

## Praxis for social transformation: the case of Meninas em Campo

Praxis para a transformação social: o caso Meninas em Campo

**Mark Biram**

University of Bristol, Bristol, UK  
Doctor of Philosophy, University of Bristol  
mark.biram@bristol.ac.uk

**ABSTRACT:** “Meninas em Campo” has proved itself to be a highly successful proactive example of promoting gender equality through both discourse and praxis. It is a non-profit organisation located in Butantã, São Paulo which offers a space for 9–17-year-old girls to develop as footballers. The project is financed by Colégio Santa Cruz and supported by the University of São Paulo. Meninas em Campo is the largest grassroots socially motivated girls football project, outside of those of the big clubs. Meninas em Campo is symbolic in providing a blueprint for the development of girl’s football. This article suggests much more attention should go to the crucial formative years where generations of girls have been marginalized from formal channels.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender; Equality; Health and Well-being; Praxis; Discourse.

**RESUMO:** Meninas em Campo é um exemplo pró-ativo de grande sucesso na promoção da igualdade de gênero por meio do discurso e da práxis. Trata-se de uma organização sem fins lucrativos localizada no Butantã, São Paulo, que oferece um espaço para meninas de 9 a 17 anos se desenvolverem como jogadoras de futebol. Financiado pelo Colégio Santa Cruz e apoiado pela Universidade de São Paulo. O Meninas em Campo é o maior projeto de futebol feminino de base social, fora dos grandes clubes. Fornecendo um modelo para o desenvolvimento do futebol feminino. Este artigo sugere que muito mais atenção deve ser dada aos anos formativos cruciais, em que gerações de meninas têm sido marginalizadas dos canais formais.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Gênero; Igualdade; Saúde e bem-estar; Práxis; Discurso.

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent interview Chilean goalkeeper Christiane Endler stated unambiguously that in order for women's football to continue growing 'girls need to have the same training opportunities as boys'.<sup>1</sup> Immediately upon reading this my mind returned to my ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in which women players, infuriated by the necessity to highlight the blindingly obvious, would tell me repeatedly that converting rhetoric about equal opportunity into reality was the key challenge. During my time in South America, I was fortunate enough to interview many significant figures in both Brazilian and Colombian women's football. For example, Rosana dos Santos Augusto told me that, in her youth, girls had never had any formal spaces to develop as players. She was extremely keen to emphasise how Brazil's women had reached Olympic and World Cup finals in spite of the institutional provision they had, not because of this. Similarly, Maurine Dorneles Gonçalves, another highly regarded player from the same generation, explained how the imbalance in games was due to the dearth of opportunities for young girls to develop. A nucleus of quality players was always there, but the key to achieving any strength in depth was getting far more girls on the pitch from a far earlier age. This chimed with the observations of Tayla, another player who has represented the national team on numerous occasions. Tayla spoke of how she grew up playing on the streets and playing as the only girl, always marked as an imposter, in men's games. Many of these observations had been made previously – to give an indicative example, I would like to draw attention to the excellent social history of now CBF football coordinator Aline Pellegrino, interviewed in depth and then told by Pamela Joras in her informative Master's thesis.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge emerging from elsewhere on the continent suggests a panorama which is similar or even less favourable for girls wishing to pursue football either as a hobby or as a

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<sup>1</sup> BELAS TRINDADE. Lyon's Christiane Endler: 'Girls must have the same training as boys', 2023.

<sup>2</sup> JORAS; GOELLNER. Depoimento de Aline Pellegrino. JORAS. *Futebol e mulheres no Brasil: a história de vida de Aline Pellegrino*, 2015.

professional career<sup>3</sup> This knowledge and experience of the threadbare provision for girl's football inspired this article and my current research about Meninas em Campo (MeC hereafter), a highly successful girls football project in São Paulo.

The glib institutional response to this tends to cite the exponential growth of opportunities for women players which have come about as clubs react in defence of their economic interests to the CONMEBOL policy requiring professional clubs to have a women's division in order to be eligible to compete in the lucrative flagship male competition on the continent, the Copa Libertadores.<sup>4</sup> At a surface level, there has clearly been considerable progress in terms of opportunities to play within high profile clubs.<sup>5</sup> Having researched this topic in some detail, however, it was abundantly clear to me that Endler was in fact referring to the continuing dearth of opportunities for much younger girls to learn the game in a structured manner, with the same Conditions that their male counterparts enjoy. The frustration of Endler is representative of the wider frustration which I encountered frequently in my research. Women players are acutely aware of how the prevailing logic is one of inclusion rather than of outright equality.<sup>6</sup> Until this is addressed structurally at institutional level, women players continue highlighting systemic inequalities whilst operating in a semi-professional environment<sup>7</sup> and provision for young girls remains an area requiring urgent attention, especially in light of the breakneck growth of interest in the sport.

