

## **SPORT AS LEISURE OR HIGH PERFORMANCE AND THE OCCUPATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS**

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*Julie King Gottberg*<sup>1</sup>

Universidade de São Paulo (USP)

Ribeirão Preto – SP – Brazil

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7592-6031>

*Leonardo Martins Kebbe*<sup>2</sup>

Universidade de São Paulo (USP)

Ribeirão Preto – SP – Brazil

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2360-7342>

*Regina Yoneko Dakuzaku Carretta*<sup>3</sup>

Universidade de São Paulo (USP)

Ribeirão Preto – SP – Brazil

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3228-2287>

**ABSTRACT:** Sports are seen by Occupational Therapists as a human activity related to the occupations Leisure, Work, Health Management and Social Participation and also as a possible therapeutic resource. This study aims to identify the perspective of visually impaired female athletes and their coaches, about the impacts of sports on social participation and occupational performance, in addition to identifying difficulties. The study is exploratory, cross-sectional, descriptive, qualitative, with semi-structured interviews for data collection and analysis based on thematic analysis. As results, the practice of physical activities has a meaningful impact on the self-esteem and social participation of the athletes, however, there still are sociocultural, physical and structural barriers for a satisfactory practice and for a positive real impact on the occupational performance of the population studied.

**KEYWORDS:** Visually impaired persons. Sports for persons with disabilities. Occupational therapy.

<sup>1</sup> Undergraduate student of the Occupational Therapy course at Medical School of Ribeirão Preto from Universidade de São Paulo - FMRP-USP, Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo; Research Group “Health, Occupation and Psychosocial Contexts”.

<sup>2</sup> Occupational Therapist, Ph.D. Professor of the bachelor’s degree program at Medical School of Ribeirão Preto from Universidade de São Paulo - FMRP-USP, Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo; Research Group “Health, Occupation and Psychosocial Contexts”.

<sup>3</sup> Occupational Therapist, Ph.D. Professor of the bachelor’s degree program at Medical School of Ribeirão Preto from Universidade de São Paulo - FMRP-USP, Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo; Research Group “Health, Occupation and Psychosocial Contexts”.

## **ESPORTE COMO LAZER OU ALTO RENDIMENTO E O DESEMPENHO OCUPACIONAL DE MULHERES COM DEFICIÊNCIA VISUAL**

**RESUMO:** Para a Terapia Ocupacional, o esporte é uma atividade humana relacionada às ocupações de Lazer, Trabalho, Gerenciamento de Saúde e Participação Social, além de um possível recurso terapêutico. O objetivo desta pesquisa é identificar, na perspectiva de mulheres atletas com deficiência visual e de seus treinadores, quais são os impactos do esporte na participação social e no desempenho ocupacional, além das dificuldades encontradas. Trata-se de um estudo exploratório, transversal, descritivo, qualitativo, com coleta de dados feita por entrevistas semiestruturadas e análise pela Análise de Conteúdo Temática. Pode-se concluir que o esporte tem um impacto positivo principalmente na autoestima e participação social dessas atletas, porém, ainda existem muitas barreiras socioculturais, físicas e estruturais para que essa prática ocorra de maneira satisfatória e tenha um impacto prático no desempenho ocupacional.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pessoas com deficiência visual. Esportes para Pessoas com Deficiência. Terapia ocupacional.

### **Introduction**

Impairment of the visual system can be caused by changes in any of the structures that make up this sensory system, including the eyes and appendages, the visual pathways and the brain areas that are responsible for initiating and controlling visual perception and visually oriented behavior, according to the International Classification of Diseases 11 (WHO, 2018). Thus, visual impairment is classified by the World Health Organization into categories ranging from mild visual loss to total absence of vision, based on quantitative values of visual acuity and visual field to clinically define blindness or low vision. Currently, there are around one billion people in the world who have some type of moderate or severe visual impairment, including blindness (WHO, 2023). WHO also states that adults with visual impairment have higher rates of depression and anxiety, in addition to the fact that the disability condition can contribute to social isolation, mobility difficulties and increased risks of falls and fractures (WHO, 2023). Furthermore, visual impairment, to any degree, leads to functional impairments that limit individuals in their participation and performance in

their daily activities, interfering with their independence, autonomy and quality of life (SILVA, 2014, p.292).

