

(DIS)AGREEMENTS

**TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES
IN DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN'S
SPORT IN AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA:
PERSPECTIVES OF SPANISH
SPORTSWOMEN**

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| introduction*

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This edition of the *(Dis)Agreements* section explores the topic of this issue of *L'Atalante*, "Women and Sport in Audiovisual Media: Bodies, Images, Politics" from the perspective of the people whose bodies appear in sports images: sportswomen themselves. A diverse group of Spanish sporting professionals were interviewed about their opinions on the depictions of sportswomen in audiovisual media based on their own experience with such depictions. To cover the wide range of audiovisual media options available today for disseminating information on sports, the questions here revolve around three key elements: depictions of sports in film and television fiction; sports coverage in the mass media; and self-representation on social media. In recent years, there has been considerable debate over patterns of invisibility and stereotyping of women in sport, which have tended to relegate female athletes to an inferior position in relation to their male counterparts. Indeed, as the analysis by Dayna B. Daniels (2008)

reveals, there are key differences in the way the image of sportswomen in films and other media is constructed through language use, character construction and filming strategies, all based on the conservative values associated with the traditional conception of the female. Conversely, the presence in sports films of male athletes lauded as heroes is an established trend in entertainment history. In such films, the depiction of women is invariably limited to the archetypal opposition between "inspirational muse" and *femme fatale* (Crosson, 2013), the former generally given the role of wives or cheerleaders of the male heroes (Daniels, 2008). With this in mind, we wanted to explore the role played by films and TV series in inspiring or influencing the careers of these sportswomen. Are there any positive role models for women in specific sports? Or can inspiration only be found in films about specific men's sports?

"Women characters within sports films tend to repeat, with some crucial differences, positions

defined in non-fictional discourse of sport” (Tudor, 1997: 95). With this in mind, in the case of media coverage we were interested in exploring what goes on both on and off the “field” (or pitch, stadium, track, or ring), covering both what is shown and what is rendered invisible: the shots, plays and facets of the sport that are displayed and those that are withheld from view, whether for technical or political reasons. In this way, we sought to identify any differences based on class, race, gender or disability that the sportswomen have experienced in this media construction. Today, even with the increased participation of women in sport, female athletes continue to be ignored and their achievements continue to be given less coverage (López-Albala, 2016), perpetuating the gender gap in traditional media such as the press and television (Adá Lameiras, 2019). This invisibility is not just a question of the number of news stories or the time they are given on screen; it is also a question of content. As Alba Adá Lameiras (2019) points out, news stories about sportswomen rely on images that either highlight their beauty or focus on their personal and family lives rather than on their sporting achievements, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes.

In relation to the role of social media, we have asked these sportswomen about how they represent themselves online and their potential status as celebrities. Celebrity is not so much a set of inherent personality traits as it is a performative practice that involves building a fan base, performing intimacy, authenticity and accessibility, and constructing a consumable persona (Marwick & boyd, 2011: 140). It is therefore important to understand how sportswomen experience the tension between their personal and professional lives on social media in an age when these platforms greatly reduce the distance between the public and the private, as authors such as Anne Jerslev and Mette Mortensen (2018) have shown. The analysis of sportswomen as celebrities reveals the

social conditions that influence the way they present themselves online.

In all these media representations and audiovisual products, there is one question in particular that we were interested in exploring: the depiction of the female body in relation to sport. Depictions of sportswomen in film and on television reveal a dichotomy between the transgressive potential of the female athlete’s body and its sexualisation and objectification (Lindner, 2013). As Emma Pullen and Michael Silk (2019) have demonstrated in their extensive review of the literature, media coverage of the bodies of sportswomen with disabilities has historically been characterised by “asexual objectification”, trivialisation and infantilisation. Ana Pastor Pascual (2020) suggests that sport is a gender technology and a biopolitical institution that reinforces the male-female gender binary, with mechanisms such as medical examinations to detect testosterone levels, the division of sports into men’s and women’s categories, and the *gendering* of certain sports. This complicates the participation of intersex and trans people in sport, with the media treating trans women athletes as “intruders” in women’s sports (Curbelo, 2023), just as previously the presence of women in the masculinised context of sport was itself considered an intrusion (Lindner, 2013). It also forces female athletes to embody a hegemonic, heteronormative femininity, which includes, for example, not being too muscular. In this sense, in the sporting world both gender performance and female masculinity are viewed as subversive acts of the body (Pastor Pascual, 2020). The White construction of normative femininity systematically marginalises racialised women in sport and in other fields, as is evident in sports media coverage, which generally renders Black women invisible or depicts them with negative stereotypes, subjecting them to “controlling images” such as the mammy, the matriarch, the jezebel, or the welfare queen (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016).

In view of these considerations, this section aims for diversity in terms of both the sports concerned and the profiles of the women who play them. The interviewees compete in a wide range of both team and individual sports, including mountain running, basketball, athletics, volleyball and boxing. And although all of the interviewees have competed at a professional level in Spain, their profiles differ in terms of age, class, gender, race and functional diversity. In addition to these factors, we believe that the different backgrounds of these sportswomen will facilitate a diverse picture of the current state of women's sport in Spain and its depiction in audiovisual media. The interviewees are:

Laila Palau (born in Barcelona, 1979), former basketball player and current sports executive for the team Spar Girona. She is the player with the most caps and medals at the national level in the history of Spanish basketball, including the silver medal at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

Núria Picas (born in Manresa, 1976), mountain runner with the Catalan selection who has won numerous competitions, including the Ultra Trail World Cup in 2012 and the inaugural Ultra Trail World Tour in 2014. In 2022, she won the Ultra Pirineu, beating her previous record by 17 minutes, after taking a three-year hiatus due to an injury.