This article is a preliminary contribution to a longer term cooperation between the University of Bristol and MeC positions itself and considers the impact this has on the wider panorama. Firstly, it considers how the project has been able to attract investment in order to function (as it has done successfully with major

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<sup>3</sup> GARTON. *Guerreras: fútbol, mujeres y poder*, 2019. GARTON; HIJÓS; ALBARCES. Playing for change: (semi-) professionalization, social policy, and power struggles in Argentine women's football, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> SOARES. O Estatuto da FIFA e a igualdade de gênero no futebol: histórias e contextos do Futebol Feminino no Brasil, 2019. STAREPRAVO; DE MOURA; CANAN. Has Latin America's Title IX Arrived? Impact of the CONMEBOL Institutional Incentive Regulations on South American Football, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> BIRAM. *As Sereias da Vila na terra do rei: uma etnografia de Santos FC Feminino*, 2021; BIRAM. *Women's Club Football in Brazil and Colombia*.

<sup>6</sup> ELSEY; NADEL. *Futbolera*, 2019, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> GARTON; HIJÓS; ALBARCES. Playing for change.

brands). Secondly, it will consider how the project may influence policy-makers both at sporting institutions and at government level. This wider impact, in terms of influencing policy, is the primary concern of this article.

### **GIRLS ON THE PITCH (MENINAS EM CAMPO)**

Whilst carrying out ethnographic research with Santos FC Women in 2018 & 2019 I became aware of an initiative catering to the systemic deficiencies described above. MeC is a non-profit organisation located in Butantã, São Paulo which offers a space for 9–17-year-old girls to develop as footballers. As suggested earlier, the levels of both symbolic violence and exclusion surely deterred all but the most physically and mentally resilient girls from pursuing a career, or even from playing the game as a hobby throughout their formative years. The lack of formalised spaces for girls to play the game is clearly one of the major barriers facing women’s football.

The project is financed by Colégio Santa Cruz and supported by the University of São Paulo. Its location is strategic, insofar as it allows access from the nearby favelas such as São Remo, Sapé and Vila Dalva. This is evident in the demographic of users of the program, who are clearly from a range of distinct social backgrounds. All of the projects activities are free and football is mixed with a range of other educational activities aimed at ensuring that participants receive a well-rounded overall formation.

The achievements of MeC are considerable. In 2022, the project catered to 234 families, of which 47 are now playing for professional clubs. Moreover, as of February 2023, the project has produced 12 players who have represented the Brazil Under-17 national team. MeC uses a methodology known as *Treino Social*. It has been used successfully across 25 sites in Brazil and Mozambique. *Treino Social* is a praxis based methodology which places emphasis on a holistic development of athletes. Education is one of the key planks of this development, with particular emphasis on socio-emotional development: for example problem-solving, bravery or daring the empowerment of women and developing emotional resilience. The development of MeC’s athletes, then, is not merely as footballers, but as balanced

and thoughtful human beings who are well placed to be ambassadors both for the project and for women's football more broadly.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I became curious about the workings of MeC – and was lucky enough to be able to follow up this interest with a visit funded by the University of Bristol's AHRC Impact Funding in December 2022 and January 2023. Owing to the length of the visit and the timing, I was unable to spend a lengthy period with the project as per my previous ethnographic work. Nonetheless, through conversing with key figures in the project I was able to learn a great deal about the project and procure further funding to emphasise how the project symbolically challenges exclusionary narratives and the marginalisation of girls from the sport. This article is built around conversations with the project's social media and communication lead Sofia César Gomes and then Teaching Coordinator, Sandra Santos, who is responsible for the holistic development of athletes. Moreover, visits to the project allowed me to draw on project archives since its inception in 2016. This article outlines how MeC, using Praxis akin to that described by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971), has contributed to promoting gender equality making a practical difference in the area in which it operates and also in its campaigns promoting women's football and highlighting the dearth of provision nationally for girls in the 9-17 age group. Further academic work will be accompanied by a toolkit for practitioners aiming to start girls' sport projects both through NGO and/or state agents.