In view of these issues, parasport can be considered, according to the International Paralympic Committee (2000), as a form of Rehabilitation, Leisure and High Performance (work), which can offer several benefits to people with visual impairment, from improving motor skills, even increasing autonomy and independence and promoting social inclusion (OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2013, p.177). However, practicing sports is still an activity considered predominantly male by society, since both female sport and para-sport have little visibility, whether in the media, in sports associations, in school physical education or in public leisure policies. Therefore, this study focuses on the female population with visual impairment, seeking to give some visibility to this population.

Currently, there are eight Paralympic sports that are practiced by people with visual impairments, which are: athletics, triathlon, swimming, 5-a-side football (exclusively for blind people), goalball, judo, cycling and rowing. However, there are also other sports that are not part of the Paralympic Games but have already been adapted to allow people with visual impairments to practice them, such as surfing, B2/B3 football, bowling and Powerlifting.

Sports for people with visual impairments divide athletes into categories defined by the International Blind Sport Association (IBSA, 2005) namely:

B1: Total absence of light perception in both eyes, or some light perception but an inability to recognize the shape of a hand at any distance or direction;

B2: From ability to recognize the shape of a hand up to visual acuity of 20/600 and/or a visual field of less than 5 degrees in the best eye with the best practical eye correction.

B3: From visual acuity above 20/600 and up to visual acuity of 20/200 and/or a visual field of less than 20 degrees and more than 5 degrees in the best eye with the best practical eye correction.

To carry out this classification, the tests are always carried out with the best eye and the highest correction possible, that is, athletes who use contact lenses or glasses must use them normally during the classification, even if they intend to use them or not. them during competitions.

In the context of sport, it is important to highlight that there is a multidisciplinary field of action that includes physical education professionals, physiotherapists, psychologists, occupational therapists, doctors and nutritionists.

However, this study is based on the work of the occupational therapist, who sees sports as an activity that can be linked to leisure, work and social participation. Occupation is defined by the American Occupational Therapy Association (GOMES; TEIXEIRA; RIBEIRO, 2021, p.9) as activities of daily living in which people engage in a significant way and among these, Leisure is defined as a non-obligatory activity performed during free time and motivated by the subject himself, with the aim of providing moments of relaxation and fun; Social Participation is involvement in activities in which there is successful interaction with the community, family, peers and friends; and Work is defined as paid or unpaid occupations that include the effort of doing things aimed at organizing, planning and evaluating services or processes of living or management. And, according to the Occupational Therapy Guidelines for Client-centered Practice from the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, Occupational Performance refers to the ability to actively carry out routines and perform roles and occupations that aim for self-care, productivity and leisure. in response to the

needs and motivations of the individual's external and internal environment (BLAIN, TOWNSEND, 1993, p.280).

With these considerations, this work aims to identify, from the perspective of female athletes with visual impairments and their coaches, the impacts of practicing sport on the social participation and occupational performance of these athletes, in addition to the difficulties encountered.

### **Methodological Path**

The study is characterized as exploratory, transversal, descriptive, qualitative, with data collection carried out through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out between November 2022 and January 2023.

The research participants were selected for convenience, that is, considering the most viable possibilities for making contacts. Institutions in the state of São Paulo that offered sports practices to people with blindness or low vision were searched on social networks, starting with the municipality in which the researchers reside. From these initial contacts, the Snowball strategy was used to identify other subjects, that is, from a first participant, this indicates the second, who successively indicates a third.

For women, the inclusion criteria were participation in some sport, whether individual or team, for a period of at least six months; have blindness or low vision; practicing sport as a form of leisure or high performance. The exclusion criteria were the presence of multiple disabilities and impediments in verbal communication that could compromise the interview.

For the coaches, the inclusion criteria were working with sports for people with visual impairments for a minimum period of six months, which could be in any modality.

The interviews were carried out remotely, due to the conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and followed all conditions of confidential recording and were guided by being carried out in appropriate environmental conditions regarding noise, interference and privacy. The study was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Hospital das Clínicas of the Medical School of Ribeirão Preto, under opinion No. 5.679.151.

