

Women, sport and francoism in Catalonia: perceptions of sportswomen from the early years of the dictatorship (1939–1961)

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the lives and perspectives of women who embraced physical and sporting pursuits in Catalonia during the tumultuous post-war era and the early years of the Franco dictatorship (1939–1961). It explores the biographies of the sportswomen and uncovers the intricate tapestry of moral and religious dynamics that coloured their experiences. The strategies used to collect data were a document and literature examination, in-depth interviews to 32 women (ranging in age from 73 to 100 years old), and a discussion group. Subsequently, content analysis was conducted using version 7 of the Atlas.ti software. We identified five categories of analysis for the moral sphere, which enabled us to construct a story to help understand the sportswomen’s experiences in the early years of Francoism. Without a doubt, practising sport was not common among women between 1939 and 1961 because it diverged from the model promoted by the Franco regime based on religious, scientific-medical and educational arguments. Within this context of women’s invisibility in the public practice of sport, the interviewees’ voices recounted the influences which led them to start practising sport and the moral pressures exerted by a highly moralised national-Catholic society influenced by the traditional Church, which hindered women from practising sport.

1.Introduction: women, sport and dictatorship

1.1The Francoist rupture

The period studied focuses on the era between the final victory of Franco’s army in Catalonia in March 1939 and the enactment of the Law on Physical Education and Sport in 1961. The timespan between 1939 and 1961 is a consistent social and

political unit that can be broken down into three periods: post-war, autarchy and stabilisation plans (1959).¹ From the standpoint of sport, the period was characterised by the construction of a new political, legal and institutional order in Spanish sport, as well

as by the implementation of a process of controlling and repressing associations which had never before existed in Spain (Viuda-Serrano, 2011; Santacana, 2011).

Women's sport and physical activities during the Franco dictatorship were framed within a society which clearly limited women's possibilities. Their role within society was laden with a heavy morality which clearly diverted them from sport and led them to play the social roles that had been assigned to them because of their gender; that is, they were supposed to be future mothers, wives and housewives.

In the new Spain, the liberal sports system which had existed until then was assigned to the sole party in the regime, the Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista (FET y de las JONS), and the sports system came to be managed by a strongly hierarchical political instrument created for that purpose called the Delegación Nacional de Deportes (National Sports Delegation, DND). The preamble to the decree creating it, dated 22 February 1941 (ESPAÑA, 1941), briefly defined the role that the state assigned to sport; it was the embodiment of the social and political model of a dictatorial state and the institutions charged with developing it.

The physical practices that women were allowed to engage in during the dictatorship were conditioned by different scientific, medical, religious, political (Manrique et al., 2009) and educational stances. They had to be considered appropriate and fit the norms, behaviours and values of the sexual stereotype that women had been culturally assigned.

Sport was practised differently by each sex during that period. In this sense, Luis Agosti, an advisor to the Sección Femenina (SF),² stated: 'the goal was not for women to practise sport in the male way but in accordance with their own form of expression' (Suárez, 1993). Furthermore, he believed it absurd to promote sports like boxing, wrestling, football and rugby among women, as well

as certain gymnastic exercises like the high bar, rings, parallel bars and competitive athletics, which ‘requires qualities which are completely opposed to the female constitution’ (Manrique, 2008). In this sense, ‘There was a series of sports that were off-limits to women: wrestling, football and rowing; even though athletics was not forbidden, it was included among the extremely dangerous sports’ (Domingo, 2007). The most noteworthy phenomenon is women’s exclusion from athletics, which was not introduced until 1961 because it was considered unfeminine and masculinised its practitioners (Manrique, 2008; Zagalaz, 2001).

There was a major controversy over women’s sport practice because social thinking associated sport with men. In this regard, the opinions of the most conservative intellectual sectors, which were adopted by the regime, should be taken into account. Authors such as the writer Jose Maria Peman and the psychiatrist and military doctor Antonio Vallejo-Najera published various essays in the 1940s in which they emphasised women’s incapacity and their difficulties in finding fulfilment in a life outside the home. Vallejo-Najera used his position as a doctor to affirm that ‘the female psyche has many points in common with the infantile and animal psyche’, while at the same time claiming their physical and intellectual inferiority to men (Barrachina, 1991; Otero, 2017). These innate conditions, according to the dominant conservative thinking, relegated women to a rank inferior to men in all aspects. Women’s incapacity for