## **PROMOTING EQUALITY**

An area where the project has been particularly strong is promoting its work and engaging in partnerships with influential companies which wish to associate themselves with progressive approaches to gender inequality. The project has been acutely aware of gradually shifting attitudes to gender equality and has been able to capitalise on this. Over the previous decade campaigns like #metoo and

#niunamenos<sup>8</sup> have captured the imagination of women on the continent and have generated enough interest to cause wider reverberations whereby sectors of the business community have finally been engaged. This section outlines two representative examples where MeC has followed a highly effective social media and communication policy. These examples are the ‘She Can’ campaign and the ‘Thank You Haters’ campaign, respectively.

### **‘She can’ campaign**

The ‘She Can’ campaign was developed by Guaraná Antarctica in partnership with ten Other major brands with the intention of supporting grassroots women’s football. Its video begins by invoking the oft-used metaphor of Brazil as the ‘country of football’<sup>9</sup> In the first five seconds the video pithily expresses the continued marginalisation of women from this crucial trope of Brazilian identity. ‘Really? But for whom?’ it asks. The visibility of the women’s game is immediately brought into focus. It is claimed that men’s football receives more than a billion dollars more than women’s football in sponsorship each year. The campaign claims that 35 million cans of Guaraná are circulated in Brazil each month giving the brand an unrivalled reach. All the funds from this campaign were sent direct to MeC allowing MeC to establish itself as the largest women’s football grassroots project outside of the *clubes de camisa* (large Brazilian clubs).

In an era of unprecedented growth for football more generally, it is important that women’s football taps into the vast number of commercial opportunities that the men’s game does. A serious worry here is that this leads to highly uneven growth and that the majority of the revenue does not trickle down to grassroots level. For this reason, a campaign that is particularly aimed towards grassroots girls football is positive, both in practical terms and symbolically.

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<sup>8</sup> ELSEY. Fútbol Feminista: Energized by the# NiUnaMenos movement, women’s soccer teams take on the patriarchs of the beautiful game in Latin America, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> FONTES; BUARQUE DE HOLANDA. *The Country of Football*, 2014. KITTLESON. *The Country of Football*, 2014.

## ‘Thank you haters’ campaign

Similarly, the ‘Thank You Haters’ campaign – another collaboration between the MeC project and Guaraná Antarctica – sees user generated content being employed to fuel the growth of women’s football. A range of academic literature attests both to skewed media coverage of women’s football<sup>10</sup> and to outright hostility and misogyny expressed on social media.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the anonymity and ease of posting exacerbates the problem, and there is a certain element of mischief attached to some of what is found online. Nonetheless, it is clearly symptomatic of lingering discomfort about women participating in the game. Moreover, it could not exist without staggering levels of misogyny and irrational prejudice which are structural – not only in Brazil, but globally.

This background was the starting point for the ‘Thank You Haters’ campaign. In summary, a considerable number of internet comments which make misogynistic comments about women’s football were printed out on seed paper and then planted on the pitch where MeC play. As the campaign states, this allows players to ‘trample on the hatred every single day’. In total, over 30,000 comments were collected. The advertisement finishes by noting that ‘one of the most plentiful things on the internet – hate – had been turned into infrastructure for thousands of women players. It finishes by saying ‘Valeu Aí, Haters’ (thank you haters). The achievements of such a campaign are multiple. Firstly, it serves to ridicule the persistence of retrograde views about women’s football. The campaign was launched with a number of hashtags, for example #DoeSeuCliché (suggest/donate a cliché). Secondly, it emphasises how shifting societal attitudes are slowly translating into action on the ground. It shows that more spaces for girls to practise the game are appearing and that these spaces are providing the open and positive environment that young girls need to play the game.

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<sup>10</sup> CASHMAN; RAYMOND. Making gender relevant in Spanish-language sports broadcast discourse, *gender & language*, 2014; MINA; GOELLNER. Representaciones sociales de la selección femenina de fútbol de Colombia en la Copa América 2014, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> SCHMIDT *et al.* An analysis of Colin Kaepernick, Megan Rapinoe, and the national anthem protests, 2019. FREDERICK; PEGORARO; SCHMIDT. “I’m not going to the f\*\*\* ing White House”: Twitter users react to Donald Trump and Megan Rapinoe, 2022. MACDONALD; CLELAND. Gender politics of social media, 2022. BULLINGHAM; MAGRATH. ‘Pink hair, don’t care’: a print media analysis of Megan Rapinoe at the 2019 Women’s World Cup, 2023.

