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Research Article

## **SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT IN SPANISH HIGH LEVEL ATHLETICS BY GENDER**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research analyzes different aspects related to the sociological context of Spanish sportsmen and sportswomen, specifically the sociological context of athletics, in a time when women practically compete in the same events than men, and sports are accessible and desirable for them. A questionnaire was carried out among the athletes to obtain information about the social aspects, the preferences and the degree of satisfaction of their condition as athletes on one hand, and the presence or the feelings about different treatment between the two sexes on the other. The data have been then analyzed statistically as a fundamental tool of the methodology used in this survey. The study confirms that women have succeeded in establishing a position of equality with men for number of participants at high competitions and for the level of performance.

**Key words:** sociological context in sports, athletics.

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## INTRODUCTION

The slow but constant evolution of the situation of female athletics has suffered an arduous and long process that goes back to the epoch of the baron Pierre de Coubertin (1896). He was the real architect of the systematic blockade for the access of women to competition. As time went on and the sports institutions took shape and got consolidated worldwide, this systematic opposition to the participation of the women was turning out to a gradual recognition of the women possibilities as athletes.

Notwithstanding, the history of feminine athletics in Spain has very recent roots. According to Corominas (1967), the Athletics Society of Madrid was the first organization that took the initiative (June 23rd, 1929) to take women in, when organizing an athletic competition in their sports facilities. Following this initiative the first feminine club of sports was created in the town of Hospitalet (Barcelona). As well, the first sport festival took place in April 21st 1930, organized by their president. One year later, the first National Championship was held. However, it did not have continuity due to the armed conflict that meant the Spanish Civil War.

Lagardera said (1992), "In today's world, sport have turn out to be an everyday activity for men and women at the end of the 20th century... and the changes the sport has suffered during this century have been, clearly, key changes to reach the real state of importance in sports matters nowadays".

It is obvious that today women situation in sports, and specifically of athletes, have improved in a substantial way to establishing a position for themselves on equal terms than men according to the number of participants and level of performance in competitions.

The purpose of this study was to analyze how men and women perceive different aspects linked to the practice of high level athletics and to be aware of their degree of satisfaction towards the athletics environment according to the sex.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

An ad hoc questionnaire was characterized by anonymity and simplicity in the formulation of questions for sportsmen and sportswomen which practice elite athletics. The questionnaire was composed by three sets of questions: a generic part which aimed to obtain general information about sex, age, region, study level, a part dedicated to obtain information about the level of satisfaction of athletes in relation to their sport and a third part which investigate the opinions of athletes on a different treatment between the two sexes. The cohort sample comprised 194 athletes (49.48% female and 50.52% male) engaged in the 2004 Absolute National Championship. All the participants were between the ages of eighteen and twenty five, being most of them single, and some of them have studied a degree course (68.4% of the female sample and 49% of the male one).

Once the questionnaires were completed, the data have being analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 12.0 for Windows) from SPSS Inc. Chicago, IL.

With the aim to examine the existence of important differences according to the sex, every one of the analyzed variables was divided into two groups according to the male/female factor. Among the variety of statistic material evidences available to determine if there is or not a relationship between the variables under study, the theoretical probability distribution

chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) was used in our research, given the complexity of the characteristics under study and the analyses of the main components.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We will set out below a detail analysis of every matter under study.

### Analysis by gender of the athletes' level of satisfaction in relation to different aspects of athletics.

Our study highlighted a general satisfaction of Spanish athletes towards the sport they practice; though it was possible to sharpen some key aspects that once identified could help to improve the condition of Spanish athletics.

In general, polled men and women showed a great deal of satisfaction in being athletes (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Frequency and percentage of subjects in relation to their satisfaction as being an athlete, according to sex. Value of the probability distribution ( $\chi^2$ ) and significance.

	VERY MUCH N (%)	QUI TE A LOT N (%)	NOT MUCH N (%)	NOTHING N (%)	TOTAL N (%)
<b>MEN</b> <b>(N=98)</b>	20 (21.1%)	53 (55.8%)	18 (18.9%)	4 (4.2%)	95 (100%)
<b>WOMEN</b> <b>(N=96)</b>	31 (33.3%)	44 (47.3%)	15 (16.1%)	3 (3.2%)	93 (100%)
$\chi^2$ (significance)	3.60 (0.308)				

Nevertheless, we have observed remarkable differences in the answers provided by the men and the women, as far as it concerns their satisfaction in relation to the level achieved in sport (Table 2). In fact, the great part of polled men and women feel as not having achieved the highest level, but the percentage of women (5.4%) who think having obtained the desired success in their profession (with or without difficulty) is much inferior to that of men (12.8%). They are shown by their activity and the reasons given. We verify the fact that it is not the material or human means what prevent sportsmen and sportswomen from doing sports.

