

Gender Construct in Sports and the According Perceptions of these Roles of Male and Female sports players; A case study on football at a Catholic High School in Madrid

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Abstract:

On a global scale, women's sports are disproportionately treated and funded compared to men's sports. In Spain, amid the backdrop of the controversial 2023 Women's World Cup celebration during which the president of the Real Football Soccer Federation kissed a player on the lips without her consent, there has been intensified examination of the gender discrepancies (both in treatment and allocation of financial resources) in football. Based in Madrid, Spain, my research explores whether gender disparities in the professional sports field are mirrored in a high school environment. Using my Catholic high school as a case study, I specifically examined how gender roles are constructed by peer and administration influence and how they manifest in the school's sports program, focusing on Spanish football (soccer). I used the following question to guide my research: How do high school student players internalize gender roles?" Through interviews and surveys with both male and female athletes, student observation, a period of literature review, and an analysis of the school's sports policies, my research illustrates that masculinity and dominance construct gender roles in football and other sports in three distinct ways, via peer pressure, positions of power, and systematic gender inequality. I found similar patterns between these macro-level discrepancies nationally and the examples I observed during my investigation at the micro level within my local school community. My findings conclude that the presence of gender norms in sports exists at my school, and they are reinforced by the school administration's (largely male-dominated) lack of interest in and failure to prioritize rectifying these discrepancies, and through the perpetuation of these roles in student peer influence.

Introduction:

Though we are well into the 21st century, and women's football has gained popularity, it continues to receive fewer resources and less recognition than men's football. Women continue to be disadvantaged in sports, a predominantly male domain. This was underscored by the recent debates surrounding the 2023 Women's World Cup, where the current President (now former) of the Real Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) kissed the player, Jennifer Hermoso on the lips without her consent. Spain's male football players have largely stayed silent about the incident whereas the entire women's team refused to play unless Rubiales resigned from his position. Not only has the women's team complained, but protests erupted all over Spain due to backlash from the event, calling for the removal of Rubiales from power, and urging for significant changes to be made to the soccer federation. The movement "SeAcabó" or "it's over" was on the rise, trending during August and September of 2023, with the hashtag appearing on

various social media platforms. Many compare this movement to the #MeToo movement in the United States (The Guardian, 2023). It symbolizes the collective effort to put an end to 'machismo' in Spanish football.

In Spain, football is the most popular sport, and male-dominated. Women who enter into the world of football are immediately aware that they are disproportionately treated. As of 2021, the average annual salary for a male footballer at FC Barcelona could be as much as 11 million dollars, and an average player on one of Spain's professional league teams can earn \$195,000 annually. Comparatively, in the last season of 2023, 80 out of 334 female Spanish footballers were paid less than \$21,400 per year, and an overall average annual salary of \$42,000 (The Associated Press, 2023).

Though women in football had been disproportionately paid and treated differently long before the events of the 2023 Women's World Cup, it was not until controversy over the kiss Rubiales planted on Hermoso that provoked a strong social media response. With these complaints circling throughout the media, the RFEF called for an emergency meeting. At this meeting, Rubiales spoke and denied the allegations, refusing to resign from his position, and calling the protesters "fake feminists." Labeling the protesters as "fake feminists" is a tactic that attempts to discredit and marginalize those raising concerns about gender inequality, reflecting a way of maintaining power. The power tactic exhibited by Rubiales caught my attention and will be the main focus of my essay.

During the unfolding of this event, I was a student who just moved to a new school in Spain from the United States. At my new high school, I board a residency that houses over 50 boy international football players. These athletes engage in rigorous training during the afternoons and play games over the weekends, balancing their studies throughout the school week alongside my peers and me. Every day, I am exposed to the constant discussion of football in my residency, and my classroom environment. Consequently, I became interested in understanding the perceptions of my football-focused classmates on the kissing controversy, and also, their broader views about gender inequality in the sport.

This paper will explore the disparity between male and female sports based on the construct of gender roles within the context of a Catholic Spanish high school. A series of my encounters at the high school help illustrate these biases and stereotypes, and they suggest that my school create a gender-structured system within its athletics programs. To guide the focus of my research, I will be focusing on these central research questions:

- *How are gender roles construed at a Catholic High School in Spain and how does it manifest in the school's sports, with a particular highlight on football?
- *How do high school student players internalize these roles?

This research will also explore related inquiries:

- * Are the girls' teams treated equally as the boys' teams?
- *To what extent do the school's policies and athletic practices provide equal opportunities to both?
- *How are girls treated when they enter male-dominated sports at a high school? *How do girl athletes correspondingly perceive the gender roles systematically set up for them by the school?

To examine these questions, I will carry out the following research methods by beginning with a period of literature review, followed by researching the school history and analyzing the

sports policies and administration in place, conducting observations, and lastly surveying students and conducting in-depth interviews of football players from the boys' and girls' teams. Based on my case study, this research paper argues that masculinity and dominance construct gender roles in football and other sports in three distinct ways;

1. peer pressure
2. positions of power
3. systematic gender inequality.

Through the observations I take note of, and my interviews, I find that these three ways will appear as common patterns of how male dominance controls gender roles in sports at my school. Following the identification of these patterns, this paper will delve into an analysis of whether these observations align with or deviate from patterns identified in the literature. Finally, my research will present conclusions about these connections and common patterns.

Chapter 1: Gender Identity

Identity can be defined as a multifaceted concept that defines one's sense of self. It is shaped by various factors including one's environment, culture, lifestyle, and experiences. Gender identity, which is significant to understanding one's overall identity, remains significant in the world of sports, and pivotal to determining how people behave and engage in certain sports activities. Though gender has specific reference to the male or female sex, gender identity encompasses a more complex idea of an individual's deeply felt internal sense of who they are. Social and cultural norms dictate masculine or feminine attributes of someone according to their behaviors and bodies (Enke, 2012; Griffin, 2012; Krane et al., 2012).