## EVERYDAY ROUTINE AT MENINAS EM CAMPO

### Freirean praxis at MeC

In his foundational text of critical pedagogy, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire described praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it”.<sup>12</sup> He contended that it was insufficient merely to study our surroundings, it was a moral imperative to act upon the injustices we encounter. The way that MeC approaches many of the seemingly intractable social problems which surround us, seems, at least in part, inspired by this commitment not to ignore social reality.

From the outset in 2016 MeC has sought to create a space which gets the entire family involved. In the first instance, before attending trials, families are invited to a breakfast or lunch event where there is a presentation made about how the project functions and how forming players in a holistic way is central to the project’s values. This allows a certain degree of trust building to occur in the vital early exchanges, in this way ensuring that players will receive the right support from the family unit. In addition to this, during the most testing period of the COVID-19 pandemic, surrounding favelas such as São Remo have received solidarity donations from MeC in partnership with the Quilombola Cooperative. There is a tacit understanding at MeC that the support of families and the local community is crucial in making the project and women’s football more broadly successful. There is a discursive battle for hearts and minds which can be won with engagement on a community level. As part of the early work building relationships, friendly mixed gender games of futsal have been played, allowing mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters and brothers and sisters to compete on the same field.

MeC prides itself on being a space where players learn not only how to play football but also about how to function well within the social environment they inhabit. This holistic educational approach means that young girls attend workshops between sessions where they will discuss a range of sensitive topics

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<sup>12</sup> FREIRE. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 1971, p. 59.

crucial to their social development during adolescence. They are given the chance to speak privately in confidence to a gynaecologist in order to discuss any doubts they may have. Beyond this, as part of another campaign *Juntas Somos Campeãs* (Together We Are Champions), in collaboration with Fluxo Sem Tabu, an organisation aimed at tackling period poverty, project participants are able to access sanitary pads, as well as gain an awareness of the intersectional symbolic violence which could lead to girls giving up playing the game.

Project participants learn, then, about issues of female empowerment in a way which encourages them to behave in solidarity with one another and which foment a respect to players from different backgrounds in Brazil. The project aims to take advantage of every opportunity to deepen the girls education about their surroundings. For example, MeC has a specific focus on areas of the game where there is a notable underrepresentation of women. These areas include a number of coaching roles, the club manager positions and also the role of referee. As the maximum authority figures in football, the roles of manager and referee appear one of the last bastions of male domination. For this reason, referee training imbues the girls with the skills they need to pursue a career as referees should they wish to do so. They are taught, firstly, about how few female referees there have been – and are then given strategies to ensure their work and authority as referees is respected. In the Freirean sense, this fits perfectly with the notion that ‘knowledge is made, not discovered’.<sup>13</sup> In the same sense, knowledge building and learning is deeply rooted in its social context, that of discriminatory societal attitudes towards women in this case, rather than in some abstract or supposedly objective context. Similarly, there are also specific courses for goalkeepers which have benefitted from the assistance of players who have played at the highest level such as Thaís Picarte and Nicole Ramos.

With these indicative examples it is clear that MeC is a project which positions itself clearly and explicitly. In his celebrated *Carnavais, malandros e heróis* (1979), the great Brazilian anthropologist Roberto Da Matta was concerned with the constant tension between the highly authoritarian, hierarchical aspects of

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<sup>13</sup> FREIRE. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 1971, p. 232.

Brazilian society which we have seen come to the fore in recent times and the concurrent and powerful desire to overturn this with a push towards equality, democracy, and harmony. MeC endeavours to produce players and young women who are not only aware of the internal friction between these forces, but able to act upon them in a Freirean sense and help to create a better society.

### **Producing well-rounded professional players**

In the first period of MeC, the club was involved in a partnership with Santos FC, providing both its Under-15 and Under 17 teams. Three players would go on to represent Brazil at Under-17 level: Ana Luyza, Laura Valverde and Luana Teodoro. Similarly, a number of these players transitioned to the Under-20 team which won the continental championship recently, including Giovana Fernandes. Recently the project competed in the Paulista Championship for the first time as Meninas em Campo, in MeC own kit alongside clubs like Ferroviária, Audax Osasco and Jundiaí.

The project has a number of ambassadors including the aforementioned Laura Valverde and also Tamires Dias, one of the mainstays of the national team for the last decade. This is particularly fitting in the case of Valverde as she has come through the MeC project and clearly embodies much of what the project is about. Valverde is humble but well spoken, and regularly thanks the project for being able to launch a professional career. Similar is true of Giovana Fernandes, who recently won an award for the best new player at the Paulista Under-20 level. Fernandes made a point of thanking her family for all of their support along the way, together of course with MeC whom she credited for her wider formation as a player and as a person.