Omaira Perdomo (born in Las Palmas, Canary Islands, 1999), volleyball player and trans sportswoman who has played with the team CCO7 Las Palmas in the Iberdrola league (Superliga), following numerous achievements including winning the Spanish Championship with the J. A. V. Olímpico volleyball team.

Adiaratou Iglesias (born in Bamako, Mali, 1999), para athlete who represented Spain at the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo, where she won gold and silver medals in two different para athletics categories, following numerous accomplishments in national and international competitions, inclu-

ding two silver medals at the World Para Athletics Championship.

Tania Álvarez (born in Barcelona, 2002), boxer, winner of the Spanish women's Super Bantamweight Championship in 2023, with an impressive record that includes competing at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

The presentation of the profiles above conforms to a standard that reflects one of the ideas about sport that we are interested in exploring here: the culture of individual achievements and success. With this in mind, before providing the opportunity for them to represent themselves, we believe it important to recognise these sportswomen, beyond their individual accomplishments, as role models in their sports, and to acknowledge the political implications of their status as individuals in the public sphere and pioneering negotiators of relationships with the body, identity, and competitive practices. ■

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discussion

PERSPECTIVES

I. When thinking about films that deal with women and sport, titles like *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002) or *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2005) come to mind for most people. But there are other lesser-known productions that offer very bold and personal perspectives. What is your opinion about how the sport you play is depicted in films, series and documentaries? Do you remember any titles or characters who have served as role models for you?

Laia Palau

As I'm 44 years old, my generation really didn't have any films about women playing sports when we were kids. The biggest female role model who did amazing things was Sarah Connor, the apocalyptic warrior in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991) or, if I think harder about it, Catwoman. Beyond that, I didn't have any role models for women in sport. There are more role models now. Apart from *Million Dollar Baby* and *Bend It Like Beckham*, there is also *Love & Basketball* (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2000), for example. In any case, there aren't many women playing sport on screen, so basically my role models were men.

Núria Picas

We have a lot of role models on screen for my sport, and moreover, the footage taken in the mountains are really spectacular. We are lucky in that the footage of sportswomen in this case, whether they're climbing or running up the mountain, always comes with awesome scenery. So, we have an advantage over football, basketball and other sports. I have been really influenced, for example, by reports like the ones about Kilian Jornet or films like Alex Honnold's *Free Solo* (2018), which won an Oscar. The free-climbing footage in Yosemite is the one that has had the biggest impact on me in my life. If we go further back, I was inspired by the documentary *Everest* (Greg Mac-

Gillivray & David Breashers, 1998) starring Araceli Segarra, which introduced the Everest climb in IMAX format. I was also extremely influenced by the documentary about the rock climber Lynn Hill (*Free Climbing the Nose*, Lynn Hill, 1997), who climbed a legendary route known as The Nose, on the El Capitán rock formation. She is the first person to free climb The Nose, without any artificial support.

Omaira Perdomo

I've never seen myself represented in sport because no stories similar to mine have ever been told. When I started playing volleyball, I remember that there was nobody similar to my situation, so I could never fully identify with anyone. I could identify with role models who had a very strong, competitive personality, like Serena Williams, who has always been very optimistic when she fights for what she wants. Her personality fits well with mine, because she works really hard to achieve her goals. I can see myself reflected in her competitiveness and aggression on the court. In my case, becoming a role model to so many, opening that door for so many people or giving peace of mind to so many parents with children in the same situation as mine who play sports, makes me proud. It's important to construct role models so that everyone can feel represented in sport.

I think sport really needs to be reflected in films and series, especially women's sport. There are a lot of films and series that show you how wonderful and how hard sport can be, what it's like to be playing at the top competitive level, but I think a lot more stories need to be told that deal with different situations, like the one I have lived through since childhood, for example. I really like films like *I, Tonya* (Craig Gillespie, 2017) and *King Richard* (Reinaldo Marcus Green, 2021), but I think there should be a lot more where the audience can see themselves represented and can talk about things that happen that are not okay but that we often keep quiet about.

Adiaratou Iglesias

I think those films—*Bend It Like Beckham* and *Million Dollar Baby*—were the ones that inspired me most when they came out. Seeing women playing

sport in those days was really new and I think it was a key time for women.

Tania Álvarez

In films, series and documentaries about boxing, they nearly always depict boxing as a sport played by people from low socioeconomic backgrounds with no education who are troubled or aggressive, and who have a fatal ending like dying or suffering severe injuries. Both for men and for women, the view of boxing in film and television productions tends to present these factors that create a bleak impression of the sport: poverty, aggression, violence, injuries and death. For example, in *Million Dollar Baby*, the protagonist (Maggie) is a woman from a low socioeconomic background who barely has enough money to eat; she's from a dysfunctional family and she ends up dying at the end of the film after being made a quadriplegic in her last fight.

2. Another important way of representing of sport on screen is in broadcasts of sporting events. What differences do you see between the way you experience the sporting event, on location, and the way it is treated in a media broadcast? Are there images or actions that are important for you, but that don't tend to be made public in pictures or videos? And conversely, do you find there are any kinds of images that the media repeat or disseminate too often?

Laia Palau

I think we need to improve how we commentate on the sporting event being broadcast. In a lot of cases, the commentators have a paternalistic attitude about how women play sports, at least in basketball. Sportswomen are infantilised and treated with less consideration; they are called "girls" even if they're 35-year-old women, and there is no appreciation for the technical feats they are capable of because of their physical skill. Furthermore, it's hard to sell a product if it doesn't have a good production that shows details, replays, close-ups of the players in action... in other words, if it can't really show their skills. And finally, wo-

men are often judged for their physical appearance instead of their athleticism.