Gender identity often manifests in sports through athletes' choices of the types of sports they participate in, their playing styles, and their agreement or rejection of sports-related gender norms. Individuals may express their gender identity by engaging in sports traditionally associated with their identified gender, challenging established norms, or adopting a gender-neutral approach.

However, the sports landscape often operates within the framework of a sex-binary system, where participants are categorized as either male or female (Braumüller, 2020; Menzel, 2020; Hartmann-Tews, 2020). For example, athletes who decide to play competitive sports are most often separated into teams according to their gender, or according to the sex they were assigned at birth.

In the Olympics, the majority of sports continue to remain 'non-mixed' or 'segregated' as males and females are not permitted to compete against one another. Even in most schools, they will offer a separate team for boys and a separate team for girls of the same sport. In my school, more specifically, the student football players are first categorized into their teams according to gender. This binary system, rooted in traditional beliefs about sex and male dominance, assumes a clear distinction between masculine and feminine characteristics. It influences societal expectations regarding appropriate behavior, roles, and expressions in sports. The sports world prefers tough and aggressive traits and idealizes the male body as being the symbol of athleticness (Griffin, 2012). In doing so, women have a much more difficult time finding their place in sports because the normalized image of sports is associated with masculinity. Therefore, factors like fear of negative evaluations over gender identity and gender roles can play into the decision-making process when women select the sports they engage in.

Chapter 2: Peer Pressure - Gender Conformity in a Social Setting

Peer pressure refers to the influence that individuals within a group can exert on each other to conform to the group's attitudes, behaviors, and expectations. It can manifest in various forms, including direct persuasion, subtle suggestions, or even implicit social cues. In the context of sports, particularly male-dominated sports cultures, peer pressure can greatly influence individuals to conform to certain expectations.

My first observation of peer pressure at my school was prompted by my advisor's commentary in class one day early into the school year. My advisor, a white American male in his late twenties, highlighted the presence of gender stereotypes within our school sports, where the division between certain sports as 'appropriate' for one gender over the other became evident. Typically, in my advisory, the students, who are all international 10th graders, lounge at their tables and complete independent study or talk with friends during this period. There are about 14 students in total, with seven girls and seven boys in the class. During this advisory, the boys were spread out, sitting at different tables within the room, whereas the seven of us girls were clumped together at one table. My advisor interrupted our quiet chat to announce that the school was offering a girls' and boys' volleyball team. Usually, during the first semester, clubs and after-school activities are promoted by teachers to increase student involvement, and my advisor brought up volleyball because he would be coaching the team. However, through subtle language and behavior, my advisor only addressed his news directly to the girls' table, encouraging only girls to join the volleyball team. He pulled up a chair to sit with us and spent the rest of the lesson discussing how much he enjoyed the sport, his history of playing it, and other ideas about the team. He even confirmed with one of the girls at my table that. Knowing that at least one girl was already engaged in the sport, my advisor might have felt more confident in proposing volleyball to the girls, assuming a certain level of interest or willingness to participate. My interpretation was also that none of the other students took note of or thought it odd that he was only addressing female students. Though I did not confront my female classmates about my impression, my assumption was based on the fact that many girls showed strong interest in this newly offered extracurricular, and asked for more details about when tryouts would start. Whereas, I observed that no boys followed up with our advisor. Instead, while my advisor was talking at our table, the boys remained concentrating on their own separate conversations and working on their computers, none of them paying attention to our discussion.

Looking back at this moment, I think two possible factors could support my advisor's motive for only addressing the girl table, and no boys. First, every boy in my class is either a player for one of two football teams at my school and is committed to this sport every day of the week. My school first offers the Getafe international football team. The Getafe team is competitive and intense and only has male players on the team. My school also offers their respective team, which several boys from my school participate in as well. My advisor is well aware of this information and was possibly hesitant to ask the boys due to their time conflicts. And, since no girls had Getafe football interfering with the volleyball schedule, they would be more likely to join. However, this implies an underlying belief in the dominance of male-centric sports. This assumption reinforces the bias that is still held in Spain on a local level. For instance, the idea that boys are primarily committed to intense and competitive sports potentially neglects the consideration of boys engaging in activities traditionally associated with girls.

Secondly, since my advisor knew that one of the female students had involvement in volleyball, he had an incentive to ask her about joining the team. Despite this, he was promoting a sport offered to both girls and boys only to the girls in our class. Through this action, he may have contributed to perpetuating a pattern where girls are encouraged or expected to participate in certain activities, and limited to doing others, in this case, they are not allowed to play on the Getafe football team.

To further my first point about my advisor demonstrating peer pressure, in another instance, when I approached my advisor with questions about the girls' football team, he asked if I wanted to consider volleyball instead, redirecting my interest away from playing football. I first asked him if he knew any of the coaches from the girls' football team, or anyone I could speak to that could help direct me to the head coaches of the team. A male student in my class sitting nearby, who is also a member of the school's boys' football team, overheard our conversation, and confused, asked me if I meant that I wanted to join the volleyball team, as opposed to the football team. I said no, and he replied, "The volleyball team is for girls though," implying that the football team is not. When observing this student's facial expressions and demeanor, I noticed that he was genuinely shocked by my interest in women's football. He was not coming from a place of sexism but from a place of complete ignorance. He assumed that volleyball was what I came to ask our advisor about and not football because football to him was associated with a men's sport, and volleyball with a women's. Commentary as such has deeper implications though that can affect student perception and choices in the future when it comes to sports and gender norms in terms of Spain.

Notably, the peer pressure I experienced myself, as a girl at my school who displayed an interest in sports, has only come from men so far. It appears to me that my male peers have biases in place, especially since they all play sports or men's football. Therefore, the language they use with me to discuss football (by redirecting my focus away from it) may suggest that they have a negative evaluation of women entering what are labeled as or considered 'masculine sports.' The innate talk around sports at my school encourages girls and boys to apply themselves in sports where they most properly fit, meaning where they have historically fit based on their gender.

This type of peer pressure, or fear of negative evaluation, also shows up in other research.

