Media Representations of Heroism Among Argentinean Women Footballers

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the relations of gender and culture portrayed in the media surrounding Argentine women's football. Through an ethnography of Argentine media, we explore the interactions between society and the cultural meaning of the Argentinean women's football team that, during the World Cup in France 2019, took different paths of action: first, their recognition of a patriarchal society; second, their coming together and promoting leadership; and third, their heroic actions promoting transformation. This championship led to various media narratives of the players as "heroines." It is from this imposed identity that we examine their circumstances, understanding that as the representations of football players change—they are now seen as heroines, agents of influence (Hogg), or leaders (Pestana and Codina)—their achievements contribute to the enhancement of collective national pride. This study's analysis is based on social media posts and news, qualitative interviews, and archival documentation from which it is possible to observe that new media narratives proclaim women's football as a non-binary profession, empowering women's success at the local and national levels.

Keywords: collective heroism, media, women footballers, Argentina

Although Argentina is seen as fertile land for women's football, this idea has been overshadowed by a national and international image of men's football fueled by world-renowned figures considered as national heroes such as Diego Maradona, Gabriel Batistuta, and Lionel Messi. For a long time, the only information about women's teams has been presented from a binary, sexist, and, in many cases, misogynistic perspective, as Eduardo Archetti, anthropologist and sociologist, illustrates: "Football . . . does not belong only to the general dimensions of a society and culture, but, at the same time, it is related to the construction of a masculine order and world, of an area, in principle, reserved for men" (7).

This article, developed from a perspective based on media, social psychology, and gender (Gomáriz Moraga; Sissa; Butler), seeks to track the focus of this ethnographic study on the Argentine media by examining the representations of women's football from its beginnings to the present. The study focuses on the idea of the emergence of a "collective heroism" as popularized by the media. Following different authors (such as Toni Bruce and Dunja Antunovic; Sara Banet-Weiser et al.), we begin with the idea that football players create spaces (on and off the field of play) of empowerment and transformation in a post-feminist context.

For this qualitative study, we developed an ethnographic design whose distribution of themes and sub-themes are presented as follows: the first section addresses methodological aspects of the study; the second section introduces the theoretical framework presented as the patriarchal society outlining the global tendencies regarding women football players; the last section tackles women's sports in Argentina, where the cultural and social aspects of the South American country are presented. This section highlights the scope of the coups d'etat in Argentina in the lives of sportswomen. In that context, the patriarchal and binary view of the role of women is reinforced by political and religious views naturalizing the exclusion of sportswomen. We examine these moments of exclusion by looking at sexist narratives in Argentine media. In comparison to these narratives, we also analyze gender perspectives on the pitch, where the team's actions—as observed in their interactions and roles—are translated into playing for joy. The third section presents the interviewees' voices, leading to a discussion on pride, recognition, and support for sportswomen as portrayed in Argentine media, bringing us to the visibility and reappropriation of women's footballers.

Interpretive Research on Football

This exploratory study with an ethnographic and critical design takes off from a gender perspective. As interpretive research, the implemented methodology includes an ethnographic point of view and unstructured interviews with journalists, football players, and experts in the area, as well as documentary analyses as the main research tools. This work follows the recommendations of Richard Torraco, a longtime researcher on community college leadership and human resource development, as it compiles existing articles that represent the data from an integrative review. For the analysis of the use of the terms "heroine" and/or "heroines," social psychologist Harris Cooper recommends using informal, primary, and secondary information channels as search terms.

The interviews in this study were conducted online between May 2019 and December 2021. The general orientation of the research adopted a gender perspective as defined by the sociologist Enrique Gomáriz Moraga: one that opts

for an epistemological conception that approaches reality from the perspectives of the genders and their power relations.

The second stage—a documentary analysis of the treatment of women's football by the media in Argentina between 2019 and 2020—was guided by the sampling of sports newspapers and publications that introduced football heroines and a search for published articles on women's football that could be categorized under the topics "heroism" and "heroine/s."

The third stage involved reflecting on the concept of heroism in media through a qualitative study of the data collected in the documentary analysis as well as the interviewees' answers.

Women's Sports in Argentina

In the Argentina of Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi—considered national heroes as a result of their achievements, awards, and international fame for having won the World Cup in 1986 and 2022, respectively—women's sports have been invisible for most of the country's history. For a better understanding of sports and women in Latin America in general, and Argentina in particular, it is essential to delve into their origins (Arbena). Historian Joseph Arbena and sociologist David LaFrance point out that contemporary sports in Latin America and the Caribbean evolved from three sources: indigenous games and recreation, activities introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, and those distinctly modern sports that have come as part of the outward spread of the North Atlantic community, primarily England or the United States (25). For example, Argentine state artisans "promote[d] physical education for girls very early, in 1839" (Saraví Rivière 25). Later, in 1870, Francisco Antonio Berra, a historian and educator from Argentina, published a physical education text stating that physical education is as important for girls as it is for boys. Berra suggested that physical education for girls was a way to prevent nervous conditions in women, as well as deadly diseases such as tuberculosis (qtd. in Santiago Harispe 28).