**Table 2.** Frequency and percentage of subjects in relation to their perception of their development as an athlete, according to sex. Value of the probability distribution ( $\chi^2$ ) and significance.

	I HAVE REACHED THE TOP LEVEL	I HAVE NOT REACHED THE TOP LEVEL	I HAVED REACHED THE TOP LEVEL WITH DIFFICULTY	I HAVE NOT DONE MY BEST SO I DID NOT REACH THE TOP LEVEL	I HAVE NOT REACH THE TOP LEVEL BUT IT IS NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY	TOTAL
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<b>MEN (N=98)</b>	7 (7.4%)	71 (75.5%)	6 (6.4%)	5 (5.3%)	5 (5.3%)	94 (100%)
<b>WOMEN (N=96)</b>	2 (2.2%)	85 (91.4%)	3 (3.2%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.1%)	93 (100%)
$\chi^2$ (significance)				10.396 (0.0167)		

When athletes were asked about the reason of their unsatisfaction in the practice of their sport, we observed that both sexes had difficulties to answer, being very reduced the number of people that expressed its opinion (Table 3). However, the athletes agreed that the lack of means and support is the most important factor, even if there are a high percentage of women (29.2%) which had some problems with their coach or the training team. Anyhow, it is necessary to reduce validity to the information obtained at this point because of the scanty number of athletes who have answered to this question (27 men and 24 women).

**Table 3.** Frequency and percentage of subjects in relation to the reasons of unsatisfaction provided by the practice of athletics, according to sex. Value of the probability distribution ( $\chi^2$ ) and significance.

	LACK OF MEANS AND SUPPORTS	TOO MANY COMPETITIONS	EXCLUSIVE MINORITY	THE COACH AND THE TRAINING TEAM	TOTAL
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<b>MEN (N=98)</b>	18 (66.7%)	3 (11.1%)	6 (22.2%)	0 (0%)	27 (100%)
<b>WOMEN (N=96)</b>	15 (62.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (8.3%)	7 (29.2%)	24 (100%)
$\chi^2$ (significance)				12.138 (0.016)	

The level of satisfaction in relation to the present situation of athletics is considered as satisfactory by all the athletes (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Frequency and percentage of subjects in relation to their level of satisfaction towards athletics, according to sex. Value of the probability distribution ( $\chi^2$ ) and significance.

	VERY MUCH	QUITE A LOT	NOT MUCH	NOTHING	TOTAL
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<b>MEN</b>	56	23	5	4	88
<b>(N=98)</b>	(63.6%)	(26.1%)	(5.7%)	(4.5%)	(100%)
<b>WOMEN</b>	56	23	6	5	90
<b>(N=96)</b>	(62.2%)	(25.6%)	(6.7%)	(5.6%)	(100%)
$\chi^2$			1.56		
(significance)			(0.814)		

However, we have to point out that there is a slight reduction in the number of people answering the part of the questionnaire where it is asked about their opinion on several matters of nowadays athletics (Table 5). There are no remarkable differences according to sex for the people which answered to all questions. In both male and female, we have found a negative opinion about Federations, scholarships, grants, medical care, and High Performance Centers. However, the National Federation is best regarded by women.

It is very interesting to check that the actual athletes' statements match up with those of García Ferrando in 1982. It is significant that in the two researches, the coach and the initial club are the best regarded items by the athletes, showing a great deal of satisfaction. On the contrary, grants, scholarships and medical care are the worst considered.

**Table 5.** Frequency and percentage of subjects in relation to their level of satisfaction in various matters of athletic, according to sex. Value of the probability distribution ( $\chi^2$ ) and significance level.

