

## THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SKATEBOARDING, GENDER, AND PUBLIC LEISURE SPACES IN BELO HORIZONTE<sup>1</sup>

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*Cecília Isaura de Araújo e Silva*<sup>2</sup>

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)

Belo Horizonte – MG – Brazil

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0925-1284>

*Vitor Lucas de Faria Pessoa*<sup>3</sup>

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)

Belo Horizonte – MG – Brazil

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6298-7440>

**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this research is to analyze whether public leisure spaces designated for skateboarding in Belo Horizonte are accessible and welcoming to women. The methodology adopted was based on a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that the research participants face various challenges stemming from their condition as female skateboarders, including a lack of support and representation in skateparks, the devaluation of women's sports, evidenced by unequal prizes between genders in competitions, as well as incidents of harassment, prejudice both in society and within the family environment, and a lack of time due to the demands of triple work shifts, among other challenges.

**KEYWORDS:** skateboarding. Gender. Public leisure spaces.

### RELAÇÕES ENTRE SKATE, GÊNERO E ESPAÇOS PÚBLICOS DE LAZER EM BELO HORIZONTE

**RESUMO:** O objetivo desta pesquisa é analisar se os espaços públicos de lazer destinados à prática do skate em Belo Horizonte são acessíveis e acolhedores para as mulheres. A metodologia adotada baseou-se em uma abordagem qualitativa, por meio

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<sup>2</sup> Bachelor's Degree in Physical Education by School of Physical Education, Physical Therapy, and Occupational Therapy at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais [Federal University of Minas Gerais].

<sup>3</sup> Postdoctoral research in progress at the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Leisure Studies at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (PPGIEL/UFMG). Professor at the Department of Physical Education at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (2022 - 2024). Ph.D. and Master's Degree in Leisure Studies by Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (PPGIEL/UFMG).

de entrevistas semiestruturadas. Os resultados indicam que as participantes da pesquisa enfrentam diversas dificuldades decorrentes de sua condição de mulheres skatistas, incluindo a falta de apoio e representatividade nas pistas, a desvalorização do esporte feminino, manifestada por premiações desiguais entre os gêneros em competições, além de situações de assédio, preconceito tanto na sociedade quanto no ambiente familiar, e a falta de tempo devido às triplas jornadas de trabalho, entre outros desafios.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Skate. Gênero. Espaços públicos de lazer.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to identify whether the public leisure spaces designated for skateboarding in Belo Horizonte are welcoming to women. Additionally, we will investigate the challenges faced by female skateboarders through interviews conducted at some skateparks in the capital of Minas Gerais. We could not begin this text without providing some sort of preamble about how certain factors led to the creation of this research project, as without them, this study would not be possible.

This article is the result of a Final Paper started at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, stemming from the dialogue between an undergraduate student, whose trajectory has been significantly marked by skateboarding, including in a competitive context, and a professor who has been involved with this cultural phenomenon for about fifteen years. Although the research is not conceived as an ethnographic study, we were inspired by some anthropological perspectives to establish our starting point in terms of epistemological positioning in the academic context. We assume that the personal trajectory of the researchers can, and in some cases, should be closely related to their academic work, something that also impacts the way the relationship between the "researchers" and the "researched" is established. In this article, we will not seek to analyze the female skateboarders of Belo Horizonte with the aim of classifying them into categories, but rather to understand, alongside these women, the different ways of

existing as agents who constitute this cultural manifestation. In the words of Ingold (2019, p. 11): According to Ingold (2019, p. 11):

The kind of anthropology I advocate here has a different purpose. It is not a question of interpreting or explaining the behavior of others; it is not a question of putting them in their place or consigning them to the category of "already known". On the contrary, it is about sharing in their presence, learning from their life experiences, and applying this knowledge to our own conceptions of how human life could be, its conditions, and future possibilities.

In this regard, we seek to learn from the wisdom of these women about what it is like to be a skateboarder in the public skateparks of Belo Horizonte. It is important to highlight that, from this perspective, knowledge and wisdom take on distinct meanings: "knowledge seeks to fix things in concepts and categories of thought, explain them, and make them, to some extent, predictable," while wisdom, "on the other hand, is to venture into the world and take the risk of exposing oneself to what happens there. It is to share in the presence of others, pay attention, care" (Ingold, 2019, p. 12). Considering these assumptions, it is only fair to begin this text by presenting the personal journey of the author, which motivated and significantly influenced the completion of this research.

Her relationship with skateboarding began at the age of 13 at the Nova Zoo skatepark, located in the Nova Floresta neighborhood in Belo Horizonte. Since then, skateboarding has taken up a huge space in her life. At that time, she skated with a group of four friends, all male. There was a distance between her house and the skatepark, which made frequent practice difficult. In 2014, a year after she started skateboarding, a skatepark composed of three bowls<sup>4</sup> was inaugurated at the Fazenda Lagoa do Nado Park, a place very close to where she lived, which, for her, was the

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<sup>4</sup> Bowls are a type of concrete "pools" where skateboarders ride their skateboards.

fulfillment of a dream. She recalls the feeling and the sparkle in her eyes on the day of the inauguration.

From that year on, skateboarding became a regular practice for her, and she would spend the entire day at the skatepark, from opening to closing time. Throughout all these years of practice, there was always a feeling that bothered her: the lack of female skateboarders. Even though she had friends who skated with her, in certain situations, she felt excluded. The lack of representation in the environment often discouraged her from skating.

In Belo Horizonte, there is a female skateboarding collective called "Minas do Skate," which occasionally organized skate sessions for women. On those days, she felt like a happier skateboarder, in a way, more complete. However, most of the girls skated in the street<sup>5</sup> category, not in vertical<sup>6</sup>, which was her specialty. The predominantly male presence at the skateparks led her to experience situations where her skateboarding skills were constantly judged, always in a derogatory manner.