The Informed Consent Form (ICF) was read and sent via email or WhatsApp to all research participants by the interviewer before the start of the interview.

The analysis was carried out using (MINAYO, 1998), grouping the information resulting from the interviews into analytical categories.

## **Results and Discussion**

Nine women aged 18 to 60 years old who lived in the State of São Paulo, and who practiced some type of sport, and four professionals who worked as coaches in some type of sport aimed at people with visual impairments were interviewed.

The general data of the athletes are presented in Table 1:

**Table 1:** General data of the athletes interviewed

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Degree of VI</b>	<b>Causes of VI</b>	<b>Sports played</b>	<b>Practice time</b>
ATHLETE 1	35	Ribeirão Preto/SP	Total blindness	Congenital Glaucoma	Swimming, Gymnastics and Five-a-side football (Fut5)	14 years old
ATHLETE 2	19	Ribeirão Preto/SP	Total blindness	Marfan Syndrome	Five-a-side football (Fut5)	4 years old
ATHLETE 3	43	São Joaquim da Barra/ SP	8% of vision	Marfan Syndrome	Cycling	4 years old
ATHLETE 4	52	Serrana/ SP	Total Blindness	Congenital Glaucoma	Physical education and dance	5 years old

ATHLETE 5	52	Ribeirão Preto/SP	Total Blindness	Congenital Glaucoma	Pilates, Yoga, Thai Chi, Cycling, Swimming and Bodybuilding	7 years old
ATHLETE 6	24	São Paulo/ SP	Total blindness	Congenital Toxoplasmosis	Swimming	13 years old
ATHLETE 7	35	São Paulo/ SP	Total blindness	Brain tumor	Swimming, Goalball	22 years old
ATHLETE 8	21	Novo Horizonte/ SP	20 to 40% of vision	Retinoblastoma	Artistic gymnastics, swimming and athletics	12 years old
ATHLETE 9	46	São Paulo/ SP	Total blindness	Congenital Glaucoma	Athletics and Goalball	27 years old

**Source:** Prepared by the authors.

The age range of the women interviewed varied greatly, with the youngest being 19 years old and the oldest being 52 years old. Six of the nine interviewees, despite the long period of practice, have at some point or mentioned that their practice will be interrupted against their will, either due to lack of incentives, difficulty in accessing practices or due to the end of the team or project they are working on. part. Of the interviewees, three - Athletes 6, 7 and 9 - practice or have practiced sport professionally, that is, they consider sport as the main source of income and have a training routine aimed at high performance.

Regarding the coaches interviewed, general data is described in Table 2:

**Table 2:** General data of coaches

<b>Initial</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Modalities</b>	<b>Time of working</b>
COACH 1	Female	Goalball and Swimming	28 years old
COACH 2	Male	Goalball	21 years old
COACH 3	Female	Goalball, Athletics and Swimming	30 years old

COACH 4	Male	5-a-side football, goalball, athletics and gymnastics	5 years old
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**Source:** Prepared by the authors.

All the coaches interviewed work or have worked with both female and male athletes. Three of them focused on high-performance sport and competitions rather than sport as a form of leisure. Of the coaches, only one has never worked with an exclusively female team, working only with mixed or male teams.

The interview data and its analysis through Thematic Content Analysis resulted in six categories, discussed below:

### **Impacts on Daily Life**

All athletes pointed out positive differences in their daily lives when comparing before and after sports practice. The willingness and motivation, both physical and mental, to carry out their activities and occupy their spaces, were topics brought up.

With sport I became more active, willing, my mind is not open to thinking about sadness (Athlete 1).

You experience improvement in everything you do, from cleaning the house, everything improves, your body feels better, the pain goes away, everything goes away. I feel more willing in general (Athlete 5).

Not to mention that sport promotes a sense of capacity that is perceived by both athletes and the people around them. It was pointed out in the interviews that practicing sports opened doors to expand participation in other occupations of life such as mobility, activities of daily living, instrumental activities of daily living and even in education and work.