Núria Picas

I do long-distance runs; I run 100km or 160km races, and there are moments when I don't have any cameras around me. That means there are moments when I'm suffering a lot, which I would like to see get coverage, but they don't. Most coverage is of the nice bit, when I reach the finish line, which is triumphant, and people say: "I'd like to be her." But they don't show all the effort that went into it. I would like it if they could show the hours of solitude, the training, spending a whole sum-

mer going out at seven in the morning to avoid the heat, the doctors, the physiotherapy, the diet regime, the loneliness, not being with your kids... They show footage of the victory and reaching the finish line that gets replayed over and over. Afterwards, when I'm with my friends they say to me that I get my shoes, my Gore-Tex or my granola bars for free, but really I don't get anything for free; I've had to work for everything and I've paid for it with effort and sweat, which is something people obviously don't see. That's why I would like these things to get more coverage.

Omaira Perdomo

Everything revolves around the glass ceiling. Everyone has always said that men's sport sells and that women's sport doesn't so much, and I think that is a big lie. It depends on the sport, the fans and the people who follow it. Obviously, there are sports that are much more important for the media, like football, basketball or tennis. They are viewed as more important and significant than minority sports like volleyball, which is the sport I play. For example, here in Spain, women's volleyball is much more famous than men's, but the men still get paid much more than the women and men tend to get much more media attention than women.

As for the broadcasts, a couple of years ago it was a difficult issue in volleyball that there weren't so many people who watched the live broadcasts on a constant basis. Nowadays, you can follow the league on YouTube, but not all the broadcasts are the same quality. The image quality varies depending on the club, the funding and the priority they give to live coverage. It should be given higher priority, because all audiovisual coverage is important to hook in outsiders, so they can see that there are other sports and how cool it can be to play at the elite level in one. So, I think we should be giving a lot more priority to creating better live broadcasts, because honestly, in this country, compared to volleyball in other countries, the quality of the broadcasts and commentators falls a little bit short.

In the Spanish media, the negative side of sport is what tends to get talked about most. The positive side, like competitions or medals won, doesn't tend to get much coverage. But there tends to be a lot of talk about the bad side of volleyball, like transphobia, homophobia, racism, or child abuse... or for example, clubs that haven't paid their players and have been reported by the Sports Association. I've experienced some very difficult situations in the sport that have ended up being made public. There is a lot more talk about the negative side of national volleyball than the positive side, but the truth is that I see it as normal, because the things going on inside this federation are shameful.

Adiaratou Iglesias

I think that these days, especially in the world of sport, these things are handled tactfully, but it is true that sometimes it can be stressful because they twist the words of the professionals or present an image that perhaps is not what best represents them or is not what the athlete would like.

Tania Álvarez

To tell the truth, I wouldn't know whether there are differences or not, because it's been years since a boxing match was broadcast on television in Spain. However, when I came back from Madison Square Garden after becoming the first Spanish woman boxer to fight there, the television and radio networks did take a lot of interest in broadcasting the news. But several times I was told that they had taken an interest because I was a woman, and because of the issue of feminism today, and if the same news story had been about a man ("The first Spanish boxer to fight at Madison Square Garden"), they wouldn't have been interested. On top of that, the only time a TV network came to a fight here at Castellbisbal [boxing ring] was for the Spanish championship, the first fight in history between two Catalan women, but it wasn't broadcast live, and they didn't replay the whole fight.

3. How do you think the sports press and television shape our understanding of women's sport? Have you ever noticed differential treatment due to gender, race, social class or disability? And along the same lines, do you think there is a preference for celebrating stories of heroism, individualism and drive instead of group stories?

Laia Palau

The media are the ones who decide what is important and what isn't. The way they treat sport matters. If the production, the time scheduling and the stories aren't good, if they're "second class", the people who watch it are going to understand that it's a "second class" sport. There is also differential treatment. What we should be valuing and celebrating is the athlete's ability to endure and to give her best, regardless of gender or race. In society right now, we have a discourse of individualism and success that is misunderstood, which creates a situation where not everyone is treated the same way. I'm not talking about men and women here, but about team sports. We should try to celebrate how the team is working together, not just the individual who stands out from the rest.

Núria Picas

In my case, I've never come up against that problem. I've been lucky in the sense that the press has always treated me well and publicised all my achievements in my sports career. It is true in the case of other sports, as it is right now in women's football or basketball, which have been getting much more attention in the last two years. That makes you realise that they didn't get so much attention before, and then you start thinking about how women's sport has been discriminated against a lot in the media in the last few decades. Now they are giving it much more visibility, which is very positive because young people and kids see it and that creates a desire for constant growth thanks to the promotional power of television. There has been a substantial change that will be noticeable in future generations. A lot of girls are playing football now, which just a little

while ago was unthinkable, thanks to the importance given to Alexia Putellas and Aitana Bonmatí. These generations need role models. And they only have role models if they can see them. In other words, if you don't see them, they're not there. You have to search for them and it's harder. That's why the images in the media in this case help a lot.

Omaira Perdomo

I have experienced a lot of difficult situations in relation to this issue. The press is always going to look for what sells. I'm a transgender volleyball player, the first one in this country, and the youngest one in the world. That's why overnight I wound up on all the front pages all over the world. But what were they selling? My ability as an athlete or the fascination of being the first? A lot of people sold it as something really great, praising what I'd achieved. But others just talked about it to create debate or report on the presence of trans sportswomen. It's a double-edged sword: I was doing what I really wanted to do, which was to be playing in the sport and to be like any of my teammates, but I started to realise that I was different from them, because the media gave me an importance that they didn't give any of the others. So, this type of situation ended up creating individualism within the group. And added to this is the fact that female groups tend to be a little complicated because there are a lot of people who like being the stars, who don't like seeing others stand out.