Throughout her practice, he participated in some championships: 1<sup>st</sup> place at the Anchieta Pool Party in 2015; 3<sup>rd</sup> place at the Anchieta Pool Party in 2017, sanctioned by the Brazilian Skateboarding Confederation (CBSK); 1<sup>st</sup> place in Best Trick Minas at Skate Nova Zoo in 2017; 7<sup>th</sup> place at the 1<sup>st</sup> BH Skate Invasion in 2017, a stage of the Brazilian Championship (sanctioned by CBSK). All these competitions took place in the city of Belo Horizonte. These were the ones she had the courage to participate in, as many others made her feel embarrassed due to the small number of female participants and the lack of encouragement from the predominantly male audience at the skatepark.

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<sup>5</sup>The street skateboarding modality is focused on tricks performed on the ground, either on tracks or on streets. It is one of the first skateboarding modalities. It does not necessarily require a track.

<sup>6</sup> The vertical modality, also known as Park, is a category that relies on skateparks with steep ramps, bowls, half-pipes, mini ramps, and more.

We live in a society where women constantly need to assert themselves to be valued, whether in the workplace, at home, or even in the spaces they choose for leisure. According to Stoppa e Isayama (2017), women's participation in sports during their leisure time does not even reach 50% of the male participation rate. Considering that sports are also a right enshrined in the Constitution Brazil, 1998)<sup>7</sup>, the opportunities for women to engage in skateboarding should be greater than they currently are. From this perspective, it is extremely important to understand the reason for this low rate of sports practice by women, when compared to men. According to a study conducted by Datafolha<sup>8</sup>, the number of skateboarders in Brazil in 2015 was around 8.5 million, of which only 19% were women. This data aligns with the findings of the study by Isayama and Stoppa, highlighting the low rate of female participation in sports.

We understand leisure as a human necessity and a dimension of culture that constitutes a field of social practices experienced playfully by people (Gomes, 2014). In this regard, it is essential to analyze how the female public has engaged with this phenomenon, considering that, beyond being an ontological necessity of the human being, it is also a social right guaranteed by Article 6 of the Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1998). Furthermore, we believe that leisure has an emancipatory character, providing, through cultural manifestations, opportunities to broaden people's critical perspective and cultural capital as they experience its diverse cultural contents:

The emancipatory potential of leisure is based on its educational nature—not that this is its ultimate purpose, but rather that, through the enjoyment of cultural manifestations, one learns through experience [...] it is in this context that experiencing becomes transformative (Pessoa, 2020, p. 110).

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<sup>7</sup> Constituição Brasileira de 1998.

<sup>8</sup> HIROSHI, Hiroshi. 8 dados sobre o skate que você nem imagina. Redbull. 2017.

There are many public spaces in Belo Horizonte dedicated to skateboarding, such as Parque Nossa Senhora da Piedade, Parque Mangabeiras, Parque Lagoa do Nado, Esplanada do Mineirão, Bowl do Anchieta, the Skate Park at Nova Zoo, and the Serra Skate Park. Based on the personal experience of the author, it is evident that most of the people who use these spaces are men. The environment we are in can either enable or limit sports participation. It is relevant to consider the relationship between this reality and the fact that the appropriation of public leisure spaces for skateboarding is predominantly male, which may make these spaces less inviting for women.

Historically, skateboarding has been more associated with men than with women, resulting in different opportunities for male and female skateboarders (Figueira, 2009). From competition prizes and sponsorships to media recognition, women's skateboarding is often made invisible compared to men's skateboarding. Thus, considering the gender inequality present in the sport, it is possible to state:

The central position occupied by men is notorious and, as a result, is taken as a reference. Women are the 'others', positioned on the margins, and, because of this, they must struggle for subject positions. Like any cultural product, skateboarding is a territory full of conflicts, including gender conflicts. It is a space that demands struggles for meaning and existence (Figueira, Goellner, 2009, p.99).

Therefore, it is necessary to debate the differentiation in the treatment of gender in sport, which, in theory, should be accessible to everyone, regardless of gender. However, it is possible to highlight several situations in which sexism is present in skateboarding. In the article written by Márcia Figueira, "*Skate para mulheres no Brasil: fragmentos de um esporte em construção*" (2008), the author searches historiographical records for fragments related to women's participation in the sport. In this research, she analyzes the book "*Onda Dura: Três Décadas de Skate no Brasil*", which consists of 105 pages, but only two of them feature photos of women. Moreover,

these images do not show women performing skateboarding tricks. Instead, the photos depict women as symbols of physical beauty. In contrast, Figueira discusses other records from the same period, written by women, that document the evolution of women's skateboarding. The images in these records actually show women skateboarding and performing tricks. Additionally, the author documents information about Leni Cobra, the first Brazilian woman to win a street skateboarding competition in 1987. Furthermore, in 2006, during the Skateboarding World Championship in Germany, Sandro Dias, Daniel Vieira, and Karen Jonz were the winners. However, the magazine “100% Skate” published an article that highlighted only the men's victory, completely omitting Karen Jonz’s unprecedented achievement—becoming the first Brazilian woman to win the Women's Vertical World Championship (Figueira, 2009). Once again, women were pushed to the margins, even after reaching first place with all their skill and tricks. Despite international recognition, Karen Jonz did not receive the appreciation she deserved from the main skateboarding media outlets in her own country.

Considering all these aspects, this study aims to research and understand the relationships between skateboarding, gender, and the appropriation of public spaces in Belo Horizonte. More specifically, we seek to observe whether public leisure spaces designated for skateboarding are inviting for women, analyze whether male and female skateboarders have equivalent opportunities both in recreational and professional contexts, and investigate the challenges a woman faces as a skateboarder in Belo Horizonte.