competitive sports was argued by the single party and organisations such as SF, which relegated women to gymnastics, sports games and dance. The only sports acceptable for women were basketball, handball, hockey, volleyball, tennis and skiing (Manrique, 2011). Furthermore, the moral aspects were highly restrictive, especially for women, who had to obey the moral rules imposed by the regime and the Church. This article, therefore, focuses primarily on analysing the impact of the restrictions derived from these moral aspects restricting the women who practised sport: the impact on their daily lives, on their sporting activity and on the construction of their sexual identity. In relation to the concept of ‘morality’ applied to women during Franco’s regime, we take into account the conservative and Catholic values disseminated by the ‘controlling agents’ of morality that operated during the dictatorship: the Catholic Church, the State (through

legislation), the SF, the school, the family and the social environment. These values, including abnegation, sacrifice, obedience and motherhood (as well as ‘bravery’, in the case of SF), had an impact on female sports practice, resulting in self-control and self-repression, as well as affecting the activity itself, the clothing, the opportunities for competition and their identity as athletes and women. This ‘moral dimension’ was undoubtedly one of the pillars of the process of re-education and social control of women initiated by the Franco regime even before the end of the Civil War.

1.2 Catholic national morality and women’s sport

The predominant ideological and moral discourse on sport associated with gender was captured in the different expressions of sport in both institutions from the National Movement and in federated sport. The Franco dictatorship applied iron-fisted censure via a variety of laws and decrees which were highly pleasing to the religious authorities.

This prohibition was present in both the activities conducted in public life and in books, newspapers, magazines, cinemas, theatres and sport. Furthermore, the Catholic Church’s view of women was highly stereotyped. The prototypical woman (Alted, [1991](#); Barrachina, [1991](#); Gallego, [1983](#); Manrique, [2010](#); Puig, [1987](#)) summoned by the different seats of power (state and Church) had to devote herself to her natural mission as a wife and mother.

The practice of physical and sport activities caused moral friction with the Church, as espoused by the Cardinal of Seville, for example, in that ‘(...) gym could not be practised in girls’ schools until Cardinal Segura died (in 1957), as he had explicitly forbidden it’ (Alted, 1991), not to mention the archbishop of Valladolid in the 1940s banning women in the SF from riding bicycles (Alted, 1991) because he deemed it sinful. Other prohibitions were related to modesty in sport practice, respecting mass times in competitions and going outdoors in athletic wear or wearing sportswear with decorum. In this sense, prudence and feminine purity were reflected in behaviours, attitudes, corporal experiences and clothing. The regime accentuated the moral nature of clothing through its own organisation, the influence of the Church and the conditions set by schools. Wearing pantaloons, large skirts, pinafores³ and petticoats, which hindered women as they practised

sport, was perceived as obligatory. The dominant moral discourse exerted significant pressure, which materialised in reprimands, warnings and punishments, especially during the early years of Francoism.

Despite this, the country began to change in the 1960s, and the traditional model of woman had to adapt to these societal changes. For the first time since 1939, Spanish women participated in the Rome Olympics (1960) (Pel'aez and Mar'ia, 2017), which along with the 1961 Law on Physical Education and Sport marked the shift 'from the Spain of the Movement to Spain in Motion' (Gonz'alez, 2011).

1.3 Sportswomen and gender identities under the Franco regime

In recent years, the historical study of sportswomen has also given rise to numerous studies on gender and identities linked to sport. In the 1980s, the number of interpretations of sport and gender increased with updated sociohistorical visions of the origins of women joining the practice of sport and the contradictions between the social role attributed to women and the practice of sport (Hargreaves, 1985). Jennifer Hargreaves' outstanding contribution to research into the history of sport and women was clearly captured in what seemed to have been the next logical step, namely providing a theoretical foundation for the construction of gender identity via sport. This was a less descriptive approach that had a clearly sociological or social-historical approach, which signalled paradigm shift. From then on, Hargreaves' studies affected the study of gender theories applied to the history and sociology of sport, which has signalled a major step forward in constructing theoretical frameworks applied to sociohistorical studies (Hargreaves, 1994).

On another front, Allen Guttmann's synthesis of the United States surveyed of the history of female sport from a global social perspective (Guttmann, 1991). The studies by Nancy L. Struna from the University of Maryland on the incorporation of American women into sport practice in the late eighteenth century have provided an approximate—and well-documented—picture of how women in the United States played a crucial role in pre-capitalist rural society in the east Atlantic states (Struna, 1995). The publication of the volume on the twentieth century in France, *Histoire des femmes en France*, by Duby and Perrot (1992), served as a theoretical impetus for studies on women and sport in France in the 1990s. The studies, which usually draw from exhaustive documentation but in this case used oral sources, resulted in monographs which were novel from the standpoint of the target of study, such as the work on grassroots sport and working women in the years between the world wars, which effectively demonstrated the reproduction of

bourgeois stereotypes and barriers in what was called proletarian sport in France (Amar, 1994).