The first recorded women's football match played in Argentina happened on October 13, 1923 between the teams "Argentines" and "Cosmopolitans." The newspapers *La Vanguardia* (from Spain), and *Crítica* (from Argentina) published news about the event. At that time, women's football had acquired unprecedented international popularity.

Years passed and during Perón's first government in Argentina, "[s]ports spaces were opened for the working class and more opportunities were provided to women, giving them the opportunity to practice and learn elite sports" such as polo

(Elsey and Nadel 24). While the state supported physical activities for women and girls at times, there was also backlash from some parents and conservative activists who boycotted sports practices for women as they considered them dangerous to women's health. According to historian Patricia Anderson (2009), the debates were contradictory and biased, often emanating from renowned institutions such as the University of Buenos Aires, where certain researchers recommended that women stop all sports activities with the onset of menstruation. In that sense, the historians Brenda Elsey and Joshua Nadel state: "The effects of girls' physical fitness on their fertility and future motherhood were at the center of public and expert debates" (10).

Theoretical Framework

In order to analyze the media portrayals of female football players in Argentina, we start from the social psychology of the media. Social cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura argues that "social cognitive theory provides an agentic conceptual framework within which to analyses the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human thought, affect and action" (265). More precisely, Bandura argues that social cognitive theory extends the conception of human agency to collective agency. People's shared belief in their collective power to produce desired results is a key ingredient of collective agency. Group achievements are the product not only of the shared intentions, knowledge, and skills of its members, but also of the interactive, coordinated, and synergistic dynamics of their transactions.

From the foregoing, it is understood that the conversation surrounding women's football in Argentina is constituted by ideas and beliefs that suggest that this sport has long been considered a "natural" masculine practice, symbolically expressing male traits. Female sports, on the other hand, have been associated with emotion (e.g., greater sensitivity and expression of feelings), reproduction (i.e., motherhood), family obligations (e.g., women as wives and caregivers), and behavioral expectations (e.g., femininity and modesty). Many of these gender stereotypes are naturalized and promoted by leading sports institutions, thereby influencing people's perception of the sports.

A clear example of the naturalization of football as a masculine sport is the response of Joseph Blatter, then-President of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), to the question of whether women footballers should be dressed in sexier clothes (with shorter shorts and tighter t-shirts) as was previously announced by Blatter. He stated, "This is a twenty-year-old question. Let women play the sport. And let them play it most attractively when they use their personal and genetic attributes. How they dress is not so important" (qtd. in Dure).

Blatter refers to the viewer's desires to see an "attractive" women's sport. He directly links gender with sex, insinuating that women should emphasize their femininity so the sport can be aesthetically pleasing. A similar strategy was used by the German Football Federation (DFB) to promote the 2011 World Cup in their country: "The beautiful side of 20 ELEVEN." This is the same idea as Blatter's: "Be professionals, but please don't lose your femininity" (qtd. in Dure). According to Blatter, in order to increase the sport's popularity, women should play with more feminine clothes such as those worn by volleyball players; with tighter shorts, women are more beautiful. Blatter also considered implementing different rules for women, such as the use of a lighter ball.

This masculinity so heavily rooted in the football pitch and the institutionalization of sexist opinions could be analyzed using French philosopher Luce Irigaray's examination of women's bodies perceived and presented as objects: Marx's views on merchandise as the basic form of capitalist wealth gives meaning to the marketing of women, in which feminine bodies are the exchange value for relations between men. According to Irigaray, "The merchandise, women, are reflections of the value of/for men" (53).

Despite these tendencies to make football and the female players more attractive, the Women's World Cup 2019, held in France, was the most media-covered sports competition featuring women to date. Thus, the demands of female footballers were brought to the world's attention: equality in a sport in which the heroes are men. Alluding to the World Cup, the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published a cover in June 2019 with the image of a football entering female genitals, along with the caption, "We're going to eat it up this month." There were, however, improvements in the coverage of the World Cup as a result of the effort of organizations such as *Pateando Mandatos: fútbol, comunicación y mujeres* (To kick mandates: football, communication and women), a space founded by professors and students of Communication Sciences from the National University of Salta, Argentina. Based on the idea that language and mass media construct reality, they decided to draw up a list of dos and don'ts so the media coverage of the French 2019 Women's World Cup incorporated a gender perspective. In addition, in a 2022 interview with us, a representative of the International Network of Journalists with a Gender Perspective in Argentina explained that they also presented recommendations based on "gender perspectives" for journalists in their news productions.