Regarding the methodological aspects<sup>9</sup>, the chosen research approach is qualitative, conducted through semi-structured interviews. These interviews consist of a series of open-ended questions, asked verbally in a predetermined order, in which the interviewer can add clarification questions (Laville e Dionne, 1999). Furthermore, Marconi and Lakatos (2004) state that the interviewer has the freedom to develop each situation in any direction they deem appropriate. This flexibility allows for a broader range of perceptions and feelings from the interviewees regarding the researched area.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the topic, the selection of research volunteers was carried out using the “snowball” methodology, which works as follows:

The execution of snowball sampling is structured in the following way: to initiate the process, documents and/or key informants—referred to as 'seeds'—are used to identify a few individuals within the general population who fit the necessary profile for the research. This approach is taken because an initial probabilistic sample is either impossible or impractical, and the seeds help the researcher establish initial contacts and explore the target group. Next, the individuals identified by the seeds are asked to suggest new contacts with the desired characteristics from their personal networks, and so on, thus allowing the sampling pool to expand with each interview, depending on the researcher's interest. Eventually, the sample reaches saturation, meaning no new names are suggested, or the newly identified participants do not contribute additional relevant information to the analysis (Vinuto, 2014, p 203).

The first interviewee was chosen based on the researchers' convenience. Initial contact was made through social media to invite the participant to respond to the interview and to arrange a suitable time and location. The next skateboarder to participate was selected based on the recommendation of the first interviewee. All initial contacts were made via social media, specifically Instagram and WhatsApp. In total, eight female skateboarders were contacted, and seven agreed to participate in the study. To ensure the protection of sensitive data, each participant was assigned a fictitious name: Conceição, Maria Fernanda, Jamille, Weldra, Rafaela, Iasmin, and Maria Julia.

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<sup>9</sup>We would like to emphasize that this study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, as outlined in Resolution 196/96 of the Brazilian National Health Council (Brasil, 1996).



All of these women were over 18 years old and were interviewed only after signing the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE)<sup>10</sup>. After the seventh interview, data saturation was observed, leading to the discontinuation of further interviews. Data collection was conducted entirely at skateparks in Belo Horizonte, which the volunteers regularly frequented.

All interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile phone, with the participants' authorization. Subsequently, they were fully transcribed into a document, preserving all expressions used by the skateboarders in their original form. The interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method. "The method is based on deconstructing the structure and elements of the content to clarify its different characteristics and extract its meaning" (Laville, Dionne, 1999, p 214). The interviews were read and reread to uncover the underlying messages in the women's statements (Bardin, 2004). The goal was to identify common perceptions and themes among the participants. To formulate the analytical categories, the "Open Model" approach was used. Laville and Dionne (1999, p. 219) define this approach as follows:

The researcher begins with a certain number of units, grouping those with similar meanings to obtain an initial set of rudimentary categories. This set serves as the starting point for a process that, through successive stages, leads to the final categories" (Laville & Dionne, 1999, p. 219).

Based on the analysis of the collected data, three analytical categories were created: "In the middle of the road there was a stone" – This category discusses the challenges of being a female skateboarder. "Between the Drop and the Doll" – This category explores the gendering of skateboarding practices and its influence within the sport. "Empowerment on Wheels: The Unity and Representation of Women's Skateboarding" – This category highlights how female skateboarders transform the

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<sup>10</sup> UFMG. TCLE / TALE. Research Ethics Committee.

difficulties they face into motivation and resilience to keep skating. These three categories will be presented below.

### **In the Middle of the Road there was a Stone**

The vast majority of female skateboarders have likely experienced moments when, while skating, a small rock crossed their path, causing the wheel or bearing<sup>11</sup> to lock up and resulting in a fall. Parallel to this, there are "obstacles" that make it difficult for women to practice skateboarding. In this category of analysis, we will address some of these challenges. First, we will discuss the structure of skateparks. According to Pessoa *et al.* (2023, p. 263): "there needs to be a "space" for leisure to take place, one that is safe and has all the necessary infrastructure." The structure of the environment says a lot about who the people are who can frequent that place. One of the problems reported by the interviewees is precisely the lack of bathrooms at the skate parks, revealing the lack of infrastructure in this environment:

There is also the issue of infrastructure, of having a proper bathroom. Having a place, right? If you need to use the bathroom, like I was saying about being on my period, which is a specific concern for women, and there is no adequate structure for that, which makes it difficult. I've even used both a tampon and a pad just to come skate. I was worried about leaking. Besides that, I always avoid drinking water because of the lack of bathrooms, even when the sun is blazing. I avoid it because I know that if I need to use the bathroom, I'll have to walk 3 blocks and count on the goodwill of shop owners to let me use theirs (Rafaela).

It is possible to identify more than one issue in this statement, showing how the lack of infrastructure negatively impacts women's ability to fully occupy these spaces. The fact that Rafaela avoids drinking water, even while engaging in a physically demanding activity in high temperatures, is concerning and could be considered an

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<sup>11</sup> Wheel and Bearing – Components of the skateboard's structure; they are responsible for the movement and displacement of the skateboard.

unhealthy environment. Hydration is essential, especially in extreme heat combined with physical exercise.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the interviewee mentions menstruation, which raises an important question: How can a space that does not provide even the minimum conditions for a dignified stay be considered welcoming? To answer this question succinctly, another interviewee, Weldra, stated: “The environment is hostile for women. The skateparks don’t have bathrooms—the bare minimum for us to feel comfortable”.

Another structural issue that arose was that, when bathrooms did exist, they lacked changing stations. Out of the seven interviewees, three are mothers: Rafaela, Weldra, and Conceição. This brought up relevant discussions about the intersection of motherhood and skateboarding. In the following excerpts, Rafaela, who has a three-year-old son, shares her experience returning to the skateparks after giving birth, while Conceição reflects on the feelings of being a skateboarding mother.