A case study done on Children's Stigma Consciousness of Gender in Sports and Physical Activities shows that cultural stereotyping of gender and behaviors that are considered more appropriate for one sex or another also limits people in their expression of attitudes and interests (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991; Liben & Bigler, 2002). The goal of the study was to examine the extent to which children can recognize these gender stigmas in place, and also to see how these stereotypes affect their participation in sports. They collected a participant sample of 22 girls and boys, ranging from the ages eight to ten, at the age when children have not fully developed their gender roles and sports identities. They asked these children in one-on-one interviews their perceptions about sports, gender association with sports, and what makes them think the way they do, using language that would be understandable to the age group. For instance, when asking a young boy what he considers boys' sports and girls' sports, he responds that football is for boys, and cheerleading is for girls. Other responses from the children showed similar thinking. Boys' sports were often identified because of masculine behavioral traits such as aggression and competitiveness in participation, while props were frequently used to characterize girls' sports, such as pom poms in cheerleading.

The interviews indicated that the boys and girls are aware of gender stereotypes in sports, to the degree that it affects how they act and choose to participate in them. However, they do not fully grasp the meaning or extent of how these stereotypes impact their personal choices. The young children followed social norms learned from media, community, family, and friends without really understanding why. Similarly, the male student in my class immediately associated volleyball as a feminine sport and football as a masculine one. It was evident by the tone of his voice that he was not trying to discourage me from playing football or be hostile toward me, but he was confused about why football was even an option for me.

Results from the study indicated that in the case of feminine and masculine sports (which were designated based on the perceptions and votes of participants from the study), boys and girls tend to participate in the sports deemed socially appropriate for their sex due to unconscious stigmas and potential peer pressure from their environments where they learned these gender associations. This type of peer pressure playing a role in gender construct within sports was clearly demonstrated at my school. In the volleyball example with my advisor. Later, when I asked about how the volleyball teams were going, to further my point, my advisor exclaimed that the school had only continued with a girls' volleyball team, due to a lack of participation from boys. This made me think that if my advisor had encouraged more boys to play for the school volleyball team, there would have possibly been more interest and more males willing to participate. By exclusively promoting the coed sport to girls, my advisor may be reinforcing traditional gender roles that associate certain sports with masculinity and others with femininity. This action sends a message that certain activities are more suitable or expected for one gender over another. Although this form of peer pressure is indirect, it illustrates how peer dynamics, even if not explicitly coercive, can influence decision-making and behavior.

In comparison, I could also identify boys at my school adhering to stereotypes by their responses in my surveys, and through personal interviews I conducted. First, I created a self-administered anonymous questionnaire, which I sent out to 15 students, seven girls and eight boys. I received a response from five girls and four boys (nine in total). The boys and girls I reached out to, were all members of my grade. I had reached out to these students specifically because I built upon relationships with them in the past, doing class work with them and/or group project activities. All of these relationships were similar in my level of connection. I sent the survey out during an advisory period when I was in a class with all of these students. In this context, I was able to also see my participants while they filled out my survey. The only important note was that I did not know which student was answering which responses. I could only identify if they were male or female.

I identified differences between the boys and girls immediately based on the reception I got when I asked them to fill out the form to help me with my research. The girls all initially agreed, and showed little care about my intention or what I would do with their responses. In strong comparison, all the boys initially questioned my reasoning for surveying them and only agreed to survey certain circumstances. For instance, three boys did not agree to respond to my survey unless I kept their names anonymous. I always planned to keep my form anonymous, so I could receive the most honest responses and allow my participants to feel more open to share. However, keeping the form anonymous only allowed the boys to respond to my survey inappropriately, with silly, dishonest answers that 'mocked' my research. What signaled this to me was the behavior and discourse of the boys in person as I witnessed them write their responses on their computers, and also the language used in the answers themselves.

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MY SURVEY:

I set up my survey on Google Forms and sent these forms to my survey participants through their school email. The form was titled, "Treatment/Privileges of the Boys' Football Team vs Girls' Football Team at [name of my school]." The form had a section with 12 statements, asking students to rate on a scale from one to five based on how much they agreed with the statement (1 meaning does not agree at all, and 5 meaning strongly agree) and their reasoning as well. Examples of statements were "Football is a men's sport," or "Boys and girls are treated equally if they play soccer at [name of my school]." In the final section of the survey, I ask about the Women's 2023 World Cup controversy, and which corresponding "side" the students agree with more. Below is a layout of the questions I asked from sections two and three of my survey. The blocked-out spaces hide the name of my school to keep confidentiality. *Zooming in may be helpful to have a clearer image of the layout.



Sección 2 de 3

How much do you agree with the following statements on a scale from 1-5 and then explain why:

Descripción (opcional)

Boys and girls are treated equally if they play soccer at ~~dispositions~~

I strongly disagree with this statement 1 2 3 4 5 I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Texto de respuesta larga

The boys' and girls' teams receive equal recognition when the teams do well during games (from coaches, equally celebrated by students at school)

I strongly disagree with this statement 1 2 3 4 5 I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Texto de respuesta larga

The coaches have equal expectations for both boy and girl football players in terms of their skill abilities

I strongly disagree with this statement 1 2 3 4 5 I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Texto de respuesta larga



The girls' team is equally as pushed as hard as the boys' team by their coaches

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

The boys' and girls' teams receive equal opportunities in training, practices, and games *

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

██████████ celebrates the boys' football wins more than the girls' football wins *

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

██████████ distributes their resources equally to the boys and girls football teams (coaches, uniforms, number of practices, field for practice, quality of training, etc) *

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

Football is a masculine/male sport

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

Women who play football are less feminine *

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

Boys are better at football than girls in general *

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

Boys can pickup football skills faster than girls can *

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

██████████ investing in a girls football team is a waste of money *

1 2 3 4 5

I strongly disagree with this statement I strongly agree with this statement

Reasoning *

Tarea de respuesta larga

Desde la sección 2 ir a la siguiente sección

Sección 3 de 3

Additional information

Descripción (opcional)

Has there ever been a time when you have noticed the privileges, opportunities, and resources * of the girls' and boys' football teams at ██████████ are not equitable? If so, please explain