Those recommendations on gender perspectives still play an important role since women's sports have grown in visibility and professionalism. At the same time, sportswomen have been subjected to stigmatizing control measures (based on the actions taken by FIFA), such as sexual verification. For instance, in 2015, FIFA forced

female players to pass a gender test before competing in the World Cup ("Fútbol Femenino Más Sexy"; Salas). More specifically, FIFA specified that they sought to ensure the soccer players were of the "correct sex" (Borras). In FIFA's document "Regulations: Gender Verification":

> For FIFA women's competitions, only women are eligible to play. Each participating member association shall ensure the correct gender of all the players to be considered for such nomination by actively investigating any perceived deviation in secondary sex characteristics and keeping complete documentation of the findings. (7)

This rule imposed by FIFA is based on the idea that a man has an advantage when competing against a woman. It also indicates that football is rooted in the antipodes of dominant sexist masculinity and this is confirmed by different studies such as those of sport scientist Jayne Caudwell's, which analyzes women's football in the UK, delving into the role of sex, gender, and desire; sports media scholar Roxane Coche's analysis of women's football in the USA and its promotion through social media; sports author Carrie Dunn's work on young women's football participation in the sport and promotion of elite female players; Hallmann et al.'s study on the influence of spectators on the behavioral intentions of women's national football games; Mintert and Pfister's work on the feminization of football in Europe; Peeters and van Sterkenburg's reading of race/ethnicity and gender in televised football in the UK; German historian Gertrud Pfister's study combining women's football and European integration in the European Union and its impacts on national identity, gender, and socialization; Valenti et al.'s analysis featuring an integrative review of women's football studies; and Schallhorn et al.'s study evoking the differences in motives of those who watch football in relation to their gender/sex.

These academic works on women, media, and sports have generated results in different areas of study—from the representations of "female sport" in social media (Toffoletti and Thorpe), the study of women's socialization in sports communities (Heinecken; Rodríguez Castro et al.), to the messages promoting gender violence against sportswomen (Kavanagh et al.). The process of excluding women in sports can also be observed in social studies of sports in Argentina. Until recently, there was limited academic research on the role of women in sports. In the case of football, the publications of various authors from Argentina are worth mentioning. Argentinean sociologist Pablo Alabarces based his work on the construction of masculinities through sport and its mediatic reports (1985, 2001, 2003). Other studies are on football supporters focusing on the public and fans reactions and behaviors (Alabarces; Alabarces et al.; Alabarces and Zucal) or specifically about experiences of female football players in Argentina (Binello and Domino; Binello et al.; Conde and Rodriguez; Branz; Janson; Alvarez Litke; Garton).

Dictatorship and the Exclusion of Female Athletes

Sexist narratives about women's football throughout history illustrate the lack of equity policies in many countries (Williams and Hess). Sometimes, this is related to the political situation of each nation, specifically in terms of human rights and policies on gender and diversity.

To better understand the context in which women's football has progressed in Argentina, it is essential to bear in mind that the country has gone through periods of political and economic instability and coups d'état, which have reinforced the patriarchy and woman's role as a wife, mother, and caregiver. "The military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, which restricted civic associations and promised a return to traditional gender roles, undermined the progress made in women's sports in the late 1980s" (Elsey and Nadel 10).

The last military dictatorship in Argentina— from 1976 to 1983— could not be compared to what had occurred in previous coups (Palermo and Novaro). The military regime of Jorge Videla, calling itself the "National Reorganization Process," resulted in political instability that involved kidnapping, imprisonment, torture, and murder, causing the exile of tens of thousands of people who were not sympathetic to the military regime. Faced with this bloody dictatorship, a group of women decided to confront it, thus demonstrating remarkable resistance in 1977: the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. However, beyond that manifest desire for the apolitical, the movement of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo as Barrancos pointed out,

> was covered with all the characteristics of political agency every time they questioned the public powers, stubbornly demanded and built substantial senses of resistance to the runaway State. The strategy of 'maternal consecration' is not new in the history of the fight for women's rights and the group of Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo inadvertently built a very forceful complaining politicism. (Barrancos 33)

Situated in this context of tense relations and military domination, one of the peculiarities of the dictatorship is that it had inherited the organization of a sports tournament awarded to Argentina in 1966. Given this, the military regime decided to use the 1978 Football World Cup for its political benefit. The instrumentalization of a sport, specifically football, was related to its enemy, the left and popular political movements such as Peronism. More precisely, the eleventh edition of the Football World Cup was held in the Argentina of Videla, an era of military dictatorship considered to be the bloodiest in the country's history when more than

30,000 people disappeared, including 500 babies who were stolen from detainees and given to military supporters (Rae 324). In this context of State violence and violation of human rights, female sports practices were also affected by the regime (Pujol) since women had to submit to the patriarchal regulations of the regime, taking on roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers.