I was able to get back to skating when he was about one year old. It was complicated because there was the issue of fear, exhaustion, and also the logistics. We would go to the skatepark with him, and we literally changed his diaper there. My husband<sup>13</sup> would joke, saying, “You’re more local than anyone here at Lagoa do Nado because you’ve changed a dirty diaper here”. And yeah, it was tough.. We used to go to Lagoa a lot when he was a baby, and the bathroom there didn’t have a changing table. So, all these difficulties. I only kept skating because I love it so much—because there’s nothing favorable. It’s really hard. I always say that I only keep skating because I truly enjoy it. If I depended on good conditions, I wouldn’t be skating. Every time I go skate, I’m already exhausted—from work, from taking care of my child, from taking care of the house. So, I skate purely because I love it. And I find it complicated because when you’re tired, you’re more prone to getting injured, and I feel like that affects my progress in the sport. To try new things, you have to be willing and have time for it. So, normally, it’s always really complicated (Rafaela).

When I had João, I thought many times, “man, I’m never going to skate again. I’ve even heard other moms say, “Conceição, I respect you—you’re a mom. How do you manage to balance that with skating?” (...) And then there’s the fact that, as a mother, you already hear so many things and have so many obligations. Then, after finishing everything, where’s the energy to

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<sup>12</sup> According to Giroldo *et al.* (2022, p.540.) “hydration is of utmost importance before, during and after practicing the most varied types of physical activities, ensuring that the expected physical performance is achieved and that health problems can be avoided”. Hidratação e Atividade Física. Revista Saúde em Foco.

<sup>13</sup> The name of the partner was omitted to prevent any form of identification. The authors chose to use the expression “my husband”.

skate? And then, as a woman, how am I going to be welcomed? If you look at the skatepark, you'll see that moms aren't really embraced. I even mention this in the article. A mom has to say, "Hey, can you hold the baby for a second so I can take a quick ride?" And then there's the prejudice, like, "Wow, look at that old woman chasing after a skateboard, a piece of wood—what an embarrassing sight" (Conceição).

In this regard, the interviewees' statements highlight the difficulty of being a skateboarding mother, which corroborates the study of Rocha (2023, p. 108) which talks about the probable difficulty in learning to skateboard because she is a woman and a mother. It is important to emphasize that we are not saying that because she is a mother, a woman becomes incapable of skateboarding, in no way. We are discussing the fact that motherhood involves numerous responsibilities, often attributed exclusively to the mother, in addition to professional and domestic obligations. This accumulation of roles, combined with the lack of adequate infrastructure in public spaces, makes it more difficult and challenging for mothers to practice skateboarding, as reported by the interviewees. Therefore, it is necessary to have a sensitive perspective on these obstacles and understand that spaces should act as facilitators of the practice rather than as another barrier that women must overcome. Rocha (2023, p. 108), highlights the importance of this sensitivity and the need for environmental adaptations for women, mothers, and skateboarders:

A careful look at this issue is an important point in this experience that addresses the problem of gender and the social injustices suffered by women. One of the topics [of the research conducted by the author] dealt with how social spaces need adaptations and must overcome prejudices to accommodate women and their social markers (Rocha, 2023, p. 108).

Another set of challenges that women face both inside and outside skateparks includes harassment and discrimination, which often manifest in "subtle" ways but sometimes take explicit and intimidating forms. From disrespectful comments to invasive behaviors, female skateboarders endure a daily battle for their safety and

respect in skateboarding spaces. In the following excerpts, the interviewees share their experiences regarding this issue:

I think there's a kind of subtle harassment, like, I'm skating, and then a guy comes over wanting to "help", trying to touch me. And then there are these baseless criticisms from the guys. I'm learning, and when you're learning, you make mistakes. And when I made mistakes, I would hear teasing and mean comments, you know? Just to put you down, to make you want to quit. Some mean comments. One time, some guy mocked me, calling me a poser. Poser? Why? Just because I don't skate like him? Sometimes I go out to skate all excited, but when I get to the park, my energy drops, you know? Like when a place just isn't that welcoming? (Maria Julia).

Back in the day, we used to wear baggy clothes more often, but now, some girls skate in shorts and crop tops. So what? Everyone does what they want. Just because a woman dresses like that doesn't mean she's trying to be sexy. Men shouldn't be commenting. I've had bad experiences because of prejudiced and ignorant people. [...] We're skating in a public space, and then a guy comes over and just stares at a girl's legs, her body—it's messed up. We see the looks, for sure. It's uncomfortable. Imagine a girl feeling oppressed there, surrounded by guys. I remember one time I was competing in a tournament, and there was this girl wearing really short shorts, with a really nice body. Man, she's wearing her shorts, she does what she wants! That doesn't give anyone the right to say anything. I remember the announcer made a comment, like a compliment, and I didn't like it. That wasn't about skateboarding. She was there to skate (Conceição).

The testimonies of Maria Julia and Conceição reveal the harassment women face in skateboarding. Maria Julia describes situations of subtle harassment, with degrading comments and attempts to discourage her from skating by some male skaters. These attitudes highlight the persistence of a sexist and exclusionary culture that seeks to delegitimize women's presence and skills in skateboarding. On the other hand, Conceição discusses the judgment women face regarding their clothing, emphasizing the importance of respecting each woman's right to dress however she wants, without it being seen as "sexualizing" herself. Her account underscores the need to combat the objectification of women's bodies. Along the same lines, Weldra adds:

As a woman and the only woman at the skatepark, I was very sexualized. One time, I literally punched a guy in the face—he was three times my size. I was sitting on a higher spot, and he was standing. He said he had seen something of mine while I was skating, but at that moment, I wasn't even thinking about that. I was just skating, and I was wearing pants. But I still like skating in a crop top to this day. In that situation, my pants were a little loose, and he said he had seen something there. That was the moment that

made me really, really angry—so angry about being the only woman skating there. That day, I had to react on impulse. Some other guys supported me at the time, but I also knew that those same guys had been unpleasant toward me in other situations before (Weldra).