Tarea de respuesta larga

Participants' emails were hidden when they filled out my study. The only personal information I collected from my participants was their gender. In this first section, I put the options "male," "female," and "other." Early on, I had identified dishonest answers, as one student wrote in the other box, stating they identified as non-binary and another identified as a "rat." These students indicated a high level of immaturity because they laughed and exclaimed

that they were excited to see my face in response to their answers. As I saw this ridicule of my project within the first few minutes, I then explicitly asked for my participant's integrity in person. In some responses, I received sincere writing whereas in others, I did not. In the answers I got from the four boys, however, the explanations for their ratings were evidently either jokes, had no effort put into them, or were dishonest. Two boys simply put a "." for every required reasoning section so they would not have to explain themselves. By inserting a period in the explanation box, the boys were enabled to move on to answering a new section in the survey without having to write a real response. Another male student kept putting "kill all men" or "girl power" as his explanation for his rating, which had no relevance to the statements being asked. And most of the responses I received included curse words, slang, or two-word explanations. This general theme of inappropriate language conveys a lack of seriousness and attempt. Yet it also conveys a potential form of peer influence or pressure because they were all in the same room watching one another. Also, it is possible that when a certain discussion is deemed irrelevant or met with discomfort, it may communicate to the speaker to stop or withdraw the topic of conversation. I witnessed the boys laughing and smiling as they wrote down responses as well, and they would gesture to me that they were looking forward to seeing my expression once I received their answers. Their excitement to see my opinion on their insincere answers signaled that they were making a joke out of my project, and did not take my interest in the construction of gender roles at our school seriously. Even after they had completed the survey, two boys followed me out of the classroom to ask me my opinions on feminism, and the LGBTQIA+ community, to see how "woke" I was, using the quoted term specifically. One of the specific questions they asked me was "Do you believe transgender women are 'real' women?" The boys, who were all friends with one another, would smirk and snicker amongst themselves while they brought up this conversation. I was not interested in entertaining their jokes, so I asked them the relevance of these questions, and why they brought them up after my survey. They had no sufficient explanation for the raising of these questions, other than basic curiosity.

Observing my male classmates belittle and shame girls for talking about gender and sports demonstrates the normalization of gender-specific roles at my school.

The boys' sarcastic approach to my survey highlights how their lack of concern/care for the discussion of ensuring gender equity within sports is accepted at schools where gender inclusivity and equal representation are not a priority.

Furthermore, to the people who answered truthfully, in their responses, I noticed a pattern of them exclaiming the male football team receiving better treatment, more recognition, and more opportunities and resources. One female student pointed out how my school has three football teams for the boys, with two separate levels for Getafe, and one for the school team, whereas the girls only have one team. Another female student pointed out the different playing opportunities, as the girls' team only has training twice a week, while the Getafe team has training every day, and with games at least every weekend. This same student also mentioned the disparity in the celebration of the team's successes. While in classes, from her experience, and my own observations as well, the school makes announcements on the speaker to point out the boys' teams' wins. These announcements typically last two minutes long, and the class would be interrupted so students could listen to what is being said by the announcer, who would applaud the boys' team for their achievements. On the other hand, the girls' team has never received an announcement from the school. However, not because the girls' team never wins, but because the girls' team does not even have the opportunity to play matches. This last detail will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Positions of Power

Just ten months before the World Cup event, the players on the women's team had already made complaints about the men who held positions of power. Jorge Vilda, the previous head football coach of the women's team, was accused of cultivating an atmosphere that had a 'significant' adverse effect on the players' physical and mental well-being. They expressed reservations about his strategic expertise, the quality of training conducted under his guidance, and the level of physical care extended to the players. Furthermore, they highlighted how the team management had a controlling, authoritative approach. Up until 2019, team members were obligated to keep their hotel rooms unlocked, allowing coaching staff, including Vilda, to conduct bed checks. Andreu Camps, an advent supporter of Luis Rubiales, but also one of the most prominent figures in RFEF as general secretary, was also among the executives that mistreated the players on the squad, governing the team with hostility. The accusations against Andreu Camps indicate a broader issue of executives mistreating female players, as seen with the claims made about Luis Rubiales a year later. Dating back to 2022 of September, 15 players from the team signed a letter to the RFEF, refusing to be part of the next selection to push for structural changes within the federation. As a result of the original team players resigning from their positions, only three of those 15 players who signed the letter remained part of the new roster that ended up playing in the 2023 World Cup. This drastic reduction in players confirms that the controlling dynamic and positions of power contribute to the perpetuation of gender disparity in sports because in this case, it leads to invasive practices that undermine the autonomy and well-being of the female athletes.

I was able to make connections to my school, where men who have held positions of power would take this level of control to an advantage, which consequently, keeps women disadvantaged. One of the cases was with the girls' and boys' basketball coaches. I talked to a student about her experience being on the team, asking typical questions about how her practices and games were going. In the exchange between the student and I, she subtly brought up how the girls do not receive the same support and training as the boys, despite that their team is a mixed, coed basketball team. For my research, I asked if I could record her summarizing one of the experiences she has had about the discrimination she faces.

The student described that one day, the team had just finished regular basketball practice and they were waiting on the bus for everyone to come in. She and the other female players asked their coach about the upcoming game, which he mentioned previously at practice. According to the student, they had asked if the girls were going to be playing in the game at all. The fact that they had to question whether or not they would participate in the game illustrates the disparate treatment of the boys and girls on the team. This was a typical exchange between the girl players and their coach. It was not assumed that the girls would play in the games, whereas in every game, it was assumed that boys would be playing. The student proceeded to quote the exact opening of the response he had to their question, "I'm not sexist or anything..." He then continued to explain that the game would be against an all-boys team, and if the girls wanted to play, he did not encourage it but said it was fine. However, after, he stated that they would need cheerleaders for the game, implying that the girls from the team should do this job. The student added that his tone was full of discouragement. I then clarified with the student, what was the team's initial reply to the coach's explanation. She responded that she looked at one of her friends, who was also in the same disbelief and was also evidently upset by this. Usually, when their coach says there will be a game, the girls mentioned that they felt like the

coach was only referring to the guys, and addressing the male players over the female players. Despite their frustration, they did not say anything to the coach.