Overnight I turned into a major role model. I went from being an unknown to having people knocking on my door every day. This was hard on me and on the people around me. Then, as time goes by, you realise that you end up turning into

an object. Because people aren't cheering you for your abilities, but because you've opened a door, perhaps in a positive way. There are also people who are talking about you as the star simply because you're a novelty, because your story sells. At the end of the day, I know that being a trans woman today is not a fad, but it's good click bait. Everyone wants to get involved in the debate; everyone wants to have a say. It's a controversial topic. There are a lot of people who may be in favour, a lot against, and a lot on the fence about it. It's understandable. And what most of the media want to do is create this excitement, this consumerism around the topic. As a result, as time goes by, you end up wondering: Are they cheering me for what I've achieved? Or simply because I'm trans and they want to take advantage of the fascination?

Everything that has happened to Jenni Hermoso in these last few months has been a clear example of this. We've won the world championship in women's football and yet a lot more attention has been given to a misogynist incident than to the fact that Spain are world champions for the first time. If you compare it to 2010, when the men's team won the World Cup, you see how people celebrated in the streets and how it brought the country together. The same thing could have happened now with the women's team, but everything got twisted by sexualisation and misogyny. There is a big problem there. And there is also the big debate over how a female world champion is not perceived in the same way as a man. This happens in football and in any other sport. It seems ridiculous to me, but I think it's necessary for us to talk about situations like this so that they don't happen again in the future and to raise awareness among the future generations.

We often keep quiet about things that happen to us in sport, like misogyny, the glass ceiling, the wage gap or the violations of our privacy. These

are very difficult situations that we experience because we're sportswomen, which men in our same situation don't experience because they're more privileged in this sense. Ever since I was little, I've been in an important club, at a high-performance centre, so I always had to be perfect because there was always a spotlight on me. As a teenager I couldn't post whatever I felt like posting on social media, or do what a teenage girl normally does, like fall in love, go partying, or experiment with things like drinking, smoking or trying different foods. We were kept under strict control in that sense: you have to be perfect and watch what you eat. On the other hand, for the men it has never been the same. That has always made me really angry. They treat us women like we were in the army. These are things that we should dare to talk about and stop normalising this kind of treatment, sexualising us or treating us any way they like.

Adiaratou Iglesias

I honestly think we need to start calling it "sport for women" because the way I see it, the term "women's sport"... What is it? It could end up confusing the boys and girls because there is no sport that is more a "woman's sport" than any other; it's just sport. We need to change the term and use a better one. These days it is true that there is still a huge difference between press coverage of women compared to men, and that is a fact, but I think it will keep changing. We women haven't been in the world of sport for very long, and little by little we're changing things. I don't know whether one day we'll get to full equality in the media or in anything else, but I think we'll get close. The coverage of people with disabilities in the media is a different matter altogether; that happens less often because the public isn't interested, but honestly that's not what concerns me most right now. I think that things are changing a lot, and we have to take it step by step.

Tania Álvarez

Within the world of boxing, I've never noticed differential treatment based on gender, race, social class or disability. But I have seen it in society. People who don't know this sport have a very bleak view of what it is really: the aggressive and violent view conveyed in films that I mentioned be-

fore. Added to this, as I was saying, the media do take an interest in news related to feminism, like the headline "The First Spanish Woman Boxer to Fight at the Legendary Madison Square Garden", and thus women's sport, boxing in this case, can get more coverage.

4. Certain sportswomen are viewed as celebrities because their image transcends the world of sport and their personal lives become public, on TV shows and even in the tabloids. Given that brands and sponsors are an important part of the sportswoman's image, perhaps even more so in non-mainstream sports that offer more modest pay, what approaches or strategies do you think can be used to reconcile public profile and professional integrity?

Laia Palau

With the rise of social media, a lot of athletes are now depicting their own public image; we are providing the information. The boundaries have blurred a little. The media doesn't have the power over the information anymore. We are making the mistake of thinking that the person is the athlete, but you should be able to maintain your privacy, apart from showing how you work or publicising yourself. In the case of minority sports, as there is less coverage of the sport, we have to use other ways to make ourselves visible. But I think there is a need to make a very clear distinction between the profession and the person, for the athlete's own protection. Your personal life is something private that should be left out of the general public's judgement. I know that we're living in the information age, but I think we need to protect people and only judge their professional lives, without delving into the details of their private lives. I think that sometimes public criticism can end up harming us.

sporting life takes a turn; you go from being an amateur to being a professional, and on the one hand you're a mirror and a role model, but on the other, people know you and you need to be careful. You need to be a "public personality", which means you're in the public eye. Thus, whatever you do, whether in the sport or outside it, is also important. I think that in this case we sportswomen have the responsibility to try to present a good image, to be a role model in a particular sport and also to be a role model in public life in general. And we can't complain because this brings us some good things, even if it means we lose some privacy.

Núria Picas

There comes a moment when you're under everyone's gaze because you're a good athlete and you've been successful, and you end up becoming a mirror for better or for worse. As a result, your

Omaira Perdomo

I earn a lot more money from giving interviews, talking about my life, taking part in discussion panels or being the face for exclusive brands than I do from playing volleyball. I would say that more than seventy percent of what I earn comes from that, because salaries in sports are absurd. The problem with all this is that when you end up creating a name for yourself and making a living from your image, you can't connect the two things, because your club wants you to work, to train, to give it all. So, when you have a photo shoot job for brands like Adidas, your club gets much more demanding, telling you that you can't miss training

and that sport is your job. On the other hand, this doesn't happen to other players who maybe are dentists or working in a clothing shop. The clubs understand that and see it as a job. But they can't understand that I make a living off social media and my image. I have experienced a lot of difficulties trying to live in both worlds. As of today, in the 2023 season, I decided to focus more on social media than on sport itself, because I wasn't being treated in a way that made me feel comfortable and I wasn't getting the opportunities I felt I deserved. I couldn't reconcile the two things. There came a moment when I was tired and decided to focus more on one side.