According to Machado (2013, p. 6) within the skateboarding community itself, there are some skateboarders who belittle or mock the presence of women. However, this is not immediately noticeable, as if asked, most men will always respond with an air of acceptance. This is evident in Weldra's statement, where she reveals that she received support from male skateboarders in that specific situation, while knowing that those same individuals had been unpleasant in similar contexts before. This issue of harassment and discrimination against women in sports is not new; history continues to repeat itself, not only in skateboarding but in other sports as well. The lack of safety in public spaces directly impacts women's leisure activities, and as a result, it can reduce or limit their participation in these environments. This aligns with studies that discuss this issue. An example of this can be seen in the statement of Maria Julia:

The first time I pushed off on a skateboard was on the street. I spent about three months trying to learn. I would always skate on the street below my house and always at night because there was no one around. Every time I tried to skate during the day, someone would mock me, harass me, or tell me to do a trick. So, I started skateboarding at night on the street (Maria Julia).

Considering the accounts of the skateboarders regarding the physical and symbolic barriers that prevent women from fully occupying these spaces, we can identify several challenges within the skateboarding scene. One of the most significant issues is the lack of adequate infrastructure at skateparks, which makes it difficult for women to participate in a dignified and unrestricted manner. The absence of restrooms and changing stations, as well as the lack of support for mother skateboarders, highlights the urgent need for adaptations in public spaces to make them truly inclusive. Furthermore, harassment and discrimination—both subtle and explicit—perpetuate a

hostile and intimidating environment for women, affecting not only their safety but also their freedom to enjoy leisure and sports. These obstacles, present not only in skateboarding but also in many other sports, emphasize the importance of a sensitive approach and concrete actions to promote well-structured environments. Ensuring that women can enjoy skateboarding in their leisure time without concerns or setbacks is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and supportive skateboarding community.

### **Between the Drop and the Doll**

In common sense, many sports are not seen as a possibility for women. This perspective becomes even more pronounced when referring to adventure sports, such as skateboarding. This notion emerges even before birth and continues to be reinforced afterward.

Children are socialized and go through a process of internalizing the "roles" defined by gender: during pregnancy, the choice of the baby's layette color symbolically expresses, often unconsciously, future expectations (Guerra, 2007, p. 139).

In addition to this, at baby showers, gender is "revealed" through colors—usually pink for girls and blue for boys. Similarly, a girl's first toy is often a doll, while a boy's first toy is usually a car. In this topic, our purpose is to discuss the influence of this gendering of practices and the consequences it brings to women's participation in skateboarding. As stated by Michael Messner (1994), sports represent a "gendered institution" in which the structure and values reflect dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Adolescence has a different social meaning for girls and boys. While boys are increasingly encouraged to explore public spaces, challenge their own limits, and even see sports as a space for professional and socioeconomic advancement. Girls have their

bodies much more controlled, the responsibility for household chores and caring for younger siblings falls almost exclusively on them (Moura, 2024). Based on the statements of the interviewees, it was found that, initially, prejudice against skateboarding begins within their own homes. Below are some accounts of this:

I have also heard a lot from my family telling me to play with dolls, this prejudice. "What are you doing skateboarding at your age? You're going to get hurt!" When I was younger, I also heard, "this is a boy's thing, you're going to get hurt." (Maria Julia).

At first, we suffer even at home, right? Because it's a more masculinized sport, people at home would already be like... oh wow, this is a man's thing and all that. So, it's hard to keep going with something you want because it's considered a male sport. The prejudice starts at home" (Jamille).

My parents, at first, were prejudiced. My mother even hid my skateboard, broke it, and I had to sell my clothes on the street in a bazaar to buy another one. She was afraid I would get involved with drugs [...] because she saw skateboarding as something masculine. And then I started breaking that idea at home out of sheer stubbornness" (Iasmin).

A friend of mine told me yesterday in Barreiro that the father of one of my students broke her skateboard because he said she wasn't supposed to skate. I've seen people hiding girls' skateboards. Imagine the pain (Conceição).

According to Adelman (2006), a sociologist whose studies include gender as one of her areas of research, sports have, for more than a century, been a place of intense disputes over what a "male body" or a "female body" can or should do. This is still reflected today. The families of the interviewees associated skateboarding with a practice that only the male body had the capacity to perform. This can be seen in a fragment of Maria Julia's interview: "This is a boy's thing, you're going to get hurt". Thus, the first challenge for women is to break this paradigm within their families, who do not agree with the practice of female skateboarding, as reported by Machado (2013, p.6):

Female skateboarders seek strategies to demystify, in front of their families, the idea that they practice a 'manly' sport. To do so, they try to build the discourse that skateboarding is a practice for everyone, just like any other sport. In many cases, families only start to accept it (or at least reduce their prejudice) after some practical results from the skater, such as when she achieves good placements in competitions, appears in the media, or secures



sponsorships. These accomplishments indicate the possibility of her building a promising career in the sport" (Machado, 2013, p.6).

In this context, Iasmin, one of the volunteers, talks about her struggles within her own home as a woman who skateboards. In the excerpt below, she reveals her lack of autonomy to skateboard compared to her brother, who is also a skateboarder:

But I never had the same freedom to skateboard as my brother. I have a brother who is a skateboarder, so while he could spend the afternoon skating without my parents worrying too much about where he was, I, first of all, couldn't always go out because I had to clean the house. The responsibility wasn't as heavy on him, and my parents were afraid of where I would be skating, whether it was safe for me or not (Iasmin).

In this passage, it is observed that the man, symbolized by the interviewee's brother, enjoys the freedom to skateboard whenever he wants, while being exempt from household chores. These responsibilities, in the interviewee's home, fall exclusively on the mother and daughter, meaning on the women, reflecting a patriarchal structure still present in society. It is understood that the parents fear where their daughter would be going to skateboard. Once again, the safety of public spaces becomes a crucial factor in enabling female skateboarding. This concern stems from the fact that women are constant targets of violence, which can be physical, verbal, sexual, etc.