The reactions against this particular World Cup and its projection in the national press has also been the subject of studies in different countries: in Argentina, by the graphic designer Almeida; in Germany, by the researcher Havemann; in Japan by the historian Jiménez Botta; in Israel, by the historians Rein and Davidi; in Italy by literature scholar Cattarulla; and in the Netherlands by researcher Ilse Schuurmans.

Athletes' Voices and Rights

As mentioned above, although there are many studies related to women's football, the pioneer in documenting and analyzing Argentine women's football is sociologist Adolfina Janson, whose publications of interviews with the players distinguished two stages in the history of Argentine women's football: the first, that of "playing for the sake of playing" (239), or football as an informal practice and a game for pleasure; the second, "playing for real" (239), which began in 1990 with the formalization of women's football by FIFA.

Elsey and Nadel look at the history of Argentine women's football, accounting for the challenges it encountered and progress it has made. In 1959, the magazine *Goles* (Scores) dedicated an exceptionally ample space to a meeting between female footballers' teams. One of the main stories was titled, "They play, argue and come to blows like men." In the article, the journalists argue that "Women invade football." The piece explains that the meeting was a football match organized with a charitable objective and there were certain tensions between the players.

In the 1960s, several women's football matches were played between clubs. There is a film record of a match played in 1964, and a year later a match between Club Atlético Tigre and the Alberdi Cultural Center. Tigre's team was considered one of the best women's teams of the time and five of its players would participate in the World Cup in Mexico in 1971.

At the beginning of the '70s, only a few institutions in the Argentine capital accepted women football players, while in other parts of the country, exhibition matches and tours of women's teams were organized by local businessmen. On the second edition of the Women's World Cup in 1971, there was a lack of official momentum but the selected players gathered to represent Argentina won fourth place. In the mid-1980s, FIFA decided to promote women's football and as part of

that process, the first Women's World Cup was held in China in 1991, and the first Women's South American Championship in Brazil, in 1991. The conditions were generally poor: sometimes women played on dirt courts, improvising goals was at times required, and most of the players wore sneakers—except for the World Cup players, who had been given football shoes.

Between 1985 and 1986, a series of championships and friendly matches in women's football took place. In 1986, the Argentine Women's Football Association (AAFF) was created and Doña Tota, Diego Maradona's mother, was presented as the godmother of honor. The AAFF was an independent group from the AFA that would organize metropolitan championships and, despite its amateur nature, would pay the participation expenses to play international matches. It was within this framework and previous AAFF experience that on October 27, 1991, the first official women's football tournament organized by the AFA—the Women's Football Championship—began in Argentina. This new page in the story of female football opened up new possibilities and gave way to their greater visibility. This tournament involved the participation of eight teams, ultimately crowning Club Atlético River Plate the winner. Then, in 1997, there was a notable increase in the number of clubs registered for the tournament, from only nine teams that had participated in the previous edition to 22. By 1998, the number of participants rose to 36, so the AFA had to reform the tournament by dividing them into groups. In those days, the most important matches were broadcast on the cable channel *Siempre Mujer* (Always Women). In 2000, a South American Club Championship was played in Peru, with the participation of two Argentine teams. Although it was not an official tournament, several champion teams from South America participated in it and could thus be considered a precedent for what would later become the *Copa Libertadores Femenina* (Women's Libertadores Cup). The professionalization of women's football in 2019, together with the greater spread and popularity it acquired in recent years, is a historical fact that seems to mark the beginning of a new era.

The historian Joseph Arbena and the sociologist David LaFrance point out, "Professionalization also fostered unionization, codification of contract law, and player welfare legislation. In truth, despite the higher earnings of selective players, at least in football, baseball, and boxing, such efforts protected few athletes from exploitation" (xiii). It was in the 2019–2020 season when the AFA professionalized women's football, a regulation that consisted of financing between eight and 11 professional contracts per team, so they could play in the First Division tournament. In addition to the beginning of the sport's professionalization in November 2019, the Reserve Women's Championship was held for the first time. According to the AFA, the initiative intended to promote the training of young football players. Until now, no club indirectly affiliated with the AFA has been able to participate

in official tournaments. No Argentine team has managed to reach the finals of the Copa Libertadores and there is still a marked difference between the capital (Buenos Aires City) clubs and the rest of the country's teams. The Argentine Women's Football Association (AAFF) estimates that around one million women practice football in the national territory.