### **INFLUENCING POLICYMAKERS**

This article contends that MeC serves, at least, a dual purpose. Firstly, in providing an opportunity for girls to play the game and develop as athletes that is not catered for or properly acknowledged by either sporting institutions (broadly defined as clubs, federations and confederations) or state policy. Secondly, initiatives such as

MeC serve to place due pressure on the aforementioned to address these deficiencies in a more serious and structured way. The following section outlines some of the main issues at play.

### **Influencing sporting institutions**

Exerting further influence on the powerful sporting institutions in Brazil is of the uttermost importance. The ascension of Aline Pellegrino in the CBF provides much hope in this regard. Institutional debate about club football has often centred upon the policy of *obrigatoriedade*.<sup>14</sup> The CBF has pursued a policy of demanding a women's team at all clubs from Série A-D inclusive with scant regard for the meagre resources of clubs at the lower end of the spectrum. Moreover, even at the larger clubs, there are no Mechanisms in place to ensure that clubs do anything more than comply with the bare minimum requirement of having a women's team. More than this, the disproportionate focus on the inclusion of any kind of women's team at all clubs has in some sense obscured the dearth of opportunities for girls in the 9-17 age group. Initiatives like MeC provide an excellent template for other girls football projects. Moreover, MeC gives the lie to the myth that large companies are not interested in women's football. If companies perceive that associating themselves with a progressive cause is a pragmatic business decision, more often than not, they will choose to do so.

### **Influencing state policy**

A step beyond influencing sporting institutions is to try to influence the state into including football for girls within state curricula. The professionalisation of women's football has become part of mainstream political debate on the continent, in Chile for example where President Gabriel Boric passed a law requiring

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<sup>14</sup> SOARES. O Estatuto da FIFA e a igualdade de gênero no futebo. STAREPRAVO; DE MOURA; CANAN. Has Latin America's Title IX Arrived?. BIRAM. Obrigatoriedade and the professionalisation of women's football in Brazil, 2023.

formalised contracts for players.<sup>15</sup> Argentina finds itself at a similar stage, which has been referred to as semi-professionalism.<sup>16</sup> Once again, much of this debate obscures or outright ignores the crucial formative years prior to when ‘professionalism’ is nominally being granted without many of the social and economic benefits which come from being a professional male player. The position of MeC as one of the main suppliers of professional players outside of the *clubes de camisa*, mean that it is a perfect example to highlight how women’s football in Brazil would look significantly difficult where it to be replicated. Altering state policy may appear a distant goal at the present juncture, but women’s football and indeed gender equality on the continent in general both have significant purchase to gain even more momentum on the public agenda if they are framed and highlighted in the right way.

## CONCLUSION

MeC has proved itself to be a highly successful example of a project promoting positive change in an area of acute importance to Brazilian national identity. Indeed, such has been the success of MeC it has now been recognised by a United Nations initiative #FootballForTheGoals as an example of social transformation. It contributes directly to three of the 17 sustainable development goals, namely Health and Well-being, Education and Gender Equality.

This first global recognition is of particular importance to a project like MeC. In a country where there is significant political polarisation, not to mention a regressive kickback against so-called gender ideology during the previous administration,<sup>17</sup> it lends significant credibility to MeC to be aligned with a more universal sense of what gender equality means in the twenty-first century.

Despite ostensibly rapid strides for women’s football in recent years, there are still enormous structural inequalities underpinned by machismo, sexism and

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<sup>15</sup> MOLINA. Gabriel Boric promulgó este viernes la ley de fútbol femenino profesional, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> GARTON; HIJÓS; ALABARCES. Playing for change.

<sup>17</sup> ASSIS; OGANDO. Bolsonaro, ‘gender ideology’ and hegemonic masculinity in Brazil, 2018. MISKOLCI. Exorcising a ghost: the interests behind the war on “gender ideology”, 2018. VAGGIONE. The conservative uses of law: the catholic mobilization against gender ideology, 2020.

outright misogyny. Both at the level of state and within sporting institutions facile and often disingenuous claims about ‘professionalism’ and ‘equality’ abound. Beyond the rhetoric, MeC acts to remedy the lack of both of these – both in its praxis and the educational content which it delivers. This article has discussed the acute inequalities in access to football and some of the class-related barriers which may exacerbate this. It constitutes a preliminary attempt to engage with an area – the crucial formative years in the sport – where institutional discourse and action is, to say the least, insufficient.

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