At the same time, even within skate parks, the scenario remains challenging, as male skateboarders, through certain attitudes, hinder female skateboarding. This can be identified in some accounts where women mention not being able to drop<sup>14</sup> in and, even in the street skateboarding modality, men do not respect when it is a woman's turn to go and perform a trick<sup>15</sup>. Below are some accounts of such situations:

I think one of the difficulties is this issue of arriving at the session and not seeing many women there, and having difficulty skating because people don't let you drop in easily. There's always a guy there who will give you a

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<sup>14</sup> Drop is a way to descend ramps, bowls, half-pipes, and mini ramps. It is widely used in the Park category.

<sup>15</sup> Perform a trick is an expression used by skateboarders, referring to performing tricks as part of the sport.

disapproving look, trying to intimidate you with his expression, so the session doesn't flow well. You always end up in an uncomfortable situation, feeling like you don't belong in that space. So that's a challenge (Rafaela).

It really pisses me off when I'm skating and they don't respect everyone's turn. They do respect it sometimes, but when it's my turn, they don't. That makes me really mad at the viaduct spot. Usually, I just go in front anyway. Sometimes I'm near the gap, and there's a group leaning on it, taking turns, right? And some guys see me and stand right in front of me instead of stepping aside to follow the order. They go for a trick, come back, and stay in front of me again. I go anyway, I drop in, and sometimes I get in their way—I don't even care, you know? We have to stand our ground and face them. I understand that it's a tough situation because sometimes we're in a position of vulnerability, sometimes we're alone, and we don't know how they're going to react. I think when we team up with a friend, we can support each other in that sense, you know? (Maria Julia).

Through these statements, we can see that women need to assert themselves in order to do something that, in theory, is also their right. The male presence in skateparks often makes it difficult for women to practice skateboarding. The disrespect seen in "cutting in line" ahead of a woman is evident and can be read as a message that female skateboarders do not belong in that space, creating discomfort for them. We emphasize that, while Maria Julia confronts this issue, there are women who do not have the same courage. However, the presence of more than one woman in that space makes it easier to face these challenges. According to Zanatta (2019, p. 37): "Finding more women who practice the sport helps them identify with skateboarding." Jamille mentions that whenever she sees girls feeling shy at the skatepark, she tries to help and encourage them so they understand that the space belongs to them as well.

Nowadays, when you go to places like this, you see a lot of girls who are too shy to skate, they don't feel comfortable. I talk to a lot of girls who are just starting, and they don't feel good about it. The guys see a girl walking in with a skateboard under her arm, and they want to rush in, do tricks just to show off—it's like they want to 'mark their territory,' you know? Like, don't come near. This has always happened, and honestly, I think we're far from changing that. Since I started skating, I made sure I could skate wherever I went because I always stood my ground, even when I was young, even when I didn't know the people there. I always stood my ground. I would go for it, I would push through—even if they tried to push me aside. That's what I always aimed for, but not everyone has that in them. Whenever I see a girl feeling shy at a session, I call her over, I reach out and try to help her feel comfortable enough to skate because this space is for us too. If they don't start skating, people won't respect them—because they just don't respect us, you know?" (Jamille).

The disrespect towards women in skateparks, according to the interviewees, was also reproduced in amateur competitions held in the same locations in Belo Horizonte. The volunteers reported several obstacles regarding the events they participated in or attended. Ranging from the existence of a separate female category to occupying judging positions and receiving awards. There are clear disparities when comparing the men's and women's categories. It is evident that, since the earliest major sporting competitions, women have faced, and continue to face, difficulties in being accepted in this field, demonstrating that the pursuit of gender equity in sports is an ongoing struggle (Melo, 2021). This is directly related to the gendering of practices. In the past, the spectacular dimension of sports was something from which women were to be excluded, as it stirred passions and energies, awakening sensations and desires that were not always easy to control (Goellner, 2016, p. 33). Despite many achievements in terms of space and rights within sports, there is still a lingering feeling of a "silent control". Through the interviews and the experiences shared by female skateboarders, it was possible to identify several issues regarding amateur competitions.

I go to championships to be a judge, and when it's time to hand in my spreadsheet, they look at it looking for something wrong, because it was a woman who did it. Always(...) When I'm competing, they make us run at noon, in the blazing sun, at the time when everyone goes out for lunch. Where is the visibility? I'm not saying that we die in the sun... but does it have to be noon? There is a human issue, of empathy, that is missing. As for the awards, I've already boxer shorts. Seriously, God knows I'm not lying, adding them all up, I must have won more than 40 caps, pants, underwear, huge sneakers (Conceição).

Not long ago, I participated in a Skate Day event where I won men's clothing. I mean, come on, are you kidding me? Just because I skate, you give me men's clothing? I'm not a man, for Christ's sake! You know? Like, a lot has changed, but obviously, there's still a lot that needs to change. (...) I go to competitions to win gear and other prizes so I can make some money, pay a bill, fund another trip, or cover the expenses of traveling. So, whether we like it or not, we build up certain expectations. Then, when you go to claim your prize, the guys' prizes are a full skateboard setup, clothing, a bunch of stuff, and sneakers in their correct sizes. And for the girls? It's like men's clothing, size 40 sneakers that you can't even wear. Many girls enter competitions hoping to win prizes they can actually use because they don't

have the money to buy gear. I've been given sneakers in size 42, and I wear a 35! Obviously, no one can guess exactly what size you wear, but come on—you can at least get a general idea. Women usually wear between size 35 and 39. Why not choose a middle ground? Why not provide women's clothing? Even reselling this stuff is difficult. So, like I said before, things have changed, but there's still a lot left to improve (Jamille).

Conceição describes the skepticism she faces when acting as a judge in competitions, where her evaluations are questioned—presumably just because they were made by a woman. Both accounts highlight a lack of empathy and understanding of women's needs in skateboarding. The insistence on giving out men's prizes and scheduling women's competitions at unfavorable times are clear signs that the culture still does not fully value female participation. Along those lines, Iasmin points out:

The prizes have never been equal, the visibility has never been equal, and the audience was never there waiting to watch the women skate—they were waiting for the men. The worst possible schedule, under the worst sun (Iasmin).