My mother had this vision that I couldn't do anything, I couldn't wash dishes because they might break... when I started the sport, they started looking at this differently as a blind man: both my brothers and my family, my father, my cousins, my uncles. A new perspective of the person with a disability who could also do everything... the vision that my family had changed after they saw that I was capable too, right? (Athlete 7).



This aspect of expanding occupational life was also brought up by the interviewed trainers:

It's really nice to see the transformation through sport. Sport (for many of them) was the trigger for them to continue living and looking for cool things in life. So it's easy for them to go back to studying, if they've already finished high school, they go to college. They end up going back to old practices, let's say, right? be it studying, be it some type of activity or they start to be interested in doing something besides sport too (Coach 2).

Considering what was stated above, it was possible to observe that the contact with oneself and one's own body made possible by the practice of sport, allows for a more affective perception and greater acceptance of the disability condition, since sport deconstructs the belief that Having a disability is synonymous with being incapable. According to Ranieri and Barreira (2010, p.58), the experience of overcoming can be a condition that stimulates sports practice itself, the main point that motivates practice and gives a unique meaning to sport for people with visual impairments.

For me it means freedom, independence, autonomy, health mainly and even socialization... sport for me is everything (Athlete 2).

## **Leisure and Work**

Regarding the role of sport in promoting increased leisure or even work opportunities, considering high performance, the participants were critical regarding the lack of opportunities for the practice to actually become a solid activity.

Three of the six interviewees who practice the sport for leisure said that they aim for high performance and would like to train more times a week, but they do not have this opportunity. And the main reason for this lack of opportunity to enter high performance comes from gender differences within the sport, since the place where they practice does not have exclusively female teams, a topic that will be addressed in more depth later, in the theme "Gender differences".

Teams had to be more rigid so that people who really wanted to play could take it more seriously. The same in São Paulo has five-a-side Fut but there is no women's team (Athlete 1).

Regarding the impacts of sport on the Leisure occupation, the majority of interviewees mentioned sport as their main source of leisure, however there were reservations regarding the lack of autonomy and dependence on psychics to be able to practice their sport, as stated below:

For the visually impaired, I don't think it's possible to consider sport as a form of leisure because there are few places to practice this sport, so I can't say like any other person in my city, like "oh, I'm going there for the corner to play football." It is not possible to do this because of the cost of the materials and because there are no appropriate places to practice five-a-side Fut (Athlete 4).

Of the athletes who practice high performance, two of the three pointed out that the source of income from practicing sports is sufficient for their needs, while the other pointed out that she was never able to dedicate herself exclusively to sports since she had to work in other environments to complement the income from the athlete scholarship received. Furthermore, this scholarship took so long to arrive:

Since Bolsa Atleta [Athlete Scholarship] program was launched, I have been included, so all of this has helped me both in terms of food and also in terms of getting a house, paying my bills, being more relaxed, having a health plan (Athlete 7).

Only after eleven years of my sporting career did I also start to be paid for doing sport. Not like a job, it was a scholarship, right? Which I received. But I could never be without working. I always had to have a parallel professional activity because what I earned from sport didn't allow me to live in sport (Athlete 9).

For one of the participants, sport was a direct inspiration to continue her studies and specialize in the field of sport for people with disabilities, as she is currently studying physical education at university:

I think (sport) was open an horizon, because if it weren't for contact with sport, maybe I wouldn't be here doing this degree today (Athlete 8).

## **Social Participation**

Grubano (2014, p.17) provided in his study that adapted sport enables access never achieved by people with disabilities and that it allows them to see themselves as

citizens with goals and endowed with performance and ability to achieve. The results obtained in this study do not point to different conclusions. It was through sport that all nine interviewees reported that they improved their relationships with people who were already part of their social cycle, met new people and created new support networks:

I became calmer, more understanding, I became a more tolerant person. You learn to have more wisdom, right, because you are living in society. It's a place where you meet a lot of people, you become friends with a lot of people, so you start to have contact with society (...) I didn't interact with society, (sport) opened the door to society too (Athlete 3).