I wanted to get a second opinion on this exchange with a male player from the school's basketball team. The girl and I caught up with him before one of their practices. I had her remind him of the incident that happened with the coach and ask his thoughts about it. When asked for his view on the matter, all the boy student could say was, "What do you mean? It makes sense!" His tone was exclamatory and stubborn when he responded. When he first questioned our irritation, he was defensive, and his composure suggested that he felt like we were attacking him. He responded that he had no doubts about the coach's response that day and that it was completely reasonable for him to respond the way he did. The male player's dismissive reaction to the girls' experience indicates a societal acceptance of unequal treatment. Therefore, to hear the coach's opinion on the matter, I questioned him as well. I asked, "Why did none of the girls play at the game yesterday?" and his response was, "It was their option," and then he shrugged his shoulders. That is all he had to say and did not convey any more interest that he wanted to speak more on the matter.

After hearing these anecdotes from the experiences on the girls' team, I conducted quick background research on the team's demographic. As shared by team members, a significant number of girls have chosen to discontinue their participation in basketball, with seven out of the initial 10 players dropping out. In contrast, all 10 boys have consistently remained playing on the team throughout the entire season. As of now, the composition of the team reveals a notable gap between female and male players, with only three girls and 10 boys, as a result of only girls leaving the team. This in itself poses questions about students' thought process about dropping this extracurricular particularly why this trend is exclusive to girls and not mirrored by any boys. Are the girls influenced by a lack of motivation, other commitments, or the unfair environment for girls that has been witnessed by all team members?

In response to this situation, I wanted to discuss the sports teams' organization and treatment of their players with the athletics director at my school. However, I was reluctant to share with him the basketball team incident because I wanted my reason to talk to him to sound as indifferent as possible. I had no intention of interrogating him and I did not want him to feel defensive about the school if I questioned him with preconceived notions surrounding the school's treatment of girl and boy students. So, I emailed his school address directly, stating simply that I was a curious student from journalism class who had questions about the high school girls' team. This way, I knew he would respond because it framed my intent to only ask him questions as part of a school journalism assignment. The athletics director replied to me within an hour of the time I sent out my email, stating that we could meet the following day. When I met with him, he had my journalism teacher in his office in case he needed a translation for any of the questions I had, as English is not his first language. However, he must have misinterpreted my email because he thought this meeting was about me wanting to join the school girls' team. I clarified that I had many more questions to ask and that the reason for the interview was for a research project. I then showed him my document filled with the questions I was prepared to ask him, and he said it would be easiest if I then just sent him an email with the questions, so he could also respond in Spanish. Therefore, I sent him an email with the questions so he could respond with more ease, preparation, and knowledge. The following image includes the exact email I wrote, as well as the list of 12 questions I asked:



I am conducting a research project and report for my journalism class at school. Here are examples of questions I am interested in and I would like to know your responses. However, I would really appreciate and prefer asking them in person. You are welcome to respond in Spanish! If you still have any time for me to come in and interview you, please let me know your availability! Also, if there is someone else I can talk to who may be better able to answer these questions, please let me know! Thank you

School history of football on campus:

Do you think there are certain sports that are better for boys or girls?

When did Aquinas first have a football team for boys and girls?

Do you think the school policies encourage students to choose certain sports according to gender?

Details concerning the girls' football team:

Is the girl's football team treated any differently by other students, teachers, and the school administration than the boy's team at Aquinas?

Do you have a list of the female football players on the team? (Nombres y Apellidos)

School Administration of Sports for boys and girls:

Are the coaches the same for the girls' and boys' teams and are they men or women?

How often do both teams have practice? How long is practice?

How often do the teams have games and who do they play?

Do the teams practice on the same fields, and have the same practicing facilities?

of boys and girls on each team?

What is the skill level of each of the teams?

The email was distinctly organized into three categories. The first section asked three questions about my school's history with football, to understand how the school's policies in the past and present are presented to the students. The second section specifically focuses on the girls' football team, asking two questions: one, qualitative and the other, quantitative. Finally, the third section comprises seven general questions about school administration involvement in sports and other details regarding the specific resources each team has.

However, after I sent the email with my questions, he did not provide me with his answers until two weeks later. I followed up with him several times during this period. First, I sent the director a second email, but he did not respond. The director not responding to my second email shows a lack of transparency about the reason for the delay. I was then told by my journalism teacher that he did not realize what the questions would be about. According to my teacher, when he saw that I had questions asking if there have been problems in the past with gender discrimination within the school sports, and his personal opinions on gender association with sports, he felt that this was a highly "controversial topic." He also mentioned that he did not want me to publish anything about this in the school paper.

The director's hesitation and concerns about the controversial nature of the questions suggest a desire to control the narrative around potentially sensitive issues. The implication is that he may be reluctant to address or disclose information that could be perceived negatively, and therefore avoids my email to avoid negatively reflecting the school. My journalism teacher also explained that if I wanted answers from him, I would have to explain that this was not for the school newspaper, but for a separate extracurricular activity where I would keep the school's name anonymous as well as any specific names, such as his, from the public. Therefore, I met with him in person, asking once again when I would receive his responses. He called my research and the situation a delicate topic that could be damaging to the reputation of the school's image. He also explained this was a matter he had to ask the school principal about to see if it was appropriate for him to respond. The director sought approval from the school principal before responding, indicating a hierarchical decision-making process. After I promised to keep personal names and organizations anonymous, he was able to clear the questions with the head of the school and respond to my questions. The director's agreement to respond only

after I assured the anonymity of names further underscores the control aspect. It demonstrates a willingness to engage only under conditions that minimize potential risks to the school's reputation. Even so, he still did not reply to my email directly and sent his answers to my journalism teacher, who then sent his answers to me. This indirect communication method can maintain control over the information by channeling it through a trusted intermediary. Furthermore, the long delay in his response can be seen as a way of exerting control over the information flow, possibly to buy time to articulate a response that would maintain a good image for the school regarding gender equality.