I think it's very hard to be a celebrity in sport because the clubs are always going to be watching everything you do and say very closely. At the end of the day, you're not only representing yourself as a celebrity, but the club thinks that you're representing them too, because you're associated with them and with the volleyball federation. For that reason, you have to present a flawless image. At the end of the day, they end up profiting from it. It's difficult when you're invited to events, or to do an ad, and your club isn't happy about it, because it's beneficial for your career, for your image and for your wallet.

How to reconcile your public profile with professional integrity seems to me a very interesting question. I think it's very difficult. It depends on the conditions you agree to when you sign the contract, but there are nasty people out there and you need to remember that you have to train, that it's your job and you can't miss a day, even if the pay is ridiculous for the time and de-

ducation you invest. Sometimes they forget that there is a lot more to our lives than sport, that there are a lot of people who base their everyday lives around sport but that other people do it as a hobby. For me that's how I see it: I love sport, I love volleyball; it has given me everything. I am where I am today thanks to sport, but I also believe that there are many other things in life that represent me more and that I'm much more interested in. That on the day of the match they put up a photo of you, they make a sign with your face on it and they talk about you. That really excites me. These things that sport gives you, that people see you as a role model; it's wonderful. But to achieve other goals, like to be the face of certain things, can also fill you with pride. It's hard to live on the borderline between these two worlds.

Adiaratou Iglesias

I think it's possible to integrate our public profile and our professional integrity by starting with sharing only what we want our followers to know. That's the only way to avoid confusion and the same is true with sponsors: we have to give them what we really think we can give and read the contracts carefully.

Tania Álvarez

These days, in my professional life, what I've seen businesses and sponsors looking for is the profile of a good sportswoman, and at the same time physically attractive so she looks good on social media, or with a good backstory related to feminism (gender violence, misogyny, etc.).

5. What do you think the role of social media is in promoting women's sport, and what do you use it for? When you represent yourself and post content, what type of actions, images or moments do you like to share most? How/when do you usually record them?

Laia Palau

I only use Instagram and I haven't posted anything for a while, because I think it's useful for publicising things, but there are certain things I don't share. I posted certain moments, especially with my teammates in the national selection at the Olympics in 2016. Apart from that I haven't made use of it because I felt it was information that wasn't so important or that made me feel too exposed to opinions that would have me wasting time working out whether I should believe them or not, both the positive and the negative.

Núria Picas

I think that these days communicating fast and effectively is key, because it is a necessity in today's globalised world and we sportswomen have decided to turn it into a big opportunity. In my case, it's an opportunity that enables us to analyse and explain reality to others from our point of view. I realise that there are thousands of people who have some interest in what I do and who follow me, and I try to be honest with them on social media. That imposes a big responsibility on us. I prefer to be genuine and to show what I am rather than just trying to get likes. There are certain moments that people couldn't have access to before but now they can when I capture them with my camera. A point on a climb, a moment of frustration... People are interested in these moments; they're interested to see how you interact when you have a big victory or a disappointment. The scenery also helps a lot. If I take a photo of myself training with the Pedraforca in the background, it will have a lot more visibility than a photo taken of me training in some unknown forest.

For example, in 2022 I won a really important race, the Ultra Pirineu, and I set the record for it. That had a massive impact on social media. This

year I ran the same race, which didn't go well for me, and I finished in what I thought was a terrible position. But I coped really well: I finished the race, and my social media posts showed me suffering, struggling against the elements and against the pain. People also had a lot of engagement with that, as if I had won the race. That's why it's great to be able to show both sides and opposite extremes. People like to see strong emotions. True emotions, not poses. Real emotions: suffering, victories, exertion, perseverance... Not just taking a photo to try to get likes.

Omaira Perdomo

I try to be myself. In my Instagram not all of the content is sport, because I've always connected it with my personal life. But I think it depends on the athlete, on what they want to convey. I want to convey my lifestyle. I've always been very honest and faithful to myself, to my tastes, to what I like to show. I'm aware of what I show and what I don't, but I like to be natural. I want people to see me and say that I'm not just a volleyball player, but that I'm also a cool girl, that they enjoy my content and have a good time watching my pictures and reels.

It makes me proud to know that people like the interviews I do about my profession and experiences. I recently appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* and for me it was a dream come true. I talked about a lot of things related to volleyball. I've had a lot of exposure in the media, and I've had the good fortune to appear in most of the newspapers. It's wonderful to be able to represent your sport, your community and your values; but I've always wanted to show that I'm a trans woman, I'm a sportswoman, but it doesn't rule my life. Yes, I'm a pioneer. Yes, I feel very proud of the woman I am and the goals I've achieved. But I'm so much more than that. That's why on my social media

accounts I want to convey that I'm a completely normal girl, that I live my life, that I have my style and my way of being.

In many cases the depiction of women's sport in reels or TikToks on the club accounts is not generally players in action, but the sexualised bodies of sportswomen. It's something I experience often due to the type of body I have. The photographers often send you photos and the first image is of your butt. There are a lot of clubs that are getting things right on this point, but there are many others that aren't.

Adiaratou Iglesias

Right now, I only share what I want my followers to know and what I think they might find interesting, and therefore rewarding. I always try to convey a message with everything I post because behind it, I don't know who is looking at it.