Now they (family members) say 'wow, ride a bike, do weight training'. So people look at us in a more interesting way, right? From 'wow, she's not sitting at home waiting for life to pass by'. They see us as more active people in general (Athlete 5).

Before sports, I was very shy, right? It was kind of hard to make friends, it was difficult go to school for a work presentation, right? When I started swimming, we traveled, we had to interact with more people, compete in front of a lot of people, I think it helps me a lot on the social side. Quite a lot (Athlete 6).

The coaches also brought the perception that sport is an important gateway to the formation of new social support networks and contact with society itself. They also added that sport is a significant means of creating new roles and emotional relationships between athletes:

I think that the benefits are diverse, but the issue of social integration, of finding your audience, who you identify with, who you are, talking in the same language, with the same standards, that is what is essential (Coach 1).

And the aspect of sociability, of interaction with other people, of coexistence, of making friends when we go to competitions, it is natural to have meetings with people from other teams and from these meetings emerge chats, friendships, bonds that will eventually become lasting. and maintained (Coach 4).

On the other hand, it was also pointed out that the lack of opportunity to experience sports at its fullest is a factor that also limits the potential for inclusion that sport can promote:

I met some people, yes, but not as many as I would with someone who starts playing football. Because it is very closed in that cycle that is always around us. I think this cycle would only expand in the case of competitions, you know (Athlete 2).

## **Main Difficulties or Limitations**

The lack of places to practice, the lack of sponsorship and incentives for sport and the lack of professionals or their lack of preparation for people with disabilities, were the most common obstacles to practicing physical activity.

As stated by Ferreira and Botomé (1984 *apud* SOUZA, 2003) the existence of services aimed at caring for people with disabilities does not imply that they will be accessible. It is necessary that these people are equipped to acquire information about what these services are, what adjustments to their needs and what means they can use to reach these services. The lack of accessibility and incentives to get to practice was an issue frequently discussed in the interviews by both athletes and coaches, as shown in the clippings:

It costs to have places to practice, it costs to have the modalities and when they do, it is not something that lasts the same as the modalities for people without disabilities. For other sports such as goalball, five-a-side fut, athletics, you know they exist but you only know about it from researching and you only know about this if you are interested in researching and pursuing it. Because if not, it is never mentioned, it is very rare to hear a blind judo athlete commenting, for example (Athlete 2).

I wish sport was closer to people's homes. I think this would help a lot. Often a person, to practice sport, has to travel for two hours... So if sport for people with disabilities were at school, in squares, in clubs, many more people with disabilities could have access and consequently practice (Athlete 9).

There have been sports initiatives aimed at people with disabilities for a long time. But it generally occurs in a certain place, at a certain time, it tends to be far from home, so transport assistance is never foreseen or included, transport that seeks or brings the public closer, knowing where these people are, that practice being closer to them . I think this is one of the biggest difficulties, right? To make it easy to get to that location (Coach 4).

In addition, Azevedo e Barros (2004, p.80) emphasize that sport is one of the indispensable requirements for achieving the full dimension of social inclusion, but that, in Brazil, people with disabilities encounter many more difficulties and barriers to practicing than other people. An example of this reality is the lack of acceptance or

preparation of gyms to enroll people with visual impairments, an experience that was brought by four study participants, as shown in the following reports:

In gyms, it is very difficult to accept people with visual impairments because they say there is no one to instruct or help with the equipment. I would like there to be a more accessible gym for people with visual impairments because they see a barrier in us (EP).

Luckily, a neighbor of mine is going with me (to the gym), but if I were alone, I don't think I would be able to do it alone. Because the teacher stays there but he kind of pushes it to the neighbor, you know? so there is this difficulty (Athlete 5).

This lack of preparation on the part of professionals to deal with visually impaired people is also recognized by the trainers themselves:

Universities and courses in general place very little emphasis on sports aimed at people with disabilities. Sometimes it's an optional subject, very quick, which, as cool as it is, doesn't prepare anyone (Coach 4).