Finally, after receiving his answers, I did some analysis. The athletic director, as a figure of authority within the school's sports program, can control the information that is disseminated, which is highly important to note. He wrote his answers in Spanish, and therefore, I translated his quotes directly into English below. In bold are the questions I asked him (already shared in the previous image), and his responses, which follow in quotes. *Zooming in is recommended for a clearer image.



School history of football on campus:

Do you think there are certain sports that are better for boys or girls?

"I think that the female gender has different sporting conditions than men and vice versa. This means that in each sport there is a different performance. In Rhythmic Gymnastics, women due to their constitution will always have better results and conditions than men, as the same thing happens with some sports for the male gender. But you can never underestimate work and dedication because you are of one gender or another, we always have to give the same opportunities to all people to be able to practice sports, whether you are a boy or a girl."

When did [my school name] first have a soccer team for boys and girls?

"We have always had teams that both boys and girls could play. We are lucky to be able to have a large number of both girls and boys, to make a women's team and a men's team. We've been like this for 5 years and we hope for many more."

Do you think school policies encourage students to choose certain sports based on gender?

"It is not our philosophy, nor will it be. As I have told you before, school policies must have as their essential objective "the opportunity for physical activity for all people."

Details about the women's soccer team:

Is the women's soccer team treated differently by other students, teachers, and the school administration than the [my school name] men's team?

"No. Both the women's and men's teams have the same treatment in every way. They have the same training hours, both teams are given credit, they have the same number of coaches, in addition to many other aspects."

Do you have a list of the soccer players on the team? (Names and surnames)

****I cannot give you the name and surname due to data protection law Elliot** but I can tell you that we have 20 players in the High School women's team and we are delighted as a school to have so many girls."

School Sports Administration for boys and girls:

Are the coaches of the women's and men's teams the same and are they men or women?

"The coaches are not the same because both the men's and women's teams train at the same time. This year both coaches are men."

How often do both teams practice? How long does the practice last?

"The two teams train Monday and Wednesday from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. in the same facilities."

How often do the teams play and who do they play against?

"We are working to create a school women's league. In that case the games are played every Saturday morning. Once a week."

Do the teams practice on the same fields and have the same practice facilities?

"Yes. The two teams have the same conditions and train in the same facility, but they train on different fields, because practice is at the same time."

Number of boys and girls on each team?

"20 girls and 24 boys."

What is the skill level of each of the teams?

"It is at a school level. We do not seek performance or level, but rather that children enjoy doing what they like most. DO SPORT."

After reviewing his answers, his responses showed that he crafted his email very articulately and that his main goal was to state that the school did not encourage gender roles in sports in any way. In his responses, he acknowledges physiological differences between genders in sports but emphasizes that dedication and hard work should not be underestimated based on gender. His tone is generally inclusive, using respectful language, and advocating for equal opportunities for both genders in sports. When my questions regard the inclusion of girls in football teams, his tone suggests a commitment to inclusivity and highlights the school's efforts to maintain gender balance in sports teams. The athletic director seems to have a positive attitude toward providing equal opportunities for boys and girls in sports. He is clear and asserts that both male and female teams receive equal treatment in terms of training hours, credits, coaches, and other aspects. Interestingly, when I ask for the names of the girls on the team, so I can reach out to them later for interviews, the director cites data protection laws as the reason for not providing names but still shares the school's satisfaction with the high number of players and overall considerable participation from the season, with 20 girls on a team and 24 boys on a the other team. Despite this answer, after finding the players from the girls' team and conducting interviews with several of the players, the interviews revealed a significant distinction between the director's claims and the student's experiences. The three players I interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the low participation experience during practices, with only eight girls at most showing up to practices, which contradicts the director's assertion of equal treatment. On a typical football team, it is required for 11 players to be on the field. This proves that the girls on the team cannot even have proper games due to their lack of participation. The girls I interviewed also had other answers that strongly contrasted with other responses the school director had in his email.

For example, I asked, "Is the girls' football team treated differently by other students, teachers, and the school administration than the [my school name] boys' team?" In his response, he states "no" because, "...they have the same training hours, both teams are given credit, they have the same number of coaches, in addition to many other aspects." However, I soon learned that the athletics director was not telling the full story in his response. There is indeed a school girls' and boys' football team that is equal in many senses as they both practice in the same facilities, with the same number of coaches, the same number of hours and practices a week, etc. Despite these equalities, through my interviews with the girl players from the team, I learned that the girls do not have a league of their own, and therefore are unable to play in competitive games against other school teams, whereas the boys can play every Saturday. He does explain this point directly here, but he hints at this fact in another response to a separate question. His response says, "We are working to create a school women's league. In that case, the games are played every Saturday morning. Once a week." The language in this response was phrased to show that the school is addressing this issue currently, but he also fails to mention how the school is confronting the problem, or in what ways they are providing more playing opportunities for the girls. He also exclaims that "the games" that do get played take place once a week on Saturdays, but also does not specify that these games are "the games" that only the boys get to play. Not having this detail written down demonstrates how he easily changes the focus of the response to ensure that the playing opportunities of the teams are not seen as imbalanced and favorable towards the boys' team. The imbalance of treatment of the teams will be explained further in the next section of this paper.

When presented with these key differences in the responses, I thought of two possible reasons why the athletics director and the actual girls' team responded differently when asked

the same questions. The girls I had interviewed were given at most a minute to read the questions before I asked them my question, to give them time to think of their responses. Despite having some time to think of what to say, they were given way less time than my athletics director, who had access to my email with the questions for two weeks until he responded. Therefore, it was more likely for the answers from the girls to be more honest, especially given that they all had similar responses. In contrast, my school athletics director was provided with the questions by email, giving him time to review, reread, and thoughtfully plan out responses. As it took him two weeks to respond, and a lengthy, articulate process of checking in with the school principal and journalism teacher, it is presumable that his responses were also fabricated to fit a certain narrative for the school. He likely had the intent to appear as most equitable as possible. Power works in a multitude of ways, and highlighted by my encounter with the athletic director, I noticed a distinct way in which power is used to manipulate and maintain male control.