In 2005, Patricia Vertinsky reflected on ‘gender as a way of thinking about the history of sport bearing in mind new approaches to the history of sport which have aroused a greater interest in constructing the gender subject and have stimulated a broader reflection on the representations and actions of the female athletic body’ (Vertinsky, 2006).

More recently, early in this decade Hargreaves spearheaded a reconsideration of the fundamental methodological considerations for gender and sport studies (Hargreaves, 2013), namely: (a) the use of oral sources—and the role of the

interviewer—in gender and sport studies; (b) the need to distinguish between ‘different specific categories’ of women in the historical and sociological analysis of women practising sport, bearing in mind differences in class, race, religion, sexual orientation and culture; (c) the importance of reconstructing the experiences of women practising outside the realm of highly competitive sport with values of masculinity, bearing in mind radical feminist perspectives, which are at odds with those of liberal feminism; and (d) the close relationship between sport practice in women and the construction of the meaning of difference and identity.

In Spain, studies on female sport and Francoism have primarily taken an interest in the areas of women’s incorporation into sport practice (Puig, 1987), official physical education (Carbajosa, 1999; Carbajosa & Fernández, 2000; Zagalaz, 1998) and the role played locally by the Sección Femenina of the Falange (Manrique, 2006). The study by Manrique on the physical education teachers in the Sección Femenina incorporates oral sources as a core element in his study via the use of a systematic analytical method based on a multidimensional table (Manrique, 2010). Indeed, the oral source approach to reviving the memory of women’s sport during the dictatorship is indeed essential in a sphere which has been relegated to the sidelines of public written documentation, as shown by the preceding studies.

In consequence, the research behind this article was approached as a study using oral history which sought to contribute to expanding our knowledge of the association between sport practice in women and the construction of the meaning of difference in a particularly complex context—because of the dominant moral and political discourse of the dictatorship—by reconstructing the stories and experiences of the women themselves, which are impossible to find in traditional archival sources or periodicals libraries. Therefore, as Hargreaves has stressed, the goal is to inquire into the characteristics of the construction of their own identity—different to that of men and based on their own self-determination via sport—by the women who lived in a context of strict moral, social and

cultural control.

In short, as Aguado proposes in the case of the oral memory of militant anti-Franco women in the post-war period, this study meets the need to contribute to opening new ways of accessing new historical subjects and historical issues with the goal of examining the gender identities of Francoism via the women who practised sport, regardless of what kind and bearing in mind their background, as ‘the most important factor in the life stories of women is examining the cultural mores in which their identity was constructed, shaped by the historical context’ (Aguado, 2011).

2. Materials and method

This research is a sociohistorical study following the tenets of the new historiography which uses oral history as its method and technique of historical reconstruction (Aróstegui, 1995; Ferrando, 2006; García, 2006). The purpose of the study is to collect women’s unique, untold stories. Conserving sportswomen’s memory is ‘urgent work, because as elderly women, the possibilities of reconstructing the oral histories of these sportswomen will soon vanish’ (Hargreaves, 2006). This study is part of a broader research project in Spain whose preliminary results have been published (Pujadas et al., 2016). This article presents the definitive results for Catalonia from the standpoint of the moral and religious pressure exerted on women who practised sport.

Bearing these premises in mind, in this study we collected and analysed the representative experiences of 32 women who practised physical or sport activities in Catalonia during the early years of the Franco dictatorship. We bore in mind geographic, generational and chronological criteria; rural or urban provenance; socioeconomic and cultural level (Tourtier-Bonazzi, 1991); and the diversity of the sport practises in which they engaged.

With regard to the geographic criterion, women from all four provinces of Catalonia were interviewed (22 in Barcelona; 3 in Tarragona; 1 in Lleida and 1 in Girona). Finally, there are 5 interviews with women who were born outside Catalonia but went to live in this autonomous region at a very young age and still live there. The sample included testimonies from the entire period studied. Interviews were held with 2 women born between 1910 and 1920, 15 between 1920 and 1930, 14 between 1930 and 1940 and 1 between 1940 and 1950. The

majority of the interviewees, a total of 26, were from urban areas, while the others were from rural areas.⁴

With regard to the instruments used, after a comprehensive examination of documents, both periodicals and books,⁵ we complemented the interviews by creating ‘a dialogue between oral sources, which are filled with life, and other sources, including written sources, which are limited and finished’.⁶ The technique used to collect the stories was in-depth interviews (Losada & Lo´pez-Feal, 2003; To´jar, 2006). The interviews started with general questions and an introduction to the topic of the study (approach). Then the second part of the interview was held with semi-guided or semistructured open-ended contents which inquired into the dimensions being studied.⁷ Afterward, each interview was catalogued and transcribed.