Aside from the annual budget that FIFA grants for the financing of training and different competitions, to date, players do not have financial support from clubs or the AFA. This fact gained attention during the qualifiers for the 2019 football championship as the media listened to the statements of football players and began to make their claims heard. The demands for a salary revision remain; only the strongest local teams like Boca, River, or San Lorenzo offer the players a job or a house and pay for their travel expenses. In many cases, it is the players themselves who finance their own health costs, training spaces, transfers, or equipment. This has caused players to organize and claim their rights as athletes.

"I started when I was very young, and I had to leave when I was [nine] or 10 years old because they didn't allow me to play with boys," Boca Junior player Martina Dezotti explains to a local newspaper ("Jugar en Primera"). Dezotti makes it clear that the visibility given to the players in the media is not enough and sometimes even responds to a sexist and binary gaze.

Sexist Narratives in Argentine Media

According to Alabarces in "Heroes, Machos and Patriots," football in Argentina had long worked as a strong representation of nationality; therefore, it is inextricably linked to the nation. In that sense, Alabarces and Zucal identify masculine national narratives in football, whose development throughout the twentieth century until the present is as much due to stories published in private mass media as those of the State. However, the narratives have been diversifying, giving rise to new voices and granting new spaces to women's football. Thus, the analysis based on a gender perspective emphasizes gender-based differences in status and power as suggested by Gomáriz Moraga. He argues that the question of gender is not another chapter in the history of culture, but rather that unequal relations between genders affect the production and reproduction of discrimination, manifesting in concrete ways in all areas of culture: work, family, politics, organizations, art, business, health, science, sexuality, and history. That is why the insufficient representation of women in media narratives has maintained the privileged place given to men's football rather than women's football.

In the few records that exist of women football players, we found there were concrete actions throughout history that sought to promote this sport played by

women. The most renowned and iconic sports magazine in Argentina, *El Gráfico* (The Graphic), was founded in 1919 and played an important role in the publication of the first images of sportswomen. Its contribution allowed many historians and researchers to investigate women in sports at the beginning of the century. These images were accompanied by a sexist narrative of the game written by the poet Bernardo Canal Feijóo, who described the match played by women footballers as follows: "The tackles entangled the players in an unacceptable lesbian embrace. In the meantime, as in a reserved alcove, all of them were obliged to rest vigorously on the stadium grass. . . ." In addition, from 1919 to 1930, fifteen percent of the covers of *El Gráfico* featured women; "the frequency with which sportswomen appeared far exceeded that of any similar publication on the continent" (Elsey and Nadel 25).

Faced with this, Alabarces in *Score Danger* argues that the male overrepresentation in Argentine football is so oppressive that it displaces the possibility of the existence of women's football. In other words, the macho narrative accompanied by images, voices, and distinctions (such as prizes and recognitions) contributed to the invisibility of women's football, deepening gender inequalities in both football and publications about it.

Today in Argentina, the vast majority of media sports coverage is dedicated to men's football, a phenomenon which, since the 1990s, has increased (Gil; Jaimerena). According to our interviewee, Lorena Jaimerena, a journalist and former footballer with the Argentinean national football team, "Media coverage is disproportional compared with the same sport played by men. The lack of training in perspectives of gender for journalists often violates the content when it comes to providing information."

In a similar vein, sociologist Rosalind Gill argues that gender-centered approaches in communications, film, and media studies have highlighted the fact that modern societies are stratified along the lines of gender, race/ethnicity, and class. Nowadays, in the process of taking possession of the pitch and the stadium, women players are defending their ability to play the game their way, in spaces of individual and collective enjoyment—spaces that had previously been prohibited from them. Beatriz Fainholc, researcher and doctor in education, notes, "Social communication media as conservative social forces favor women becoming the delightful 'picturesque spectacle'" (12). Thus, by playing this sport and contributing to its exposure, it is clear that women football players have helped football expand across the globe, contributing to "the footballization of society" (Losson and Villepreux). This "footballization" is also represented in media and today encompasses the challenge of denaturing gender roles and stereotypes in a field dominated by patriarchy. The work of Julia Wood, a professor of Communication Studies and Humanities, is key

to understanding the scope of gender perspective in this study: "individuals who internalize and embody cultural prescriptions for gender reinforce existing social views. People who reject conventional prescriptions and step outside of social meanings for gender often provoke changes in cultural views" (24), as is the case for female players.

Gender Perspective on the Pitch

Gender is central to cultural life and we argue that sport is part of culture, echoing Wood's views that "society's views of gender are reflected in and promoted by a range of social structures and practices" (30). Wood notes that one of the primary practices that structures society is communication: "We are surrounded by communication that announces social views of gender and seeks to persuade us that these are natural, correct ways for men and women to be and to behave" (30).