Another obstacle mentioned by both athletes and coaches is the overprotection of the family or caregivers towards the person with a disability. The belief that disability defines and disables a person permeates society and prevents stimulation and exploration of possibilities. As stated by Lima e Silva (2008 p. 27) “using, adjectives, substantiation of the person with disability as a disabled whole”. Thus, several athletes found it difficult to start the sport in other activities independently and autonomously due to this overprotection they suffered:

I think that blind women have less autonomy, right? The trust, her trust in herself, of her own family's trust in letting the person move around alone, so people often don't get into sports (Athlete 9).

My family, for example, protected me a lot, didn't let me do much and when I started traveling for competitions and without them, they even ended up letting me loosen up a little more calmly because they saw that I could do it... Then little by little We see that we can do everything no matter what disability we have (Athlete 6).

This ableist view directly affects women with disabilities not only at home, but also in the various other environments they frequent. According to the Brazilian Inclusion Law in chapter IV, article 28, paragraph V, the “Adoption of individualized

and collective measures in environments that maximize the academic and social development of students with disabilities, favoring access, retention, participation and learning in educational institutions” (BRASIL, 2015). However, in practice, many women interviewed reported that since their school years, inclusion in sport is very limited, especially for those who attended regular education. According to Mahl (2012, p.113), many physical education teachers are not prepared or are not interested in training themselves to adopt inclusive pedagogical practices to be used in their classes which, given all the challenges involved in the inclusion process, they have no motivation to face them.

What happens a lot is that the physical education teacher says something like 'oh you're blind, so sit down and wait for the class to end'. This is very demotivating because you say, oh, I'm not going to do anything, there's no way to do it, there's no perspective, so people like it but they lose the desire to do it because of that (Athlete 2).

I studied at a regular school from the 5th grade to the third grade and when I got to physical education class, I sat there doing nothing and we were dying to play. But no one included me at all (EP).

On the other hand, when these women find services that are appropriate for their condition, with specialized attention and trained professionals, their experience in the sport is very satisfactory, even being a gateway to experiences never experienced before:

My mother never let me cycle because she was afraid of me falling, hurting myself, breaking my glasses, so I started participating after I lost my vision. That's quite curious. And I loved it, I fell in love with the bike. I'm still practicing today, right? With the projects you have there. Along with the association here in Ribeirão (Athlete 5).

## **Gender Differences**

Historically, sport in Brazil and in much of the world, is treated and seen differently when it comes to the gender of the athletes and even the professionals who support the sport. For example, in 1941, less than 85 years ago, Getúlio Vargas

sanctioned decree-law 3,199 in Brazil, article 54 of which prohibited women from practicing sports “incompatible with the conditions of their nature”. This decree left women out of practices such as football and fights for 42 years, when it was only in 1983 that the law was effectively repealed. Despite the repeal, the consequences of these past bans are still having repercussions today, for example, it was only in 2012 that Brazil managed to have women in all Olympic disciplines in which men also competed. And the media is no different either, it was only in 2019 that an open TV station broadcast all the games of the women's team in the Women's Football World Cup, the most practiced and widespread sport in the country.

In this way, women's difficulties go far beyond prohibitive or permissive laws. According to Souza e Knijnik (2007, p.45), socially women have to fight much harder to be recognized as athletes, get sponsorship and training opportunities and conditions than men. This is because there is a trivialization of female athletes, linked to female stereotypes associated with physical and psychological weakness, which denies their athletic power and minimizes the importance of the sport played by women in relation to the sport played by men.

For people with disabilities, this gender difference is often no different. During research data collection, most of the teams contacted only had active male teams and, also, there was a lower overall participation of women in the championships and training sessions of the modalities researched in this article. As an example of this difference, in the 2022 Brazilian goalball championship, only 12 female teams participated in series A, while there were 15 male teams and, in 2021, 8 female teams entered the championship compared to 12 male teams. An average difference of 26% in greater participation of male teams (CBDV, 2022).

For all coaches interviewed, this quantitative difference between the number of athletes in the female and male categories is also noticed:

We have always observed a much smaller number of female categories competing in these regional competitions. Always much smaller than the male (Coach 2).

When we look at athlete scholarship opportunities, for example to encourage the continuation of sports, there are many scholarships for women and few vacancies (filled). In the competitions I have been to, I always notice that there are fewer women, fewer teams when it comes to team sports and fewer in individual sports as well (Coach 4).