In a survey conducted by the players' union FIFPRO, it highlighted many great disparities in women's football in Spain, in response to the recent 2023 women's world cup events. Some of the main concerns it emphasized: out of 260 players surveyed, 10% did not undergo a pre-tournament medical examination, and 22% did not have an electrocardiogram, which the union deems unacceptable. Two-thirds of players felt they were not in peak condition at the tournament's start, with 53% stating insufficient rest before their opening game. Despite FIFPRO guidelines recommending a four-week off-season break, 86% returned to their clubs in less than two weeks.

Financial issues were highlighted, with one in three women earning less than \$30,000 annually, and one in five needing a second job. FIFA responded, confirming prize money distribution but FIFPRO emphasized that many players still lack adequate financial compensation. Concerns about technical staff quality, a call for further player-centric improvements in women's football, club football structures, uneven match distribution, and more were also noted. All in all, in special regard to the financial setbacks the players from the women's team had, the Five-year RFEF agreement from 2022 that was said to earn the women money from sponsorships and image rights does not exactly align with the main message from the FIFPRO report of this year. Luis Rubiales, president of the RFEF at the time, even added: "We have to promote women's sport. We are working to shorten the distances with the men and we are grateful to the players for trusting in the benefits of this agreement." Ironically, Luis Rubiales, who exclaimed that women football players were on the path to getting equally treated, is a significant symbol of male dominance and abuse in the sports world.

Rubiales is considered a primary contributor to the continuing discrimination toward female football players in Spain. He fully disregards the treatment the women make claims about and the abuse they have to endure from the federation, which includes him. Yet given his role, Rubiales has been involved in promoting various aspects of men's and women's Spanish football to the public. He could portray the RFEF as something better than it was, but was not living it out in practice, especially when he violated Jennifer Hermoso by kissing her without her consent.

In both cases, with Luis Rubiales, and my school's athletics director, men in power paint an unrealistic portrait of the gender equity within the sport of football, to maintain a socially acceptable image. These two men have the power to send information out to the world about what their teams look like and the experiences of the players without knowing or sharing the real facts. The power dynamics reflect how those in authority can shape narratives, perpetuate

traditional gender norms, and resist efforts to challenge systemic inequalities. This pattern of men holding these influential jobs is one of the ways the masculine gender dominates in sports.

Chapter 4: Girls' Team Comparison and Interview Conclusions

The most significant part of my research was the interviews I conducted with the girls' team. I reached out to eight members of the girls on the team through email requesting an interview and three girls responded. Interviews were conducted following a structured set of questions designed to initiate and guide conversations and were held one-on-one with each team member. I followed a list of seven questions, but as the discussion was established, the interviews naturally deviated from my questions. All interviews were video recorded on iPhone and subsequently transcribed, each lasting about 15 minutes with participants. I also established with my interviewees that they had the choice to say no to video recording, but all participants agreed. The structure of the interview was relaxed. I began with several questions that served to ensure a nonjudgmental environment, followed by more "to the point" ones. Some of these questions followed along the line like, "Is football your main sport? And "What do you like the most and the least about playing football?," and others were more discerning, including, "What's your experience of playing football as a girl in Spain? And "Have you faced challenges because you are a girl who plays football in Spain?" To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data, I read through all interviews multiple times, aiming to identify potential themes or patterns within the collected responses from the girls. The use of video recording also allowed me to analyze the girls' physical responses to certain questions and allowed an analysis of body composure/facial expressions and an examination of their comfortability with the asking of certain questions. The data was then organized and categorized based on emergent themes, into categories of either peer pressure or positions of power, and smaller common patterns as well. Finally, I drew parallels to outside research conducted on similar themes and found similarities and differences between my study and the outside research.

Participant background information

First, each one of the girls I interviewed had not always lived in Spain. All three girls moved to Spain from Miami, Florida, within the last two years. They grew up in the U.S.A. yet none of the participants had known each other before this school year, and became closer friends through school. Despite this, each girl is in a different grade, with the youngest in 9th, another in 10th, and the eldest in 11th. Either girl has a Hispanic or Latino background from their parents, having at least a baseline fluency in Spanish. Playing football is not their main sport, which might speak to how they answered my question about their relationship to the sport. The 9th-grade girl plays competitive lacrosse, the 10th-grader plays competitive tennis, and the 11th grade explained that she had never really participated in sports until football at school. Lastly, the girls all explained that they had joined the school team this year because they would receive elective credits for the activity.

Patterns from One-on-One Interviews

After reviewing the responses from the three girls, I was able to distinguish the main patterns that would show up in their responses, and key differences between the treatment of the boys' and girls' teams, and the opportunities offered to both. First, I asked the girls (with all of them present together) some logistics about the team; where their practices took place, their team uniforms, etc.. While the athletics director stated



previously in his email that the boys' and girls' teams get equal privileges in every aspect, his statement seems false based on the girls' answers. It appears he also chose not to mention significant factors that would support the direct opposite of what he said in the email. For instance, the girls immediately pointed out that they were highly disappointed with the fact that the school had an additional two highly competitive league teams designated only for the boys. These teams are called the Getafe international football teams, and though they are not the 'school's' teams, Getafe has people who work at the school, all the players attend the school, and get picked up from school to go to their practices every day. On the Getafe teams, the boys have training every day and games at least once a week. The teams have their own private buses that drive them to games throughout Spain. They practice on the real Getafe football field and have real Getafe coaches. Other advantages of playing for the boys' team include personal physical therapists who will practice if the boys are injured. The boys have practice uniforms, as well as an entire additional uniform for their games. The boys also have access to more updated equipment and training devices that help them with testing and improving their game. As stated before though, the Getafe teams are only offered to boys, and there is no separate league team at the school that the girls have an opportunity to play on.