Tania Álvarez

When promoting women's sport on social media, the role I adopt is "being me naturally". On my social media, I show what my everyday life is like, what I'm doing, etc., while I also show myself off as an athlete and physically. I like to show moments related to sport and my personal life in a natural way. To do this, in my everyday life I generally take photos and record videos so that I can share them.

On my social media accounts, I tend to receive a lot of messages from girls who tell me I'm a role model for them and I encourage them to want to play sport. They also often write to me to thank me for giving visibility to women's boxing, and in doing so, paving the way for their parents to let them play this apparently violent, masculine sport.

6. Considering the historical context of objectification and sexualisation of women's bodies, what is your opinion about how the sportswoman's body is portrayed today? Do you identify a relationship between your image and the normative canons of beauty? And finally, what potential do you see in the sporting body for transgressing binaries?

Laia Palau

I think we've progressed in terms of the image of a physically powerful woman. There has been a clear change in society in relation to health, sport and the idea that a woman should "be in shape". The canons of beauty are not of a strong, tall or big woman. But I find those bodies pretty because I've always been surrounded by them and I feel that behind them is work, care and training.

The binary seems to me a difficult issue. Even for me it isn't very clear. Nature dictates your genes. I'm not talking about how you feel, but about a physical structure that is defined as male and as female. And there is a big difference there between the two sexes. A complete physical difference. It is a debate that society has to keep working on and accepting, and I don't mean in

everyday life, where it seems to me perfectly normal, but it does get complicated when you're talking about the question of physical competitiveness. It's an issue that needs to be examined really closely, because a man's body will always be superior to a woman's in terms of structure. So, I don't know whether we can compete at the same level, because it's not the same and that's why there are different categories.

Núria Picas

A lot of barriers are breaking down. What I want is to show myself naturally, just as I am, and to be judged on my results, my way of understanding the sport and of trying to compete the best I can. I will take care of my image, because I have a bunch of sponsors.

Omaira Perdomo

At the elite level of a sport, you always need to try to keep your body healthy. Debating about what a normative body is today seems completely absurd to me. Every sport has its discipline and needs its specific kind of body. I don't think you're going to expect the same of a volleyball player as you would of a Canarian wrestler. Therefore, what a normative body is depends on the sport.

What we need to give top priority is taking care of our sportswomen. Taking care of them when they don't conform to the canons, because there are a lot of situations where women are afraid to get on a scale or to measure their skinfolds. And this pressure to be in a normative body can lead to a lot of eating disorders. I think there should be a lot more concern about players' mental health, not just about the body, the physical side, your performance in the sport, how much weight you can lift or the level you're training at. Mental health is really important and in women's sport it isn't given much importance. Especially in under-age categories, where young women are starting out.

It's hard to work all your life training with a group of people and because of your body you can't reach the same goal as they can, because you don't fit the same standard, such as height. In volleyball, I've seen a lot of people with huge talent who have been told to quit because they are under six feet tall. That's why I think they should be much more concerned about players' mental health and be really careful about how they say things, how they treat us when dealing with these issues. Because we don't know a person's mental health or what might happen to it in the future. In my case, I've always had the same body, but I've seen a lot of teammates with eating disorders and a lot of worries about getting on a scale or measuring their skinfolds, or because they've been told they have to lose weight.

I've seen a lot of comparisons between teammates related to the canons of beauty. "I'm not

like you," "I could jump higher if I was skinnier," or "I want to be stronger so that I can have more power." And it ends up becoming an obsession for a lot of people. In my case, one of the big problems I've had is that I don't want to look too strong. I'm a tall woman; I stand out a lot for my height. I'm not interested in looking really strong because I build muscles quickly. So, that makes me extremely insecure. And you have a lot of conversations about how you feel about this, but they don't see it as really important, because what they care about is your physical performance and getting the most out of you. It's a very difficult situation that depends on the person, which is why I think mental health is so important.

Adiaratou Iglesias

I don't know of any cases of sexualisation or objectification in my sport. At least in the world of athletics, I think there's room for all kinds of bodies; size or height doesn't matter, nor does race or colour. But unfortunately, there are sports today that go by weight, and others where you have to be really thin and maybe those are the ones right now that are the most dangerous for a boy or girl when they start out in that sport.

Tania Álvarez

I've often received comments from people in society like: "You're so pretty... You're going to ruin your face with boxing." I always reply with a laugh: "I enjoy what I do, and I don't worry about my physical appearance. If I get a broken nose, I'll get a nose job." There are a lot of women boxers right now who look like models when they're weighing in and then they're absolute warriors in the ring. I think we can look good physically and at the same time break the established canons of beauty in the ring. In this way, we can transgress binaries and show that boxing has no gender, and that both men and women can do it. ■

conclusion

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As the five interviews above have effectively demonstrated, opinions about the depiction of women's sport in the media differ depending on the experience, profile and sport of the interviewees; but there are also numerous similarities. Regarding the depiction of women's sport in film and television fiction, it is clear that there is a shortage of female role models—beyond the most obvious well-known cases, like *Bend It Like Beckham* or *Love and Basketball*. Generally, the film and television content viewed by these sportswomen features men in the main roles. In the absence of female role models in sport, fictional characters like Catwoman and Sarah Connor have also been sources of inspiration for sportswomen like Laia Palau. The characters they identify with most are those who show personal determination and strength, which is why they have been inspired by films like *King Richard* (in the case of Omaira Perdomo) or Lynn Hill's *Free Climbing the Nose* (in the case of Núria Picas). We are living in a context that is constantly changing, with clear signs of improvement, which calls for a wider diversity of stories in film and television fiction. As Lindner points out (2013: 239), "there are some useful parallels to be drawn between women's 'intrusion' into the male-dominated world of sports and the entrance of female protagonists into the male-centred genre of the sports film."