		VERY MUCH	QUITE A LOT	NOT MUCH	LITTLE OR NOTHING	TOTAL
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<b>MEN (N=98)</b>	<b>COACH</b>	56 (55.4%)	23 (22.7%)	5 (5.4%)	3 (3.4%)	88 (100,0%)
	<b>CLUB</b>	28 (31.2%)	28 (31.2%)	22 (24.4%)	12 (13.3%)	90 (100%)
	<b>NATIONAL FEDERATION</b>	11 (12.1%)	25 (27.5%)	31 (34.1%)	24 (26.4%)	91 (100%)
	<b>PROVINCIAL FEDERATION</b>	12 (13.3%)	13 (14.4%)	33 (36.2%)	32 (35.6%)	90 (100%)
	<b>REGIONAL FEDERATION</b>	11 (12.6%)	17 (19.5%)	29 (33.3%)	30 (34.5%)	87 (100%)
	<b>SPORTS FACILITIES</b>	18 (20.5%)	26 (29.5%)	25 (28.4%)	19 (21.6%)	88 (100%)
	<b>SCHOLARSHIPS</b>	4 (4.5%)	16 (18.0%)	35 (39.3%)	34 (38.2%)	89 (100%)
	<b>GRANTS</b>	4 (4.6%)	11 (12.6%)	24 (27.6%)	48 (55.2%)	87 (100%)
	<b>MEDICAL CARE</b>	8 (8.9%)	23 (25.6%)	27 (30.0%)	32 (35.6%)	90 (100%)
	<b>COMPETITIONS CALENDAR</b>	9 (10.0%)	41 (45.6%)	29 (32.2%)	11 (12.2%)	90 (100%)
	<b>HIGH PERFORMANCE CENTERS</b>	9 (10.0%)	14 (16.3%)	25 (29.1%)	38 (44.2%)	86 (100%)

Table 5. Continuation

		VERY	QUITE A LOT	NOT	LITTLE	TOTAL
		MUCH		MUCH	OR	
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	NOTHIG	N (%)
					N (%)	
<b>WOMEN</b> (N=96)	<b>COACH</b>	56 (62.2%)	23 (25.6%)	6 (6.7%)	5 (5.6%)	90 (100%)
	<b>CLUB</b>	35 (38.0%)	35 (38.0%)	16 (17.2%)	6 (6.5%)	92 (100%)
	<b>NATIONAL FEDERATION</b>	10 (11.6%)	38 (44.2%)	28 (32.6%)	10 (11.6%)	86 (100%)
	<b>LOCAL FEDERATION</b>	4 (4.5%)	24 (27.0%)	39 (43.8%)	22 (24.7%)	89 (100%)
	<b>REGIONAL AUTONOMICA</b>	8 (9.2%)	29 (33.3%)	37 (42.5%)	13 (14.9%)	87 (100%)
	<b>SPORTS FACILITIES</b>	24 (26.4%)	29 (31.9%)	20 (22.9%)	18 (19.8%)	91 (100%)
	<b>SHOLARSHIPS</b>	8 (9.1%)	16 (18.2%)	29 (33.0%)	35 (39.8%)	88 (100%)
	<b>GRANTS</b>	8 (10.0%)	7 (7.8%)	27 (30.0%)	48 (53.3%)	90 (100%)
	<b>MEDICAL CARE</b>	12 (13.0%)	26 (28.3%)	21 (22.8%)	33 (35.9%)	92 (100%)
	<b>COMPETITIONS CALENDAR</b>	6 (6.6%)	41 (45.1%)	33 (36.3%)	11 (12.1%)	91 (100%)
	<b>HIGH PERFORMANCE CENTERS</b>	16 (18.8%)	19 (22.4%)	21 (24.7%)	29 (34.1%)	85 (100%)

**Coach =1.27 (0.814);**  
**Club =4.48 (0.214);**  
**National Federation =1.53 (0.037);**  
**Local Federation =9.62 (0.022);**  
**Regional Federation =11.30 (0.010);**  
**Sports Facilities =1.55 (0.670);**  
**Scholarships =1.91 (0.592);**  
**Grants =2.35 (0.503);**  
**Medical care =1.73 (0.631);**  
**Calendar =0.85 (0.837);**  
**High Performance Centre =4.27 (0.234);**

$\chi^2$   
 (significance)

By means of the set out question, “would you mind/like children (if you already have some or if you will have in the future) will become a sporty like you?” we have found interesting results with regards to previous studies, although the different opinions are statistically of little relevance according to sex. García Ferrando (1986) in his research about Spanish athletes considered this question as being one of the most significant with regards to women attitude towards sports.

In the survey published in 1986, García Ferrando concluded that a 60% of the women polled wished their children will do “elite athletics”, and an 11% wished their children will do “the sport they like best.”

These results differ considerably from the ones obtained in our study (Table 6), where a high percentage of polled men (72.3%) and women (70.4%) would leave their children to choose the sport they prefer, while only 17.9% of men and 11.7% of women would like that their children were elite athletes. Nowadays, a majority of those polled see sport from a completely different conception regarding their children. They see sport from a more playful point of view. We are surprised to discover that in spite of the present technical, social and financial support, sportsmen and sportswomen respond to the activity they do in such negative way.