With the goal of triangulating the information from the interviews, a research journal was kept and a discussion group was held. Seven out of 32 interviewees participated in this discussion group based on the following inclusion criteria: they practised different sports (swimming, skiing, climbing, basketball (2), track and field and tennis, and one was a physical education teacher), they were different ages (one was born in 1920 and two each in 1930, 1931, 1932, 1937 and 1939) and their families had different socioeconomic and cultural levels. The main objective of the discussion group was to further explore the meanings that the participants expressed in the in-depth interviews and to complete the information from the interviews.

The technique used to analyse the data was content analysis supported by version 7 of Atlas.ti software. The categorisation process played an important role in the research by reducing the vast amount of information collected. It was a ‘flexible process’ (Tesch, 1990) which entailed mixed inductive and deductive procedures which started with a pre-established set of categories and indicators yet allowed others to emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2002).

3. Results: biographies of sportswomen during the dictatorship

Most of the interviewees got their start in sports like athletics, tennis, swimming, basketball, gymnastics, hiking, climbing and skiing, and to a lesser extent in other sports

such as sailing, horseback riding, fencing, classical ballet or skating. The influences on their sport practice during the Franco dictatorship primarily came from the family, which played a very prominent role. Moreover, male figures played a crucial role in these women getting their start in sport. Many girls started with their fathers, grandfathers or uncles;⁸ playing with them or with their siblings, cousins or friends were considered their first forays into sport. This initiation took place at the grandparents' estates and in summer homes. Many girls practised sports like basketball for the first time in informal settings, like the street: 'So the thing is, I lived across from it and the (basketball) court was there. And you could see the entire open court from the balcony of my house'.⁹ Another interviewee discusses how she started with athletics: 'because there was this neighbour who took me running there in Turo´ Park, and I met him and he would take me there (...)'.¹⁰ The role of their mothers or grandmothers was more to keep watch during sport practice, although sometimes fathers, grandfathers or domestic staff did, too. The majority of their mothers had never practised sport, while the majority of their fathers had done so previously. Membership in sport clubs or engaging in more elite sports in families with a high socioeconomic level contrasts with families from the middle or lower class, where access to sport tended to come later and was influenced by the organisations of the regime, the Seccio´n Femenina of the Falange and sport in companies.¹¹ 'You were in a privileged club, the Club Natacio´n de Barcelona (Permanyer, 2008). This is a privilege; we were in a company club; I mean, everything was different. I think our parents ... we had differences in this regard'.¹²

Schools are not recalled as facilitating girls' access to sport during the dictatorship,¹³ and very few interviewees have positive memories of starting sports at school. Only those who attended specific schools like the German school or the Institut Escola de Barcelona during the Republic appreciated the physical education classes.

Several interviewees recall sports experiences at international schools like the French Lyc´ee or the German school after the war.¹⁴ However, the majority

confirmed that in Franco-era schools, ‘the objectives pursued with physical education were not developing women’s skills but improving the race’.¹⁵

In some cases, the young sportswomen started on their own; thus, some of them learned how to swim,¹⁶ hike or climb¹⁷ after reading sports handbooks or watching films.¹⁸

Sport was essentially practised when they were girls and adolescents, and in some cases, it extended into their adulthood. The competitions in which they participated were regional, statewide and recreational, although exceptionally several of them participated in international tournaments.

Keeping up physical or sport practices was conditioned on the men around them—coaches, fathers, partners and husbands—accepting their practice of sport. Consequently, the majority of women were not truly free to develop a sports career.

When they were engaged or married, their fiancés’ or husbands’ role as facilitators was important, as they could practise sport together and attend recreational tournaments; however, in some cases,¹⁹ their husbands became obstacles to continuing to practise sport: ‘I wanted to be left alone. Having a boyfriend might mean having to give up swimming; they were incompatible and at the time, I just wanted to live in the present’.²⁰ ‘I started swimming after I was widowed’.²¹

According to the interviewees, being women during the dictatorship did not condition their ability to engage in sport because they were actually able to do so. However, in their stories we were able to identify biological, athletic, educational and sociocultural barriers (Vázquez & Alfaro, 2007). First, there was a different conception of male and female bodies: ‘I wasn’t very muscular; I was a woman, apart from being an athlete’.²² Motherhood was also a major influence: ‘I accepted that if I had children I couldn’t play (competitive) sport except perhaps as a hobby, I could only do it one day a week to stay in shape, but nothing else, you know?’²³ So were differences in performance. The official discourse of the dictatorship was based on the fact that ‘all female education had

to be aligned with the mission that has brought women into the world: motherhood’ (Pastor, [1984](#)).