We always skate at the worst times. The guys get to skate when the sun is already lower, but we're usually the first ones out there, under the blazing hot sun. And even during podium photos, no one even looks at the women's category. No one pays attention to the women's category (Maria Julia).

There's always been more hype around the men's competitions than the women's. The best prizes go to the men. And the prizes for the women have always been men's items—I once won size 41 sneakers and gave them to my dad. They never really think about us, you know? (Maria Fernanda).

After reading these excerpts, it becomes clear that skateboarding competitions are not designed with women in mind, from the planning stages to execution, considering that the vast majority of prizes are intended for men. There is still an issue of invisibilizing women's skateboarding—why schedule the women's category at what is considered the worst time? Many organizers justify the lack of a women's category by claiming a shortage of participants. But given the obstacles mentioned, what incentive is there for a woman to participate in these competitions? Knowing that the women's category will take place at the least favorable times, that the prizes will not be as attractive as those in the men's category, and that there will be little photographic

coverage, the disparity becomes evident. Furthermore, when women take on other roles, such as judging, their presence is also questioned, as highlighted in the statement of Conceição.

Based on the experiences shared by the interviewees and the analysis of the difficulties faced by women in skateboarding, it is evident that significant obstacles persist, both on and off the skateparks. From childhood, with the imposition of traditional gender roles, to participation in competitions and events, female skaters encounter barriers that reflect a deeply rooted social structure. The gendering of sports practices contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes and limitations for women, making it necessary to constantly challenge and overcome these norms. The pursuit of equal opportunities and recognition in women's skateboarding requires not only the individual resilience of female skaters but also a systemic transformation that acknowledges and values their contributions. As long as the voices of female skaters continue to be marginalized and their achievements overlooked, the fight for an equal and inclusive space in the skateboarding world will remain a crucial challenge for the skateboarding community as a whole.

### **Empowerment on Wheels: Union, Identity and Representation of Women's Skateboarding**

One day, she couldn't vote, nor could she study, She left her home, hit the streets feeling sturdy. Armed with boldness, hiding her fear, Men with privilege and the system kept her in arrears. A shout-out to the girls who believe in the fight, A woman's place is wherever she likes! In rap, she takes the lead, in samba, she shines, In reggae, she chills, in funk, she defines. Calm the chaos. Stand up, be true. Just as she chooses to. (Free translation of "*Ela Encanta*" – Marina Peralta).

Women's empowerment in skateboarding emerges as a powerful movement, challenging stereotypes and claiming spaces once dominated solely by men. Women of

all ages and backgrounds find in skateboarding a tool for personal expression, resistance, and representation. This topic will discuss how female skateboarders in Belo Horizonte navigate the challenges of being women in the skateboarding scene, how their unity helps them face these issues, and the sense of identification and resilience that skateboarding fosters in their lives.

Like other sports, skateboarding is also a battleground, particularly in terms of gender (Figueira; Gollner, 2009). Initially, it is important to note that all the interviewees started skating alone or with men, which forced them to confront the aforementioned obstacles. Conceição and Weldra share their feelings about the lack of support at the beginning of their journeys:

When I started, I had no one to hold my hand. No one held mine. No one came up to me and said, 'Look, position your foot like this, align your shoulders with your knees, bend your leg, and step firmly, etc.' I just kept falling, and the guys would laugh. Then, after a few years, I was skating on the mini ramp, and that same person who had laughed at me was there. And he said, 'Wow, you're killing it now.' And instead of thinking, 'Ahhh, now I'm going to destroy you,' I swear, it was like a snap of the fingers, and I heard God's voice in my head saying, "Remember, it was him". And I remembered it was him. I looked at him and thought, I won't be rude, I won't get angry, scream, or hesitate. And I remembered that phrase and said, 'Yes, it's me. Do you remember? And then that phrase came to me: 'Don't be afraid, I'll hold your hand.' Because he never did... How many girls today can have female skate instructors to help them? (Conceição).

I never skated very well because I had no one to hold my hand. That kind of support—having someone to hold your hand, having a woman nearby to teach and inspire—never existed for me. Today, my daughter, who also skates, tells me that I am her inspiration. But I always talk to her and make sure she understands that difficulties are what make us strong and help us evolve (Weldra).

Conceição, who also works as a skate instructor, took the phrase "Don't be afraid, I'll hold your hand" from a past struggle when no one was there to support her. Now, she uses it as a way to motivate her students in skateboarding. Similarly, Weldra, who once found herself alone and without support, now has a daughter who looks up to her, creating a reciprocal support system between them. In addition to this, there are

accounts of events organized by women, for women. The excitement and happiness of the interviewees when talking about these competitions were palpable.

Britney's Crews<sup>16</sup> organizes the "Brotta e Convoca" event. I went to both the São Paulo and Rio editions. I went mainly for the joy of being with the girls, skating together. You don't see competition in their eyes—when it's something geared towards women, everyone wins, man. There was a girl who just pushed on the ground, and she won sneakers! She won sneakers, she won clothes! Like, it didn't matter whether you were landing tricks or not—you were winning just for being there, and that's the craziest part. Could you ask for a better incentive than that, girl? You can't. It makes you feel attached, like, 'Damn, I just want to be with the girls!' It's not even about the prizes—it's about the experience (Jamille).

So, I'm also part of AFESP, the Associação Feminina do Skateboard, which is based in São Paulo. We organize championships—we held one with 190 women. This was in 2019. The announcer was a woman, the entire staff was women—announcer, judges, sound crew, DJ, videomaker. It was all these women together, doing the same work that men usually do. And honestly, it was the best championship I've ever participated in! These were opportunities created by women, who worked hard to make them happen (Conceição).