We consider that these negative results can be explained because all the elite athletes polled are conscious that they have achieved high level competition by making a lot of sacrifices. So it is understood they prefer a less distinguished and less implicated sport life for their descendants in relation to the slender chances of success and the meager compensations that sports provides in many cases.

**Table 6.** Frequency and percentage of subjects in relation to their wish their children will do athletics according to sex. Value of the probability distribution ( $\chi^2$ ) and significance.

	NO	HIGH LEVEL COMPETITION	WITHOUT TAKING IT VERY SERIOUSLY	ANOTHER SPORT	THE SPORT HE/SHE LIKES BEST	I DO NOT MIND	TOTAL
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<b>MALE</b>	10 (10.5%)	17 (17.9%)	6 (6.3%)	6 (6.3%)	68 (72.3%)	3 (3.2%)	95 (100%)
<b>FEMALE</b>	5 (5.3%)	11 (11.7%)	3 (3.2%)	4 (4.3%)	55 (70.4%)	3 (3.2%)	94 (100%)
<b><math>\chi^2</math> (significance)</b>				<b>6.207 (0.287)</b>			



It was possible to appreciate that a high percentage of both sexes (81.6% of men and 84.7% of women, Table 7) have no worry about their future retirement of the competition. The fact they have reconciled their studies with the practice of athletics makes them to face up to their future with less uncertainty.

**Table 7.** Frequency and percentage of subjects in relation to their worry about their future withdrew from competition according to sex. Value of the probability distribution ( $\chi^2$ ) and significance.

	AFIRMATIVE ANSWER N (%)	NEGATIVE ANSWER N (%)	TOTAL N (%)
<b>MALE</b> (N=98)	16 (18.4%)	71 (81.6%)	87 (100%)
<b>FEMALE</b> (N=96)	14 (15.3%)	71 (84.7%)	85 (100%)
$\chi^2$ (meaning)		0.110 (0.740)	

In order to have an in-depth knowledge about the feelings of athletes about their retirement and their future professional life after retirement from the sport, we thought it would be advisable to analyze if the athletes polled wish to continue linked with athletics.

In our investigation (Table 8), we found that a high percentage of men and women (47.8% and 42.0% respectively) wish to continue linked to athletics as coaches or trainers in spite this activity is little professionalized, except for few trainers which have a great deal of prestige. There is a notable percentage of those polled who declined to follow linked to athletics (26.1% of women and 23.9% of men). Statistically, there are no differences between men and women.

**Table 8.** Frequency and percentage of subjects in relation to their future possible link to athletics, according to sex. Value of the probability distribution ( $\chi^2$ ) and significance.

	NO N (%)	YES, AS A TRAINER N (%)	YES, AS AN ATHLETICS REFEREE N (%)	YES, AS AN ATHLETES REPRESENTATIVE N (%)	YES, TO GET A JOB IN THE FEDERATION N (%)	YES, AS A SPORTS JOURNALIST SPECIALIZING IN ATHLETICS N (%)	YES, IN OTHER FUNCTIONS N (%)	VARIOUS MATTERS N (%)	TOTAL N (%)
<b>MALE</b> (N=98)	22 (23.9%)	44 (47.8%)	1 (1.1%)	4 (3.6%)	4 (3.6%)	1 (1.1%)	10 (10.9%)	5 (5.3%)	92 (100%)
<b>FEMALE</b> (N=96)	24 (27.3%)	37 (42.0%)	0 (0%)	3 (3.4%)	3 (3.4%)	3 (3.4%)	12 (13.6%)	6 (6.8%)	88 (100%)
$\chi^2$ (significance)					3.07 (0.878)				

## CONCLUSIONS

1. A high percentage of athletes declare that they do not want to remain linked to athletics once they withdrew it, in any other facet but as a trainer.
2. The athletes polled prefer a less distinguished and less implicated sport life for their descendants in relation to the slender chances of success and the slim compensations that sports provides in many cases.
3. In the present circumstances Spanish athletes are satisfied with the technical and human means put to their disposition for the effective development of their sports careers in the athletics.
4. The women perceive that the treatment is equal in all the indicators that have relation with the athletic practice.
5. The level of satisfaction in reference to the current condition of the athletics according to the polled athletes, in general, is considered to be satisfactory both by the women and by the men, though still there are a lot of improvements to go.

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