In this regard, ‘My mother had the sense that a young lady ... such as when I started to play in more championships, two in a row, she didn’t want it because she said it would wear me out.’²⁴ In terms of sport, the spaces, facilities, times and materials were contingent on men’s use of them: ‘the guys in water polo were really hard on us because they didn’t want synchronised swimming and we had lots of problems interacting (...) with the managers and swimmers’.²⁵ They lived with precarious conditions: ‘We showered with cold water in the asbestos showers²⁶ or we painted the marks on the playing field with a sprinkler and lime.’²⁷ They also dealt only with male managers and coaches,²⁸ along with administrative and athletic limitations.²⁹ In fact, ‘Franco and his cronies banned (women’s) athletics’³⁰ until the 1960s and conditioned how women could practise sport. The Franco authorities scant public investment in sport and sports infrastructures was clearly geared towards male sports competitions.

With regard to educational barriers, it should be borne in mind that Franco-era schools imposed segregation by sex, different kinds of physical education—based on sport for boys and gymnastics for girls—teachers with little training and a moral and religious conception of education and the body. Consequently, parents had lower expectations of females in sport: the daughter of a tennis player said: ‘‘What’s a girl doing playing sport?’’ He didn’t like it and she faced lots of problems just to play tennis’.³¹ The sportswomen had low self-esteem about their motor skill level, stating: ‘We played badly, really badly, truth be told’.³² There were also sociocultural barriers such as stereotypes on the social models of men and women; in this sense, the ideal woman during the Franco regime ‘was not exactly an athlete’³³ but a caring wife and selfless mother. Socially, sport was assigned to men: ‘In fact, girls were poorly viewed in all sports; any sportswoman was viewed poorly, and obviously if you said you wanted to do judo or play football, that was the last straw’.³⁴ Economic limitations were placed on practising sport: ‘Sport was practised by people (...) with money. Within sport (at) that time, there were more wealthy girls than working-class girls, like me, probably because they could afford to belong to a more elite club’.³⁵ Finally, there was also

discrimination based on national-Catholic morality, as we shall see in the next section.

In that era, the competitive sportswoman model was not regarded positively by the more conservative sectors of the regime and the Church, and it was even disapproved of socially. Others state that in general their lives were severely limited by ‘the issue of sex’³⁶ (actually gender), which had a heavy influence that did not allow them to

engage in sport. They even heard phrases like ‘female sports are playing the piano and sewing’,³⁷ which described the opinions of some practitioners during that period.

Their perception of sport and of themselves as athletes, along with the social perception of sport and their role models, give us important information on the view of women’s sport during the period from the standpoint of its practitioners. The interviewees’ overall view of sport practice and their role in sport was revealed in the discussion group. They stated that sport was not viewed very positively and that they were the target of occasional criticism, even though they usually ignored these comments. However, some girls or their families were affected and conditioned in such a way that they felt forced to stop practising sport. Women’s initiation into sport during the Franco regime was lacking the influence of female athletic role models from that period. Their sports idols were limited to a handful of prominent sportswomen from before the Spanish Civil War or the members of the Club Femení i d’Esports (Real, 1998), whom many of them admired. However, the interviewees claimed that after the war ‘everything changed and there were no longer any female athletic role models’:³⁸ ‘my husband bought me a cute little cardboard suitcase which cost him two pesetas and a photograph of the Club Femenino de ‘Deportes’, which I put in the suitcase. How I admired those girls (from the Club Femenino y de Deportes)!’³⁹

The vast majority of the sportswomen interviewed were pioneers and called for improvements in women’s sport, yet they define themselves as normal people who did what they liked in an adverse setting, namely the Franco dictatorship in Catalonia: ‘I would define myself as a normal person who liked

the mountains and nature and enjoyed it, but I wouldn't in any way to consider myself an athlete'.⁴⁰ Generally speaking, they were not aware of the importance of some of their accomplishments until quite recently, when some of them have been recognised for their athletic or educational careers.⁴¹

Finally, when tracing their athletic careers, their reasons for leaving their physical and sport practices were usually getting married or pregnant: 'I got married, a total change. I became responsible for a family'.⁴² The majority did not engage in sport during motherhood and childrearing, but later, when their children started school, they resumed some of their practices.

4 Discussion: the moral dimension and women's sport practice

As may be seen in Table 1, taking into consideration the moral dimension, the analysis of the content of the interviews resulted in five categories and more than 20 different

Table 1. Categories and main indicators of the moral dimension.

indicators. These categories and indicators allow us to better understand the real presence of the agents of the moral order in the daily lives of the sportswomen, the impact, as well as the limits, of their discourse and control.