In the case of Argentinean football, the movement on the pitch and the way scores have been celebrated have been exposed throughout history from a male perspective. According to the sociologist Gabriela Garton, these aspects "are constructed as characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. The embodiment of these qualities (this type of movement and scores' celebrations) by women becomes stigmatized" (14). In this sense, authors like Cox and Thompson point out that when playing the sport, women footballers face contradictory discourses about their bodies; "the sports discourse postulates that the body must be physically powerful, while the heteronormative discourse constructs the feminine body as weak and passive" (8).

Many women players agree that they have to really want to play because this desire to play is what gives them joy. For Marta Antúnez, former athlete, physical education teacher, coach, and president of the National Council of Sports and Women (Argentina), the national team faced several obstacles, closures, and breaks since the '90s when the international representation began. In a 2020 personal exchange with us, she stated, "The scenario for female football players is changing. After having gone through so many obstacles, we can say that today there are more rights, greater visibility. For this to happen, several situations had to converge." The foregoing is reflected in National Team Captain Estefanía Banini's statement to the media:

> Without a doubt, football is a reflection of society and the progress of a country. In Argentina, unfortunately, we are falling behind. We have to change sexist mentalities, both in men and women. We are all so used to fighting against discrimination, inequality, and a lack of resources, that today we are stronger. We are very united, and we are warriors, and this will drive us when up against great teams. (qtd. in Portiglia)

For Alabarces, the principal obstacle to creating a "feminine" patriotic narrative comes from the notion that Argentina's values are essentially masculine: virility, machismo, bravery, and perseverance sustained through pain and resistance to defeat, amongst others. According to Antúnez, personally interviewed for this study in 2022, in Argentina, sports are undervalued and show the lack of policies as "[t]he national sport lags behind in times and actions with the sport of women, both in representation and in training, there is no serious task with girls, adolescents." Other researchers have analyzed the construction of masculinity in football but focus on violence, sociability, and morality between fans (Garriga Zucal).

Women's football, and the support of its fans from the grandstand to social media, is growing stronger. On the other hand, despite a recent increase in women's participation—as professional or amateur footballers or fans—the stigma of the "tomboy" prevails, and their sexuality is questioned (Janson; Garton).

Journalist Daniela Lichinizer, however, sees encouraging progress. In a personal exchange with us in 2021, she said, "People are respecting women footballers more. Before, they used men's old clothes. Now they have their own kit. To be paid a salary and seen as workers is a big step forward. There is still a lot to do at a sports and social level, as people still say women's football is bad."

According to Mónica Santino—former professional player, physical education teacher, and sports journalist interviewed for this study in 2021—the Argentine players who participated in the 2019 World Cup in France were considered heroines because "they produced the best performance of a national team in the most important tournament in the world; until that moment they went through thousands of obstacles individually and collectively." For Santino, the capacity of a female football player was never believed because they never had enough support to develop as athletes.

In 2020, the AFA presented its Integrated Strategy for 2021–2025, an ambitious five-year plan centered on the country's clubs, teams, and National Licenses (FIFA). Along these lines, Antúnez argues that in order to provoke changes in women's football, a sportswoman's enjoyment is "fundamental, not only in football but in all sports activities."

Santino, on the other hand, emphasizes, "A true sports policy that can be developed in all areas, state and private (clubs, children's associations, groups), requires support and above all, in these countries especially, seek an end to the stereotypes of male sport / female."

"I chose heroines"

Lichinizer recalls that her article, "*Heroínas Igual*" ("Heroines Anyway"), was published the day after the Argentinean National Women's Football Team was eliminated from the World Cup 2019. She explains via personal communication with the authors:

> I chose 'Heroines,' yes, I chose to headline the article 'Heroines' in reference to all the conquests that these women footballers and this team had achieved, despite not going forward in the World Cup. They are heroines because history changed for women's football in Argentina after what they accomplished over there (France) and right here (Argentina).

Santino, who was following the event in 2019, added an interesting point regarding the media portrayals during the World Cup: "Those days, the press dealt with women's football in Argentina like never before and it was also the time of sports journalists with a gender perspective who spoke about the game, analyzed it and valued the word of the football players, a dream."

Former football player and sports journalist Lorena Jaimerena, during the interview conducted for this study in 2021, also reflected on the word "heroines" proposed by some news media and concluded that "they are, we are heroines all of us, all women football players in a country such as Argentina: sexist, patriarchal. They paved the way. Women who took the political decision to occupy and hold onto a prohibited space such as a football pitch, designed and prepared for men alone."

An example of what the women footballers from Argentina were doing and saying during the World Cup 2019 can be illustrated by a tweet from their then team leader, Banini, describing a photo of the celebration of a score: "A point worth its weight in gold. But what is celebrated is the dedication and effort. This is not a cry of score; it is a cry of change! Thanks to the team, thanks to family and friends!"

