes the number of women as assistant coaches increases, but the number of head coaches decreases. Why such disparaging tendencies? Domain structures build strategies, while groups that do not belong to these structures make resistance tactics. In this case, there is increasing pressure from women who want to ascend to the head coach position. As a result, they have reinforced the position of assistant coach, which will inevitably produce tension that will imply a restructuring of opportunities for women to access the role of head coach.

In Brazil, the case of women's football is emblematic. A foreign head coach took charge of the adult team, breaking a historical hegemony. In Brazil, there are initiatives such as the National School of Basketball Coaches, promoted by the Brazilian Basketball Confederation, and a training program for the Brazilian Volleyball Confedera-

tion coaches. However, there are several isolated initiatives in handball, but officially nothing is done. At this moment, to reduce inequality in opportunities, could actions be centralized in the Brazilian Handball Confederation?

The National Football League (NFL) uses the Rooney Rule. This rule says that when hiring coaches, at least one of the candidates to be interviewed must be from an ethnic minority<sup>27</sup>. Discussing the possibility of creating a rule along the lines of the Rooney Rule can bridge the gap between men and women that exists in head coach positions in Brazil. This affirmative action would accompany other activities in Brazil in other areas. Institutional regulation must be accompanied by studies that verify the change in the current scenario. The English Football Association (soccer) has been using the principles of the Rooney Rule<sup>27</sup>.

### *Category 2: competence*

The interviewees affirm that Brazil is still a macho country, and even at a lower level, prejudice still exists in the universe of sports. The sport is known as a territory where men produce and demonstrate their masculinity; this favors the perception that coaches are usually men, having specific questions about women's competence in that position and that only men would be able to run teams<sup>28</sup>. In this sense, Ferreira et al.<sup>29</sup> argue that the questioning of female capacity in command positions is one of the products of male domination, influencing the closure of this space for women. Interviewee 1 states that the sexist culture influences society's thinking about women's competence in sports management. Also, she still compares the character of the woman coach to the man coach by exposing that she believes the man is very political and the woman is more honest.

"Our biggest problem, apart from the culture that leads to this side that the woman does not have a pulse, that the woman does not have competence, that the woman is soft heart, despite all this, I believe much more in the woman when she has the competence as a coach than the man himself, much more so with some things, honestly, the man I think he is very political" (Interviewee 1).

The machismo still present in our society favors a devaluation of women's competence, thinking them incapable of acting in times of conflict. "The machismo of even thinking that we will not know how to deal with situations, that we are not aggressive, that we are not firm, that we are very emotional, that we are not right" (Interviewee 2).

The competence of the technical woman is questioned and demerited. The expression "lack of emotional balance of the woman" is used as an excuse for them not to assume command positions since, in crucial situations, they wouldn't prepare. "Another thing I also heard a lot is that the woman does not have the emotional balance; you cannot make quick decisions in a conflict" (Interviewee 3).



It is a fact that women are faced with distrust of their competence and must prove that they deserve to occupy such a position. The explanation for this fact lies in the cultural association of authority with masculinity<sup>30</sup>.

Bourdieu<sup>11</sup> reinforces that it is fundamental to ask what are the historical mechanisms responsible for the de-historicization and eternalization of the social division between man and woman within the structures of society. For him, the church, school, family, and in other orders, journalism, and sport build a system of co-optation that produces, installs, reinforces, and maintains different structures of domination. For us, what Bourdieu says is essential to understand the importance of seeing history as not a natural element but as a social construction that needs to be discussed and analyzed.

### *Category 3: personal and professional life*

The conciliation between family and professional life is a delicate situation, promotes conflicts, and does not favor the rise of women in positions of command. Nevertheless, the difficulty of reconciling personal and professional life, especially in high-performance sports, is necessary to leave home for extended periods for training or competition.

“There is another problem that is the social problem of women. The woman most of the time has a family has all these things; it is complicated to find a companion who understands even. If the woman has a husband and is in command of any team, it is difficult he understands so much time off to the sport; all this ... it is already allowed to man” (Interviewee 1).

Women still give up the professional rise in favor of motherhood. In this situation, the charge is much higher for the mothers than for the fathers. For them, the phase of motherhood must be full of dedication, and with this attitude, they accept and reinforce the division of social roles. One factor in the interviews about this notorious difference is the society's view of women, the maternal side, care, patience, and understanding with children and adolescents<sup>31</sup>. Since the nineteenth century, many books have made recommendations for women. These writings used expressions such as “noble mission”, “responsible for the regeneration of society”, among others, to define the role of women. These ideas still manifest themselves in discourses in the present time<sup>12</sup>. “A manager will not give a selection team to a woman, the woman sometimes married, has a husband, sometimes has a child or wants to have a child, will give a selection, and in a little, while she goes change, there is the personal side of the woman too, I think those sides are what they take”(Interviewee 2).