4.1 Agents of moral order

From a moral standpoint, the interviewees alluded to contents referring to religious pressure on how they should properly practise physical and sport activities. Likewise, they asserted the existence of impositions by the powerful sectors and critical social pressure with regard to women's sport. The main agents of moral order during the dictatorship were the Catholic Church, the Secció'n Femenina of the Falange, the police forces and, to a lesser extent, sports clubs and federations.⁴³ However, it should be taken into account that other spheres such as the social environment, friends, fellow sportswomen and above all the family (which the Franco dictatorship turned into the 'great socialising agency in the authoritarianism and submission', and the basis of the social structure) also exerted pressure on the attitudes and decisions of sportswomen (Manrique, [2007](#); Tourtier-Bonazzi, [1991](#)). The interviewees'

perceptions went in this vein by claiming that ‘the Church and the Falange owned the city’.⁴⁴ Their repression could appear at any time: ‘Those were 40 years when they had us domesticated’.⁴⁵ They also recounted that ‘everything was considered sinful’.⁴⁶ Moral control was clearly manifested at schools, where they received negative messages on practising sport: ‘Depending on the religious setting, for example at parochial schools, they’d say ‘No! Why do you have to go to the club (swimming)?! Mother of God!g)’.⁴⁷ Other times, there was retaliation, and the girls who went to the swimming club w’ (...) I totally ignored (the comments at school) because I had a good time (swimminere not chosen to be Daughters of Mary⁴⁸ or they had to change schools⁴⁹ because of the pressure. Even an innocent kiss on the forehead that was part of a game led them directly to the confessional.⁵⁰ In fact, a handbook from the Seccio’n Femenina warned young women that sports could not be used as a pretext to ‘gain independence from the family, for any freedom that runs counter to good manners’.⁵¹

4.2 Moral order in female sport

The conditions and moral values in sports practice were heavily determined by the national-Catholic view. Punishment and/or repression resulted when one failed to follow the moral norms established by the dominant discourse in terms of competition times, wearing the proper clothing and modest relationships with other sportswomen in the different spaces and facilities. ‘(For) many years sport was totally taboo, women could not practise sport and if they did they were viewed poorly, I mean, and the Church had a heavy influence on this’.⁵²

The aspects related to morality and gender were shown in different speeches given from the pulpit, and they affected the practice of different sports like swimming, basketball and athletics. In the city of Olot, in one sermon the priest said, ‘there was no need to swim, he said that (if you did swim) you could, but you had to do it with female oversight’.⁵³ In long-distance races, they were advised to bring female

companions and referees and to run the race at a reasonable time to avoid running in the dark. There was a clear demand for modesty in practice. Another time,

‘the bishop said that you couldn’t swim, or you could (but) men and women couldn’t swim in the pool together’.⁵⁴ Therefore, the Church’s moral guidelines for sportswomen ran in two directions: either they tried to highlight the biological essentialism and consequently the ‘natural differences’ between men and women, or they simply asked women to be modest, discreet and prudent; that is, invisible. In either case, this affected the construction of their identities as both women and sportswomen.

This was not the only town in Catalonia with this injunction. In the swimming pools of Igualada, ‘for a couple years the men were separated from the women (...) during the time of Franco (...) so we couldn’t swim together’,⁵⁵ and in the Manresa pool they made the women go on one side and the men on another during a competition.⁵⁶ And if separation was not enough, there was yet another bishop, ‘Gregorio Modrego, who actually said that girls got pregnant in pools, I mean, you know these utterly idiotic things’.⁵⁷

4.3 Self-blame and repression

Other sermons were delivered that affected female basketball players; in this case, the disadvantages had to do with the time of the matches: ‘We were going to play at eight in the morning and we were able to go play at that time (we had no problems with the priest because it wasn’t at the same time as liturgy)’,⁵⁸ or skirt length: ‘Criticisms from Church folk began. There were girls who were super religious, and they were told that they weren’t allowed (...) to show their legs and that it wasn’t (...) proper for women’.⁵⁹ Other times, one sportswoman told us that in a race in Reus ‘when it was time to start the priest came and said to me: ‘Miss, you can’t go out unless you put on long trousers’ instead of the shorts she was wearing’.⁶⁰

Self-recrimination and repression were part of the sportswomen’s day-to-day lives in the early days of the Franco dictatorship. The tennis players who had competed abroad said that ‘(...) the world outside here was more open (...). For example, over there (in England), the women went around the locker rooms naked, and I had never seen that here’.⁶¹ In Spain, ‘chastity and virginity, the obsessive focal point of female morality, were expressed in

centimetres of clothing, ways of walking, speaking, having fun, etc’ (Ballarín, [2001](#)). Parental pressure in more conservative families, control in clubs or even over menstruation were elements of self-blame and, in short of the construction of an unhealthy gender identity.