To appreciate why women footballers are called "heroines" requires an analysis of the meaning and conception of the word. The origin of the word "hero" is Greek, meaning "to protect and serve." In his theory of the hero's journey, published in 1949, comparatist Joseph Campbell establishes that the hero generally goes through cycles or adventures similar in all cultures, summed up by the triad "separation – initiation – return." The hero's journey is the oldest story ever told, and a pattern that is repeated throughout time and in all cultures—as in women's football.

From a psychological perspective, Carl Jung defined the "hero" as an archetype based on overcoming obstacles and reaching specific goals, its final destiny being

to kill the monster in the shadows. More specifically, for Jung, the myth of the hero refers to the vital struggle for meaning related to the displacement of an egocentric vision towards something greater than oneself. Therefore, for Jung, the conclusion of the myth of the hero provides for the attainment of a superior state of consciousness in which the pattern of life and ideals changes significantly. In this study's case, this change refers to the transformations instigated by these heroines.

Scholars such as José Pestana and Nuria Codina, in their research on heroism and emerging leaders, argue that "in heroism, leadership research has a myth that provides the basis for a deeper exploration of the characteristics of the unconscious (collective, personal) and consciousness of leaders—characteristics that can mobilize their followers" (1). The authors point out that the idea of heroism can provide a foundation inspiring creativity from women leaders to jointly analyze aspects of the collective unconscious (heroism), the personal unconscious (psychological typology), and consciousness (self-descriptions, values) in a group sample of women emerging as leaders and/or agents of influences. According to social psychologist Michael Hogg, leaders are agents of influence. This influence can be observed in how women footballers begin to lead in spaces other than stadiums and clubs, as can be observed of Banini, who asked the media to stop calling her "The Messi." She said, "We would like to start being known by our names" ("Selección Argentina: Banini").

In leadership studies, three perspectives appear which outline different characterizations of leadership, the first being "Great Man and the cult of personality" in which a closer study is made of charisma; the second is "the context: contingency, transaction, transformation"; and last, "the social identity/social categorization approach" (Pestana and Codina). The present analysis of collective heroism is based on the second and third approaches to leadership, as they demonstrate a clear tendency towards integrating an individual process into one that is social. This integration takes place in a new scenario and cultural context where female footballers are more visible and represented.

According to business and management psychologist Fred Fiedler, the training of leaders is based on a diagnosis of their group-task situation which then provides the basis for the adoption of "strategies which capitalize on their particular leadership style" (184). Pestana and Codina summarize this action in the following way: the leader observes a combination of variables and acts accordingly.

Although there are various types of leadership roles, this study focuses on transformational leadership. According to historian James Burns, the purpose of leadership is to motivate followers to work towards transcendental goals instead of immediate self-interest. In the case of the Copa América in Chile in 2018, the women

footballers who were "hostages of the conflicts surrounding the AFA spent eighteen months without training. In September 2017, they registered as unemployed due to unpaid allowances. They went into the Copa América without adequate preparation and, in the middle of the competition, they found out that the image of the women's national team football shirt was… a model" (*Infobae*). In response, in their team photo, the team decided to use a memorable gesture: all the players placed their hands behind their ears as a sign that they needed to be heard. This decision placed the group in the space of transformational leadership, which led to a mobilization of support from the audience and football teams from other countries. These individual and joint protests resulted in a process of transformational leadership, which "strives towards achievement and self-actualization, rather than safety and security" (Pestana and Codina 3).

Over the past three decades, "studies carried out in the areas of business, the military, education, religious institutions, government, and not-for-profit organizations have shown that transformational factors and contingent rewards correlated highly with the effectiveness of the leader" (Sun et al. 2). While this study revolves around sports, we believe that the above can be concretely applied to individual and collective actions.

Caudwell suggests that the sporting corporeality of women can challenge the established order of obligatory heterosexuality and lead to reorganizations of the sex-gender-desire mechanism (383). Feminine masculinity and lesbianism in sports can break the obligatory woman-feminine-heterosexual order, which could prepare for new possibilities in terms of identity. Santino believes women's leadership and influence is clear: "there is no possibility of activism without joy and that we learned very well throughout our history, following the example of leaders such as Eva Perón or the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, [that] the anger and pain are resignified in the joy."

Discussing masculine hegemony, Irigaray recalls that a feminine collective imagination needs to be recuperated from that which has been repressed and refuted, allowing women to (re)appropriate their corporeality in a way not encrypted by the patriarchy. As summarized by Lichinizer in her monitoring of the production of news on the Argentinean national football team: "These conquests are born out of enjoyment and happiness because no woman in Argentina today can say that she makes a living out of football, that she does it for the money. They do it because they want to play and for their love of sport and football. Because playing football represents a collective empowerment."