Taking into account the organization of these events, we can see how they serve as a way for women to make a statement—to push back against what society has traditionally offered them. On one hand, mixed-gender championships often provide unequal prizes, bad competition schedules, disrespect, and even harassment. On the other hand, women organize their own events, where they experience respect, recognition, inclusivity, and, above all, a whole lot of skating! This stance aligns with Foucault (1992), perspective that where there is power, there is resistance, and individuals are not merely passive recipients of discourse—they react, negotiate, and contest it. Another important point is the identification with skateboarding beyond just being a sport. For the interviewees, skateboarding is something that inspires other areas of life and provides motivation to face daily challenges. Being a skateboarder is part of

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<sup>16</sup> For informational purposes, crews, translated from English, means groups. They are like a community of people who believe in the same purpose and come together to skate.



these women's identity—something that once seemed distant is now a lifestyle, as we can see in the following statements:

The feeling of continuing to skate is the feeling of achievement, right? Of victory. When I started skateboarding, I never imagined I would like it this much. It's the feeling of freedom, of constantly pushing myself—it's a series of challenges. Sometimes you think, 'Damn, it's going to be so hard when I finally drop in,' and then when you do it, you're like, 'HOLY SHIT, I did it!'. I never imagined I could. For me, skateboarding is one of the only things I do that truly connects me to the present. It's really therapy. When I'm skating, I'm not thinking about anything else. But when I'm doing other things, I'm always anxious, thinking about something I need to do, worrying about the future. So, skateboarding is the sport that keeps me in the now, in the present. It's constant self-improvement. (Rafaela)

It's crazy how we keep pushing ourselves. I love skateboarding because it intrigues me in that way. Like, dude, if I think about it, a few years ago, I never thought I'd land a frontside ollie—but now I can! You know? And that shit is hard—at least for me! I put in so much effort, I fail over and over again, I fall so many times. Sometimes I get hurt, but I get up and try again. That's what gets me. I think the whole idea of 'impossible' is fascinating—doing something that everyone says is impossible for you, proving them wrong. And proving it to yourself too, like, 'Wow, I can actually do this!' And if I can do this, I can do a million other things in life. I've come to redefine this in my journey—if I can land an ollie, I can get a job, I can do anything I set my mind to. Skateboarding is hard, but we make it happen! (Maria Julia).

Both accounts emphasize the importance of skateboarding as a means of self-overcoming and personal growth. Maria Julia sees skateboarding as a metaphor for life, showing that if she can achieve something that once seemed impossible in skateboarding, she can accomplish her dreams and conquer new challenges. This perspective of proving to oneself that they are capable of reaching their goals reflects a process of redefinition and empowerment. For these women, skateboarding is not just a sport—it is a source of freedom, a connection to the present, and a constant reminder that they are capable of overcoming obstacles, just like they do in skateboarding. In this sense, action sports can serve as a privileged space for female empowerment (Silva *et al.*, 2018).

The shared experiences highlight the difficulties faced due to the lack of support and encouragement but also emphasize the strength and resilience these women have



developed over time. According to Schwartz *et al.* (2013), women, in order to be present in adventure sports practices, have always had to overcome numerous obstacles, especially those considered pioneers in these activities. We can see this expansion reflected in the successful events organized by these women, which demonstrate the need for greater female presence in the organization of these championships. Just as there were spaces in the past that were off-limits to women but are now claimed by them, skateboarding is also one of these environments. In this context, female presence is not only welcome but essential. This unity among women, combined with empowerment, is a way for them to find strength and support in one another, without listening to those who say skateboarding is not for them. This aligns with the words of Brazilian surfer Maya Gabeira:

This is for my little sisters around the world. I have faced giant waves, taller than many buildings. I have felt fear, anxiety, and worry. And I have heard it all. Because I was the only girl doing what I did. Sometimes I questioned myself, wondering if maybe I didn't belong in this space. To all my little sisters around the world: we all belong. I didn't believe the people who tried to tell me that a girl wouldn't be able to perform well in the ocean, in these giant waves. To all my little sisters around the world: you just have to enjoy the journey and make every wave count, wherever they take us" (Gabeira, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

This article aimed to study the relationships between skateboarding, gender, and public leisure spaces in Belo Horizonte from the perspective of female skateboarders. In summary, the testimonies of the participants reveal a scenario full of challenges, both physical and symbolic, that hinder women's full appropriation of spaces designated for skateboarding. The lack of adequate infrastructure—such as the absence of restrooms and changing rooms—combined with a hostile environment marked by harassment and discrimination, creates an unwelcoming space for female skateboarders.

The perpetuation of gender stereotypes from childhood frames skateboarding as a male-dominated sport, contributing to the discrimination faced by female skaters. Based on the interviews, several difficulties experienced by the participants due to their gender were identified, including: lack of support and representation at skateparks; the devaluation of women's skateboarding, evidenced by unequal prize money in competitions; harassment; prejudice from both society and within their own homes; and a lack of time due to the burden of balancing multiple responsibilities, among other challenges. Creating a more inclusive and equitable environment requires ongoing efforts and the implementation of policies that promote and support female participation at all levels of the sport.

Therefore, it is suggested that the skateboarding community and society as a whole recognize the importance of concrete actions to overcome existing barriers, ensuring that skateboarding is welcoming and safe for all women. We emphasize that future studies on this topic are essential, as gender, sports, and leisure issues remain relevant and require continued research and discussion to address both the challenges and demands of female skateboarders. It was not our intention to exhaust the discussion on the relationships between skateboarding, gender, and public leisure spaces. However, we hope this work contributes to the ongoing efforts to highlight such an important issue.

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**Address of the Authors:**

Cecília Isaura de Araujo e Silva  
Electronic Mail: cecilia.araujo31@gmail.com

Vitor Lucas de Faria Pessoa  
Electronic Mail: vitorlfpessoa@hotmail.com