4.4 Moral duty

Moral duties as women, wives and mothers (Molinero, [1998](#)) were omnipresent in female roles throughout Francoism. Playing these roles took women away from practising sport, and their influence could be perceived in both the initiation into sport and in keeping it up and leaving it, given that at that time ‘a woman’s place is in the home caring for her family; no way should she be doing sport’.⁶²

Generally speaking, the father figure exerted less moral pressure on the practice of physical and sport activity in nuclear families. In reality, in the interviews with the sportswomen, we found that ‘the consequences of that historically constructed male bastion’ (Vertinsky, [2017](#)) gave the man of the home the ability to decide on the sports practice of their daughters or wives. That is, given that sport was a clearly male realm, the men could limit or allow the women to practise sport, which also influenced the construction of women’s own identity.

4.5 Moral characteristics associated with women’s sports

The moral features associated with sport were tinged with national-Catholicism, and sportswomen were considered ‘strange birds’⁶³ because they engaged in sport and did not stay at home.⁶⁴ There were few sportswomen, they were frequently criticised and the virilisation of the female body was avoided: ‘Sportswomen in general were considered a bit macho’,⁶⁵ and female sport might often be considered indecent. In this sense, we should recall that ‘women athletes are often expected to be lesbians; men athletes are seldom expected to be gay’ (Pronger, [1990](#)).

These practices were associated with a series of moral characteristics (doing sport was considered taboo for women, sportswomen were viewed as

butch or strange,⁶⁶ and they received all sorts of criticisms) and the conditions placed on women's sport within the morality imposed by the regime (the repression of behaviours considered virile, the separation of men and women at all times, the demands for modesty in practice and respect for liturgy times). Sportswomen who continued to practise had to break with these conditions and put up with or ignore the criticism, adopting a view of sport and the use of their bodies as normal, in contrast to the prevailing Catholic moral rigidity. In some stories, we were able to identify how this hostile environment often led some girls to drop out of sport early.⁶⁷ In this sense, the family influence also played an important role in overcoming social pressure and normalising the practice of sport.

5.Conclusions: gender identity, morality and female sports practice

Starting in 1960, sportswomen who started or kept practising sport attest to the fact that the moral pressure of the dominant discourse decreased in the different spheres where it had been exerted and that they perceived a permissiveness that had not been possible until then.

Traditional Spain started to modernise and awaken from the narrow strictures of Traditional Spain started to modernise and awaken from the narrow strictures of the Franco dictatorship. The new generations called for more liberty to free themselves from the moral straitjacket that the Catholic Church had imposed during Francoism.⁶⁸ The social changes in Europe managed to penetrate Spain for the first time via tourism, which introduced the culture of leisure and more modern lifestyles, such as the introduction of the bikini at beaches and the explosion of pop music (Otaola, 2012). Emigration from country to city or even abroad reinforced this process, as did the prominent role played by the media, which had more freedom of expression and fostered the transmission of new habits and customs after the newly enacted 1966 Law on the Press.⁶⁹

After 1970, women's physical activity started experiencing less pressure, and the ultra-conservative moral rules on some important aspects of physical

practice imposed by the Church were loosened, such as the clothing worn, decorous behaviour and engaging in sports practices in line with the good Christian mores upheld by national Catholic morality.

In this sense, the relaxation of the moral doctrine with regard to women's attitudes and clothing meant prioritising comfort and impacted the liberalisation of the ways in which women practised sport. However, the regime's scant investment in the construction of sports teams and campaigns to promote sport had a very meagre effect on expanding women's inclusion in sport. In Spain as a whole in 1975, only 12,8% of women practised sport.⁷⁰

Women who practised sport during the dictatorship had to face two different stages which influenced the construction of their own gender identity differently. In the first stage until the 1960s, the sportswomen had to deal with factors like segregation by sex in sport practice, moral control over their attitudes, self-blame associated with motherhood and sex, self-repression, men's decision-making power in a masculinised sports environment, fear of androgyny and moral duty. During the Franco dictatorship, many of these factors were associated with an extremely conservative view of biological essentialism, the separation of social roles and the myth of regenerationism. Women's practice of sport entailed at least five different kinds of control: control by state institutions, the Church, the family, the school and the sports club. In this scenario, sport became a form of surveillance which accentuated the formation of a gender identity dragged down by the morality.

In the second stage, the social and economic context was gradually transformed, despite the continued political repression. The majority of stories from the women interviewed explain how in this scenario the practice of sport was stripped of its capacity for moral influence. Somehow, it ceased being a factor of strict control and instead became a space of greater permissiveness. This contributed to the training of more independent sportswomen with a greater capacity to make their own choices. Nonetheless, they continued to clash with a restrictive legal, cultural and political environment in the 1970s. The approach to the experiences of women athletes through oral history interviews is very valuable because it allows us to discover subjective aspects, such as their most intimate experiences and their relationship with their

environment, which official archives and traditional written sources such as the press cannot provide.