This empowerment and enjoyment of the game by women players may be related to the appropriation of spaces as defined by Irigaray:

> How to say it? That right now, we are women. We don't need to be made into women by men . . . . We have always been women without their help. And their stories are the place of our deportation. It's not about having our own territory, but that their patria, their family, their home, their discourse, imprisons us in closed spaces in which we cannot keep on moving. (202–03)

Thus, the heroism women experience gives rise to joy because the other person is not overtaken by an individual interest but rather infected by this collective active enjoyment. Irigaray suggests a multiplicity of feminine pleasures that cannot be understood when applying masculine and patriarchal logic. In this sense, Santino argues: "Our love for the game reinvigorates it and puts it back in the place of conceiving the game as a human right."

As Irigaray elaborates: "That your speech not be made up of one thread alone, of one chain, of one storyline: this is our fortune" (200). This goes beyond a simple discourse, as she points out: "Between us, 'the hardline' is not imposed. We know the contours of our bodies enough to love fluidity" (206).

Reflecting on Heroism from a Media Perspective

Heroism has made a mark on the evolution of women's football in Argentina. It is no coincidence that much of the news published about the Argentinean national team during the World Cup in France chose headlines such as "Heroines Anyway…" (Lichinizer), "The Heroine is Collective" (Grayani), "From Abandoning Football to Heroine of Argentina" (*Olé, Fútbol Femenino*), "Bonsegundo from Córdoba, the Heroine of the Historical Recovery of the National Team" (La Voz), and "Like Heroines: This is How the Argentinean Women's National Team Was Welcomed Back Home" (*Todo Jujuy*). These news articles describe a conscious leadership not only transforming the spaces for the sport but also bringing together key elements for change: recognition of a patriarchal past, an awareness of women's rights, and a transformation of the present.

The representation or naming of heroine/s by the media is usually used for actresses and divas and not for women footballers. Many sportsmen and men's teams are referred to as "gladiators," "Spartans," or "warriors," articulating a sense of pride related to strength. Referring to women footballers as heroines places them in a new professional space, a place for constant gender construction and reconstruction.

The term *collective heroines* corresponds to joint action, at times defiant where women's voices and identities in media play a distinctive role: the main actions and decisions are made by the team after mutual agreement.

The term *individualized heroine* corresponds to an external vision and reaction (that of the audience or journalist) where emphasis is placed on the way of playing; the focus is on the specific role and the individual responsibility of the player. The emphasis here is on the reaction (i.e., of the audience) to an action (i.e., of the players).

A Transformational Movement Through Reappropriation

Our analysis of the portrayal of women footballers as heroines in media demonstrates singularities not only on the football pitch but also in the narratives of the people interviewed for this study. The delimitations and structures of both sociocultural and physical spaces are given a new reading under continuous and conscious construction of the individualities and teams. These constructions allow the players to transcend to a certain extent what Garton presents as the "naturalization of football as a space for men," considering that it "is among the obstacles that have complicated and restricted women's access to this sport" (30).

This new space under construction allows us to observe more clearly what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposes as male domination, the maximum expression of symbolic violence. The logic of androcentric domination, which is both ideological and institutional/structural (e.g. family, church, state, school, sport), contributes to social reproduction. This tension between female footballers and the symbolic violence represented by gender stereotypes is reinforced in the field of sports, in general, and in football, in particular, because it is a sport of "strength" not appropriate for women whose "innate" quality is believed to be their "weakness." The media cited in this analysis helped deconstruct this androcentric view, giving rise to a new space and providing a new meaning to the sport and its players. In the words of anthropologist Christian Bromberger, "Sport is a marvelous observatory of the social construction of genders, the way in which men and women are constructed and the changes that occur in the distribution of roles between them" (1).

This is why the construction of the space and the roles embodied by the players respond to a reappropriation process that allows for the deconstruction of the well-known gender roles and stereotypes in football. The media then echoes these changes. In this line related to media and deconstruction, Rita Segato, feminist anthropologist, raises the importance of the former in disarming the elementary structures of violence and specifies that "for this there is an essential condition: the mediatization of rights. The visibility of rights persuasively builds jurisdiction" (144).

The construction illustrated in this ethnographic study allows us to advance in the analysis of individual and collective heroism in constant and transformational movement that deserves to be observed both on and off the playing field, where the body and contours of each player are reappropriated (see Dunn, Irigaray). Because this reappropriation is not always born from physical strength but is also found in the thoughts and voices of each player, the heroine is built and rebuilt within a process that creates new spaces and subjectivities. The media presentation of the heroic woman footballer deserves to be studied in greater depth to discover its scope, impact on the new generation, and future portrayals in media and publications.

There is a need to continue promoting research that addresses women's sport from different perspectives and methodological approaches typical of the social sciences, especially those derived from the research traditions in the field of media.

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