Media coverage of women's sports reflects the imbalance that exists in the marketing of sports broadcasts and shows based on gender—and on other factors, such as disability. These inequalities ultimately influence what the athletes are paid. The poor production standards and low quality of broadcasts that lack details, replays or close-ups do not allow for an effective display of sportswomen's skills. In addition to the infantilisation of women in the broadcasts, media discourses generally focus on achievements like being "the first trans woman in Spain to compete at the top level of an Olympic sport" in the case of Omaira Perdomo, or "the first Spanish woman to fight at Madison Square Garden" in the case of Tania Álvarez, instead of giving attention to their effort and development as athletes. Núria Picas points out how the camera invariably captures the same isolated achievements, such as reaching the finish line, without presenting all the hard work and suffering that it took to get there. Several interviewees condemn the sexualisation of sportswomen, in both conventional and social media, when the camera focuses on detail shots of certain parts of the body that have no bearing on the sport. Close-ups and replays in sports broadcasts, while essential for capturing all the action, may sometimes sexualise the players, as Deborah V. Tudor (1997) has pointed out. In film and television depictions

of sportswomen and in sports in general, the largely unachievable established canons of physical beauty continue to exist, with the potential to provoke mental health problems. These canons demand a normative femininity that does not allow for physical qualities like muscularity (Pastor Pascual, 2020). At the same time, media dynamics tend to promote individualism, evident as well in fiction productions about sports (Lindner, 2013), which Laia Palau suggests should be countered by extolling teamwork in the case of team sports.

All of the interviewees are aware of the importance of self-representation on social media for their professional development. Laia Palau and Adiaratou Iglesias limit the level of personal information they share online, while Núria Picas, Omaira Perdomo and Tania Álvarez all share parts of their personal lives in an effort to present themselves in a genuine, honest and natural way so that they can connect with—and engage—their followers and fans. Social media not only enables them to get closer to their followers but also facilitates a positive visibility as role models for new generations of young sportswomen. Kim Toffoletti and Holly Thorpe call this the “athletic labour of femininity”, arguing that “social media interaction between female athletes and fans is governed by gender norms and arrangements that expect and reward female athletic articulations of empowerment, entrepreneurialism and individualisation in the context of post-feminism and consumer self-fashioning” (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018 : 298). Followers thus expect sportswomen to present a successful feminine subjectivity on social media,

characterised by notions of personal choice, individual responsibility and self-management. To do this, sportswomen reveal personal content as part of the construction of their own personal brand. Through this use of social media, some sportswomen end up becoming celebrities working professionally with different brands. In such cases, the marketing of a personal image is a key means of earning a living for many sportswomen, considering the low salaries generally offered in women’s sports. All of this reflects a context of greater visibility for women’s sports in audiovisual media, although there is still a long way to go. Along the way, it will be important to listen to the voices of sportswomen, seizing opportunities like those offered by *(Dis)Agreements*. ■

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TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES IN DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN'S SPORT IN AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA: PERSPECTIVES OF SPANISH SPORTSWOMEN

Abstract

Film and television depictions of women's sports are marked by tensions and challenges in contemporary society. Laia Palau (former basketball player), Núria Picas (mountain runner), Omaira Perdomo (volleyball player), Adiaratou Iglesias (para athlete), and Tania Álvarez (boxer) offer us their first-person perspective on this topic with a focus on three key issues: depictions in film and television fiction, media coverage, and self-representation on social media. The diversity of their profiles and sports results in some thought-provoking differences of opinion, along with a number of significant similarities. In film and television fiction, the interviewees value the portrayal of the physical exertion and determination of female athletes. Historically, films have offered very few role models for women in sport. Although media coverage today provides visibility for women's sports that have traditionally been ignored, it also objectifies and sexualises sportswomen's bodies. To combat this, social media provides a space for self-representation where sportswomen can subvert such treatment of their image by conventional media, giving rise to a tension between their private lives and their professional persona as celebrities. In recent years there has been a clear paradigm shift, with an increasing number of female role models in sports films, greater visibility of women's sports in the media, and positive depictions of female athletes. However, there are still many challenges to face—both in sport itself and in its representation on screen.

Key words

Women's sport; film and TV fiction; media coverage; social media; gender; body.

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TENSIONES Y RETOS EN LA REPRESENTACIÓN AUDIOVISUAL DEL DEPORTE FEMENINO: PERSPECTIVAS DE DEPORTISTAS ESPAÑOLAS

Resumen

La representación audiovisual del deporte femenino enfrenta tensiones y retos en la contemporaneidad. Laia Palau (exjugadora de baloncesto), Núria Picas (corredora de montaña), Omaira Perdomo (jugadora de vóleybol), Adiaratou Iglesias (deportista de atletismo adaptado) y Tania Álvarez (boxeadora) nos ofrecen en primera persona su perspectiva sobre este tema alrededor de tres ejes fundamentales: la representación en la ficción audiovisual, la cobertura mediática y la autorrepresentación en redes sociales. La diversidad de perfiles y de deportes conlleva enriquecedoras diferencias de opinión, con relevantes similitudes compartidas. En la ficción audiovisual, las entrevistadas valoran que se represente el esfuerzo físico y la superación de las protagonistas deportistas. Históricamente existe una falta de referentes fílmicos sobre deporte femenino. La cobertura de los medios de comunicación, a la vez que ofrece visibilidad de las categorías femeninas deportivas tradicionalmente invisibilizadas, también cosifica y sexualiza el cuerpo de la deportista. Ante esto, las redes sociales ofrecen un espacio de autorrepresentación en el que las deportistas pueden subvertir dicho tratamiento de su imagen, lo que conlleva una tensión entre la intimidad y la profesión que deben encarar dentro de su faceta como celebridades. En la contemporaneidad se da un cambio de paradigma: cada vez tenemos más referentes cinematográficos, mayor visibilidad en medios y representaciones positivas de las deportistas; pero todavía quedan muchos retos—deportivos y cinematográficos—que afrontar.

