

Book Review



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RUBIO K (ED.). WOMEN AND SPORT IN BRAZIL: MANY ROLES, A SINGLE STRUGGLE. SÃO PAULO: EDITORA LAÇOS; 2021. ISBN 978-65-89694-00-7.

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As a child growing up in the 1950s, I knew the names of lots of Brazilian athletes. Amongst them were Gilmar, Djalma Santos, Didi, Garrincha, Vava and, of course, Pelé, only ten years older than me in 1958 when, as a seventeen year old, he announced himself to the world by scoring two goals in his country's 5-2 win over Sweden in the World Cup Final. I doubt if I even have to point out that all of the athletes whose names I knew so well were male footballers. The only female Brazilian athlete who came to my attention around the same time was Maria Bueno who won the Wimbledon ladies' singles title for the first time in that same summer when Pelé and his teammates were hitting the headlines and international football would never be quite the same again. Since then male footballers and even Formula One drivers have come and gone but any new knowledge on my part about women's sport in Brazil has been lamentably limited, much to my shame even though it is largely a consequence of the global lack of attention that has been paid to women's sport in the intervening years. I came to Women and Sport in Brazil, therefore, eager to learn and learn I did.

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As the organizer of the editorial board, Katia Rubio has done a remarkable job in bringing together contributors not only from Brazil itself but also from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Japan, Portugal and Spain. The result is a preface by Isabel Salgado, an Olympian in Moscow (1980) and Los Angeles (1984), an introduction by Rubio, and 13 chapters covering a range of issues. These include Brazil's female Olympians, the career transition of female athletes, sexual orientation, race, parasports, motherhood, traditional or indigenous games, coaching, physical education, and combat sports. The aim of the book, according to Rubio, is to instigate "[...] reflections for people who intend to make sport a multiple, plural, and democratic social phenomenon (p. 13)"¹. To that end, the book "talks about many women who faced the challenge of being athletes or working in the sports environment, either as a manager or a coach (p. 13)"¹. Two things become immediately apparent. Intersectionality will be of considerable importance in the book and so too will be the life stories of women who have taken part in the struggle to achieve recognition for women's sport in Brazil. As Melo et al. comment in the chapter on career transition, theirs is "[...] a project about listening to women (p. 31)"² as, one would argue, all good projects about women and sport should be.

In the opening chapter, Rubio traces the history of Brazilian women's involvement in the Olympics. In 1932 swimmer Maria Lenk became the first Brazilian woman, indeed the first Latin American woman, to compete in the Games. However, whereas the 1930s and 1940s was an era of increased participation, the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by stagnation. As Rubio notes, "It seems paradoxical that in a country where football is recognized as a part of culture, it was forbidden to women (p. 18)"³. It is certainly a paradox but one that was by no means unique to Brazil. It was not until 1979 that women in Brazil were allowed to participate in all sports and the first Olympic medals were eventually won in 1996. Although only mentioned in passing, arguably the greatest achievement to date was the women's volleyball team's gold at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, not least in light of the iconic status accorded to women's volleyball in the host country, the representatives of which could only win bronze on that occasion.

Like their counterparts in other countries, Brazilian lesbian athletes, according to Francisco and Rubio⁴, "[...] have used sports spaces for acts of resistance in response to the hierarchical system (p. 57)". Meanwhile, as Ferreira Junior⁵ writes in a chapter devoted to afro-Brazilian sprinter and jumper Melânia Luz, the history of women of

colour in Brazilian sports has been one of “[...] bans, prejudice, invisibility, resistance and transgression (p. 61)”. Luz’s relative obscurity is contrasted by Ferreira Junior to the wider recognition afforded to the white Olympian, Maria Lenk.

It is invidious to select a favorite chapter from a collection of such informative and thoughtful essays. However, I shall do so all the same. In chapter seven, Veloso et al.⁶ follow the journey made by Soraia André César, a black Brazilian judoka, who was a pioneer of judo in Brazil at a time when it was still forbidden to women. She participated in the Seoul (1988) and Barcelona (1992) Olympics when women’s judo was at last allowed into the Olympic programme. The chapter begins with quite a lengthy theoretical discussion. However, it is when the authors turn their focus directly to Soraia André that their account becomes not only attention grabbing but almost elegiac. Soraia André developed her interest in judo from an early age and immediately began to face obstacles erected in response to her age, gender and race.

Yet, in Seoul in 1988, “[...] the moment her bare feet touched the Olympic mat, Soraia André was present in a space from where the time of the game unfolds, where no other Brazilian woman had been before (p. 124)”⁶. Her fifth-place finish “[...] filled the judoka with the terrible pain of finitude absent from the horizon of a feat for permanence and transcendence (p. 124)”⁶. So life, in her own words ‘almost became death’. She was defeated in the first round in Barcelona and, although she won medals in the Pan-American Games, she was subsequently excluded from the national team following a dispute over funding. She dyed her kimono black as a sign of mourning and retired from judo. According to Veloso et al⁶, “[...] the duration of the black kimono represented the time of adventure and trials related to womanhood, and even more so the time of forbidden representation (p. 127)”.

I have no significant criticisms of this book, only what I hope are constructive observations. Arguably too much is addressed with the result that some important subjects do not receive as much depth of analysis as they deserve. As for omissions, the role of the sport media in Brazil receives relatively scant attention and, given the relevance of intersectionality to so many of the topics that are explored, I would have liked to read more about the influence of social class, so often ignored in intersectional analyses.

I came to this collection of essays only too aware of how little I knew about the subject matter. I now know considerably more and intend to make it my business to

continue to take an interest in women's sport in Brazil. There can scarcely be any greater compliment to those who have contributed to this fascinating, ground-breaking volume.

References

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- 4 Francisco WV, Rubio K. Lesbians in the Olympic sport: a history of media indiscretions that is repeated in Brazil. In Rubio K (ed.). *Women and sport in Brazil: many roles, a single struggle*. São Paulo: Editora Laços; 2021. p. 49-60.
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- 6 Veloso RC, Rosina D, Perez CR. A heroine's journey: women's pioneerism and protagonism in Brazilian Olympic sport. In Rubio K (ed.). *Women and sport in Brazil: many roles, a single struggle*. São Paulo: Editora Laços; 2021. p. 113-131.