As for the athletes, there was a discrepancy in reports, three of them said that they observed an equal number of men and women in the places where they practice or compete, while the other six stated that there were more men in their category than women. It is possible that this difference is related to the type of sport practiced, since in general, there are sports, especially individual sports, in which women are more accepted than in others. The following report describes a situation that exemplifies this separation:

My family said, my grandmother said, you have to do ballet, you have to do swimming, that (goalball) is not a sport for girls (Athlete 7).

Not to mention that among these six, four of them reported participating in predominantly male sports teams, the exceptions being female in their contexts.

We see a lot of men and just a small group of women. When I went to compete in swimming in Brasília it was like this, a bus full of men and only four women (Athlete 1).

There are no women's teams. I joined five-a-side fut, my coach warned me, said 'I invite you as long as you don't mind one thing: you will probably be the only woman among the men' (Athlete 3).

When asked why they believe this numerical difference exists, both they and the coaches said that there is no significant difference in opportunities for men and women



within the sport for people with visual impairments, since teams and championships always seek to include both categories.

On the other hand, the cultural issue that means sport is not seen as a feminine activity by society was the reason most brought up by athletes. In this way, athletes and coaches see a lack of interest in sport on the part of women, as they do not see the social role of an athlete as possible for them.

We will still often find the woman as the person who takes care of the house, the woman as the person who only takes care of the children and often as the person who cannot do something for herself, she always has to do something for others, right? And men are not, men are already encouraged to leave the house, they are encouraged to have a more active social life than women. So I think this makes a lot of difference when practicing sports (Athlete 9).

The coaches brought another perspective on the topic. Two of them pointed out that the lack of athletes in the female category comes from a lack of experience, opportunities and incentives to practice sports since childhood.

In terms of inclusion too, because if you exclude this child from your participation, the girl will have two problems there, right? Ultimately, feeling different from the male group and having a disability and not feeling included in the activity. I believe that it is still a painstaking task that at least we professionals have studied a lot to eliminate this type of approach that is exclusionary (Coach 1).

The biggest difference I think is the culture and the female sports culture, right? Many of the women had much less experience than the boys (Coach 2).

Despite the existing vacancies for the practice, the path for women to reach this practice is much longer and more difficult than for men, as is their permanence in the sport. The issue of the social roles expected of women, which includes the role of mother and homemaker, is often an obstacle to women's continued participation in sports, leisure and high performance. Thus, the reports of athletes and coaches point out:

Yes, there is this difference because women always have that issue focused on their children, so there is a break to have their own child, a period of being a mother, in short. And then you are at high performance, your performance drops due to this period, and then it's not so easy to get back, right? Anyway, in the regional and Brazilian championships we have a smaller number of teams participating in the women's team (Coach 1).

Being a woman, when we do a sporting activity, you have the issue of being a mother, right? I'm a mother, I was a mother as an athlete and I think this is something that society puts a lot of burden on women. Firstly, due to the physiological issue itself, right? That your life is directly impacted, your sporting life is directly impacted by a pregnancy. And then the social issue, right? Society often demands much more about child care. Society and ourselves, right? It demands much more from women than from men. So I think this also impacts sports life (Athlete 9).

In addition to the lack of appropriate teams for the practice, the lack of representation and opportunities for growth within women's sport are factors that demotivate the practice, as pointed out by Athlete 2 in her report:

You don't have a Brazilian team (of women's 5-a-side football) for you to aspire to grow, get there, to compete in major championships. So I think this issue of lack of accessibility really discourages people from looking (Athlete 2).

However, when asked about the social perspective on female athletes, there were discrepancies in the answers. While some stated that they saw no differences in the way they were treated in relation to men, others stated that there is a depreciation of their abilities because they are women. Two interview excerpts are presented below to represent this contradiction found:

I never felt like 'you can't do this because you're a woman'. In the project we have already participated in cycling challenges in the sugarcane field and people say 'come on, you can handle it', so I think it's the opposite (Athlete 5).

I would really like the way we see women to change because many people who see women as having no capacity do not place complete trust in them (Athlete 3).