Palabras clave

Deporte femenino; ficción audiovisual; cobertura mediática; redes sociales; género; cuerpo.

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Laia Palau is a former professional basketball player and current sports executive for the team Spar Girona. She played as a point guard and holds the record for the most caps (315) and medals (12) in the history of the Spanish national basketball team. She is a three-time Intercontinental champion, winning in 2013, 2017 and 2018, a World Cup runner-up in 2014, and an Olympic runner-up at the 2016 Rio Olympics. She played for CJM Bourges Basket (France), Ros Casares Valencia, USK Prague (Czech Republic), and Uni Girona.

Núria Picas is a professional mountain runner. She ran her first mountain marathon at the age of 22 in the Nike Aneto X-treme Marathon. She was a member of the Catalan mountain running team and achieved numerous victories in competitions such as the Ultra Trail World Cup in 2012 and the inaugural Ultra Trail World Tour in 2014. In 2022, she won the Ultra Pirineu, breaking her previous record by 17 minutes, after taking a three-year hiatus due to an injury. Her achievements are documented in films like *Home to Home* (2016) and *Thar-Ua* (Íñigo Jiménez, 2018).

Laia Puig-Fontrodona (Blanes, 1996) es graduada en Cine y Audiovisuales por la ESCAC y cursó el Máster de Estudios de Cine y Audiovisual Contemporáneo en la UPF. Actualmente, realiza el Doctorado en Comunicación en la misma universidad (con un contrato PIPF) sobre la representación de la maternidad en la ficción española contemporánea a través de sus actrices. Sus líneas de investigación son los *star studies*, los *celebrity studies* y los *motherhood studies*. Colabora en los proyectos de investigación «Fútbol y cultura visual en el Franquismo» y «Producción de nuevas subjetividades en los personajes femeninos y las actrices», financiados por el Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación. Contacto: laia.puig@upf.edu

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Laia Palau (Barcelona, 1979) es exjugadora de baloncesto profesional y actual dirigente deportiva del Spar Girona. Ocupaba la posición base y es la jugadora con más partidos y medallas con la Selección en la historia del baloncesto español. Concretamente, ganó 12 medallas y jugó 315 partidos con ella. Fue tricampeona intercontinental en 2013, 2017 y 2018; subcampeona mundial en 2014 y subcampeona olímpica en los Juegos Olímpicos de Río de 2016. Jugó en el CJM (Cercle Jean Macé) Bourges Basket (Francia), el Ros Casares Valencia, el USK Prague (Chequia), y finalmente el Uni Girona Club de Bàsquet.

Núria Picas (Manresa, 1976) es corredora de montaña profesional. Su primera maratón de montaña fue con 22 años en la Nike Aneto X-treme Marathon. Formó parte de la selección catalana de carreras de montaña y obtuvo numerosas victorias en competiciones como la Copa del Mundo de Ultra Trail en 2012 y la primera edición del Ultra Trail World Tour en 2014. En 2022 ganó el Ultra Pirineu superando en diecisiete minutos su marca anterior, aún habiendo estado tres años retirada por una lesión. Sus expediciones son recogidas en documentales como *Home to Home* (2016) o *Thar-Ua* (Íñigo Jiménez, 2018).

Omaira Perdomo is a professional volleyball player and a transgender athlete. She has played as a blocker for CCO7 Las Palmas in the Iberdrola League (Superliga). Her achievements include winning the Spanish Championship with CV JAV Olímpico. Currently, she balances her sports profile with her public persona and partnerships with various brands on social media.

Adiaratou Iglesias is a professional para athlete. She represented Spain at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games, where she won a gold medal in the 100-metre category and a silver in the 400-metre category. She has an extensive list of accomplishments in national and international competitions, including two silver medals in the 100- and 200-metre categories at the 2019 World Para Athletics Championships. She was also previously a medallist at the Spanish Under-23 Athletics Championships.

Tania Álvarez is a professional boxer. Still in the early stages of her career, she won the Spanish Women's Super Bantamweight Championship in 2023, held in Castellbisbal, defeating Natali Francesca. Other achievements include competing at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

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Omaira Perdomo (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1999) es jugadora de vóleybol profesional y deportista trans. Ha participado como bloqueadora con el equipo CCO7 Las Palmas en la Liga Iberdrola (Superliga) de vóleybol. Cuenta con logros como haber ganado el Campeonato de España con el CV JAV Olímpico. Actualmente, compagina su perfil deportivo con su faceta de personaje público y su trabajo con diversas marcas en redes sociales.

Adiaratou Iglesias (Bamako, 1999) es deportista profesional paralímpica de atletismo adaptado. Fue representante de España en los Juegos Paralímpicos de Tokio 2020, donde obtuvo una medalla de oro en la categoría de 100 metros y otra de plata en la de 400 metros. Logró un amplio palmarés en competiciones nacionales e internacionales, como sus dos medallas de plata en las categorías de 100 y 200 metros del Campeonato Mundial de Atletismo Adaptado de 2019. Previamente también fue medallista en el Campeonato de España de Atletismo Sub-23.

Tania Álvarez (Barcelona, 2002) es boxeadora profesional. Aún estando en el comienzo de su carrera, es ganadora del Campeonato de España femenino del peso supergallo en 2023 celebrado en Castellbisbal contra Natali Francesca. Tiene logros a sus espaldas como haber competido en el Madison Square Garden de Nueva York.

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