Although women's participation in the Olympic movement is 100 years old. Even with the increasing presence of women in each edition of the Games, the low frequency of women leaders in sport remains and can be explained, in addition to other sociocultural factors, by the

barriers that the male leaders erect systematically and naturally<sup>23</sup>. In the interviewees' speech, there is significant dissatisfaction with the opportunities given to them. They are experienced and competent women who have always been in renowned teams and, in addition to disputing all the national championships, still conquered several titles. Moreover, they have always been present on the committees of the Brazilian women's national team. Still, they feel unworthy and show some anger when questioned about why they have not taken command posts. The interviewees are aware that women are gaining their space within the handball but emphasized that this happens in the face of much work and constant proof of their competence, questioned several times.

Despite the recent achievements and the increase of women in the labor market, there is still marked segregation in jobs, organizations, and salary inequality, causing a hierarchical bottleneck in which women are in smaller proportions as the attributions increase of leadership and command organizations<sup>32</sup>. The glass ceiling concept was introduced in the 1980s in the United States to describe a barrier that is so subtle, transparent, but strong enough to make it impossible for women to rise to higher levels of the organizational hierarchy. The glass ceiling is an expression already consecrated in the studies of gender and women<sup>33</sup>. Claims that women have broken glass ceilings and enter and ascend in male reserves are insufficient<sup>33</sup>. Studies show that few women hold positions in senior management in large corporations<sup>32,35</sup>. The sports field is one of the most hegemonic in society concerning gender issues<sup>24</sup>. Women struggle hard to secure a place in the world of sports, overcoming various adversities such as the hierarchical prestige of men, less exposure in the media, and lower awards that high-end athletes receive about men<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, gender equality has become a pursued goal within the sport. Because of this goal, the 2020 Olympic Agenda included forty strategic recommendations to shape the future of the Olympic Movement: the promotion of gender equality<sup>16</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

Reconciling personal life with work life is still a combination that challenges those interviewed in this study. In an attempt to escape this pressure, a new profile of women is in construction. This realization is understandable when we understand that working with high-performance sports requires a great deal of time, which ultimately attracts a profile of women who can and want to dedicate themselves entirely to the sports sector. When entering the sports environment, women perceive difficulties in ascension and continuity due to some barriers. Some have felt more of these barriers than others, and even with an increase in certain aspects, such barriers continue to hamper women's entire development and involve-

ment. There is a notable increase in the number of women in Olympic competitions, but this did not lead to an equal division of women's power and influence in the command positions of the sport. It seems that the null performance of women as head coach of the Brazilian women's handball selection occurs due to a set of factors. In this study, the emphasis was on prejudice, mistrust of women's competence, and the difficulty in reconciling personal and professional life as factors that hinder the opportunity and the rise of women to coach the Brazilian women's handball team. As for prejudice, sometimes mentioned, we perceived that it still exists despite its reduction over the years. The men dominate the sports career, and for women, it is necessary to constantly face the “glass ceiling” and prove their capacity. As for the distrust of the woman's competence, we observed that this factor was uncomfortable in Brazil. A woman has many more charges than a man. She has to continually prove that she can command, be firm when necessary, and control her emotions. Women's access to a head coach is still a significant challenge, such as in the Brazilian adult women's handball team. Nevertheless, we perceived that woman in sports are searching for recognition, respect, and equality of opportunity, especially to occupy positions of command, free of any prejudice or resistance against those who hold power. In Brazil, the participation rate of women is much lower than that of men in coaching sports teams, especially handball. The many reasons for this gender gap can be grouped as practical, personal and social, and cultural. A list of barriers can also contain ideas for high-ranking sports officials of Brazil to implement to encourage and enable women and girls to coach sports teams.

### Recommendations

Based on the International Olympic Committee's Gender Equality and Inclusion Report 2021, this section presents some suggestions<sup>36</sup>.

#### *Practical barriers*

For instance: Lack of time & lack of childcare. Women commonly take up caregiving roles which may explain the settings where they mostly practice sport. For example, women tend to have less leisure time than men as they take on the greater burden of responsibility for housework, childcare, and care of elderly or infirm relatives. For this purpose, provide crèche facilities or classes for toddlers and children, so that the women can bring their children along when they go to exercise.

#### *Personal barriers*

For instance: Lack of self-confidence. Girls, on average, have less self-confidence than boys and rate their performance or ability more negatively than do boys. It is recommended for this purpose, where competition is a key

component of an activity or sport, to ensure women have the chance to coach at appropriate levels against teams or individuals of a similar standard.

#### *Social and cultural barriers*

For instance: Attitudes and prejudices about ethnicity. Commonly, the gap between men's and women's coaches in sports is significant among some minority ethnic groups.

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