Sometimes I want to be more demanding, right?... But because I think so, because I'm a woman and I'm in... and I'm in this sport, I feel this difference is still very big between the women's team and the men's team (Athlete 7).

## **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem was a frequently discussed topic during the research, since sport proved to be a great help in self-image, in the relationship with one's own body and in the process of accepting these women's disabilities. According to Allsen, Harrison and Vance *apud* Bavoso (2017, p.34) physical activity is associated with increased euphoria, self-efficacy, self-concept and self-esteem. The reports below corroborate this statement:

You feel braver too, you feel more in control of your body, of the space around you. You become more confident, so I think that helps a lot (Athlete 5).

I stayed in my room all the time or wherever my mother took me, I was ashamed of people and I was prejudiced against myself, you know, for being blind. Prejudice of walking with a cane... And it was through sport that I overcame my fears and prejudices (Athlete 7).

I was very shy, you know, I hardly talked, I was ashamed of my disability, I was very ashamed to talk about my disability, not today, today it's calmer (...) Today I can express myself better (Athlete 4).

This process of acceptance of disability also appears to be related to the contact with other people with disabilities that sport provides, associated with the breakdown of the socially constructed ableist image. As the following report points out:

I remember that in one of the competitions I went to, a bus went to the gym to pick me up and take me to the competition venue. There was a girl on the bus who only had a part of her leg and she was very beautiful, she was kind of tall, all blonde, she looked like a princess. Then I (thought) wow, how can a girl be so beautiful and not have her entire leg? (Athlete 8).

This perception of change also occurred on the part of the coaches. Two of the four interviewees reported an improvement in self-esteem, especially among female athletes, after practicing regular physical activity:

Especially, I feel that women who are in sport demonstrate greater self-esteem, feel more comfortable in their own skin, accept their disability more easily or live with it better. Some of them will probably never accept it but they tend to live with more peace of mind knowing that the disability will not change, so they will make the best of their life in this condition (Coach 4).

## **Final Considerations**

Based on the results found in the study, we can conclude that practicing sports has a very important potential in re-signifying the purpose of life and the feeling of self-efficacy of athletes. The sense of incapacity that disability carries is overturned when sport enters the scene and demonstrates that, beyond the courts and swimming pools, women with disabilities are capable of belonging and taking ownership of their own lives and the various layers that make it up. In addition to placing women with disabilities in a space to share experiences and identify with similar others, which validates their potential and expands their social participation through an opening to new social centers and contexts outside of family protection or health care.

On the other hand, the lack of accessibility, resources and opportunities to experience the sport is a factor that affects the full potential of the practice. In the State of São Paulo, there are not enough or adequate places, times and professionals to provide an accessible and satisfactory practice for the vast majority of the population in question. And that, therefore, the occupational performance that is related to the subject's involvement with their occupations and social roles is improved but with reservations arising from these social and structural limitations regarding sports practice.

Thus, considering that the occupational therapist, whose objective is to seek greater autonomy and independence of the people he serves or with whom he works, using occupational assessment and considering occupational performance and roles, sports practice proves to be an important resource to promote greater participation in occupations and activities that are meaningful to the subject, in addition to expanding the possibilities of social participation, leisure and work. It is expected that, in addition to mere practice on the court, possibilities for access, adaptations, access to information

and identification of potential can be sought so that sporting practice is possible and fully enjoyed by athletes with visual impairments.

Finally, there is a need for new, more in-depth studies in each type of practice, as experiences and perspectives may vary according to the sport practiced. Furthermore, there was a lack of studies on Paralympic sport for female athletes, with the need for more data in the literature on the topic.

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**Address of the Authors:**

Julie King Gottberg  
Electronic Mail: [julie.gott@usp.br](mailto:julie.gott@usp.br)

Leonardo Martins Kebbe  
Electronic Mail: [kebbe@fmrp.usp.br](mailto:kebbe@fmrp.usp.br)

Regina Yoneko Dakuzaku Carretta  
Electronic Mail: [reginadc@fmrp.usp.br](mailto:reginadc@fmrp.usp.br)