The athletics director not only misguides the community about the state of equality but also raises concerns about my institution's commitment to providing fair and equitable opportunities for all student-athletes, regardless of gender.

Despite this, one may argue that the athletics director is only discussing the opportunities shared by the *school* girls' and boys' football teams. Even so, the girls described other factors that present unfair treatment between the two. For instance, when I asked one of the girls I interviewed, "What are your uniforms like?" She responded that their team does not get uniforms. However, as she answered, she did not seem upset by this fact. She had simply responded honestly to my question and seemed indifferent about not having a uniform. Following this interview, I looked into what the boys' football uniforms are like. Through research I conducted on my own, I observed that the school's Instagram account posts images of only the *school's* (not Getafe's) boys' football team, in which in every photo the boys are wearing team uniforms with the school's logo on it. Once again, the boys' team receives more than the girls' team.

In another question, I asked a girl, "Where does your team practice? Is it in the same location as the boys'?" My interviewee responded that her team practices on the "baby field" at a sports facility nearby at the same time as the boys, who play on a larger football field. Once I had asked this question, she started to notice that I was trying to compare and contrast the boys' treatment and benefits, and girls' team treatment and benefits, and became more angry in her response. By referring to their practice field as the "baby field," the girl subtly conveyed a sense of frustration and resentment. This choice of words implies that the girls' team is relegated to an inferior or less significant space compared to the boys, who practice on a larger football field. The use of the term "baby field" may not only be a descriptive label but also a reflection of the perceived inequality in resources and opportunities between the two teams.

Concerning the girls' attitudes about these inequities, the girls all displayed similar outlooks. Instead of being angry, the girls had a very positive opinion of football at the school in general and spoke highly of their team and love for it. For instance, when asked, "What advice would you give students who want to join the team?" the 11th-grade

girl responded, “I would say just join it! It’s honestly really fun, it gives you something to do, and it just makes you closer with...other girls from different grades...” In her answer, her body composure was relaxed, she was smiling, and her tone was upbeat and encouraging. The 9th-grade student responded similarly, saying “I would say to join it, and to join it to have fun and go. Don’t just join it to sign up for a club, and receive the credits, but never go...” This student had the same friendly composure. They both shared how much they enjoyed being on the team, and the fun they have playing. They also mention the lack of participation, yet instead of indicating this fact as a negative thing, the only reason why students should join, communicate a sense of promotion of the team.

I noticed the girls showed a lack of urgency to confront these issues, so I was eager to question them more about it. I started to introduce more questions like “How does it make you feel when the boys have three teams as opposed to the girls only having one?” and “What has been the largest setback of being on the girls’ football team?” I even asked the girls about their opinions on the Women’s 2023 World Cup Debate, beginning the discussion with the question “Are you aware of the 2023 women’s World Cup controversy with Jennifer Hermoso and Luis Rubiales?” When asking the girls how much they knew about the conflict, they possessed a general knowledge of the events but needed me to share additional information. Eventually, all the girls agreed that Jennifer Hermoso was wronged and that Rubiales should receive some form of sanction for his act. However, they also demonstrated little passion or interest in the topic. They had short sentence-length responses and did not question my interest in the relevance of the topic. Despite my increased directness about referencing the inequalities between the girls’ and boys’ teams and in outside examples as well with men’s and women’s sports, the girls overall presented an accepting attitude.

The 9th grade student explained in particular that it was upsetting of course, but she did not want to advocate for the girls’ team to have games. She said that on the Bears (the school’s team mascot), “there is nothing we have to worry about.” This is the same student that plays competitive Lacrosse where she has multiple posts of her team wins on social media, and her devotion to practices and games. After asking the 10th-grade student these same questions as well, she mentioned that “it is frustrating, but it does not require a lot from me and I don’t want our team to be as competitive as the boys’ team.” Similarly, this student’s main sport is tennis, not football. From follow-up questions I had asked her, I learned that she practices tennis more often, and plays football only for fun. The two girls shared a common interest in football because to them, it is just a team game where they are not required to be competitive team players. Instead, they are competitive in their primary sports, tennis and lacrosse, where they devote most of their energy.

Conclusions:

A common thread among the girls’ responses is their awareness of the unequal treatment between the girls’ and boys’ teams at the school. While the gender dynamics frustrate them, they express a level of acceptance of this reality. This acceptance appears to stem from their lack of investment in the sport, which then prompts their lack of investment to challenge or change the existing disparities within the school’s football program. The three girls approach football as a fun pastime, compared to the boys who devote their entire high school career to playing competitively.

In a separate study that explored women's level of competition and corresponding reasons, the research references previously available literature review that suggests that women tend to be more reluctant than men to engage in competitive interactions. This competitiveness gender difference is often attributed to women's more pronounced risk aversion, but recent studies propose that it might be linked to the excess entry of men in sports due to overconfidence rather than differences in risk aversion. (Frick, 2021; Moser, 2021). The collective number of boys engaged in football, encompassing both the school's team and the Getafe teams, exceeds 80, contrasting with the reported '20' girls on the football team, a figure that is, in reality, only 8. According to Frick and Moser's study, the research proposes that the boys' dismissive attitude towards girls joining sports, combined with the significant majority of boys already participating, may have created an intimidating environment for girl players. This competitive atmosphere may have discouraged girls from engaging in sports, as they might not have been inclined to match the established level of competition. The 11th grader mentioned the biggest struggle with the team is "getting girls to show up." As stated earlier in this paper, she states that girls do not commonly play football in Spain and are not used to seeing it as a real sport because they only view football as a fun elective which they will get credits.

Moreover, in addition to the difference in competition levels, the girls' withdrawn emotional engagement in football could also be due to the school's continual emphasis on promoting and enhancing the boys' teams. To conclude, beyond the identified influencing factors, my research highlights several contributors to this gendered acceptance. These include the pervasive influence of peer pressure within the school, the impact of power structures reinforcing male dominance in football, and the overall discriminatory framework of athletics within the school, which historically has favored providing 'more' opportunities for male athletes.

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