Notes

1. The post-war period spanned between 1939 and 1945. After the Civil War, Spain was left devastated and in a precarious economic situation. Between 1945 and 1959 an isolating autarchic economic policy was implemented by Franco's regime. In an attempt to stabilise the economy and overcome the challenges of autarchy, a series of economic stabilisation plans were implemented starting from 1959.
2. The Sección Femenina was a women's organisation, a branch of the Falange single-party of the political movement of the Francoist Spain, that aimed to promote and enforce traditional gender roles and values in the society.
3. Pantaloon is women's undergarments which are gathered at the legs under the knees and were worn under a skirt or petticoat. A pinafore is a women's sleeveless dress worn over a blouse or jumper and was often worn as a uniform at school.
4. In relation to other aspects, their socioeconomic origin, 18 of the interviewees defined themselves as middle class, 11 of them as upper class, and 3 as lower class. All of them were white women educated in the Catholic religion.
5. In this study, we checked archival documents on the Sección Femenina and the collections of some sport clubs, as well as the press to confirm some of the facts cited by the informants. Ribalta (2016). In relation to the press, the following have been consulted: *El Mundo Deportivo* (1939–1961), *La Vanguardia Española* (1939–1961), *Dicen* (1952–1961) and *El Correo Catalán* (1939–1961). The sports section of the Francoist film newsreel NODO (1942–1961) has also been consulted.
6. Mercedes Vilanova in the prologue to the book by Thompson (1988).
7. This second part focused on exploring the experiences and perceptions of women in relation to sports practice from different dimensions: social, moral, aesthetic-bodily, and cultural. Topics such as gender differentiated treatment in childhood, economic limitations, moral or religious guidelines, sports preferences, sports clothing, body self-perception, physical education at school, representation of women athletes in the media, and reasons for abandoning sports were addressed.
8. Group discussion (GD) held with 7 sportswomen on 30 June 2015. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 89–100.
9. Interview with Encarna Hernández, 13 June 2014, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 103.
10. Interview with Pepita Valls, 3 December 2012 Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 228.
11. According to Manrique 'the search for fun and escape was an authentic psychological need for the majority of the population' Manrique (2011).
12. GD, fragment 63.
13. With regard to physical education and female sport during the Franco regime, there was a lack of understanding about women practising any kind of physical-sport activity. López (2000).
14. Interviews with Maria Rue, Dolors Beltran and Maria Rosa Balcells, who studied at the French Lycée, and with Berti Belil and Helena Hilde Wust, who studied at the German school.
15. Anonymous article cited by Pastor and Homs (1984), p. 61.
16. Interview with Montserrat Tresserras, fragment 52–68.

17. Interview with Carme Romeu, 2 June 2011, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 132–138.
18. Films such as German filmmaker Arnold Fanck's works about mountaineering or Jaime Cruells' books about swimming.
19. Enriqueta Sisquella, 16 July 2014, Igualada Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 366; and Interview with Laura and Pepita Biosca, 7 March 2013, Roda de Berà, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 807.
20. Excerpt from a newsletter entitled *Montserrat Tresserras, la vencedora del canal*, written by Amadeo Castells.
21. Interview with Dolors Sans, 14 March 2011, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 391.
22. Interview with Encarna Hernández, fragment 668.
23. Interview with Pepa Soler, 12 May 2011, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 206.
24. Interview with Maria Teresa Bartual, 22 February 2013, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 85.
25. Interview with Paquita Romeu, 29 October 2012, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 436.
26. Interview with Pilar Pons, 14 November. Fragment 268.
27. Interview with Elsa Verdugo, 26 November 2012, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 636–638.
28. GD, fragment 506.
29. Women were not allowed to be members of the Club Natació Barcelona, and this discriminatory restriction was finally rescinded in 1986 after longstanding protests.
30. Interview with Lluïsa Giró, 12 November 2014, Badalona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 352–355.
31. Interview with Al'icia Guri, 16 February 2013, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 245.
32. Interview with Pilar Pons. Fragment 268.
33. Interview with Mercè Guix, 20 February 2013 Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 727.
34. Interview with Pepa Soler. Fragment 67.
35. *Ibid.*, 35.
36. Interview with Josefa González, 13 November 2012, Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 293–298.
37. Interview with Pepita Valls. Fragments 212–214.
38. GD. Fragments 593–630.
39. Interview with Encarna Hernández. Fragment 413.
40. Interview with Carme Romeu. Fragment 358.
41. As an example, see the history of the "Dona i Esport" (Women and Sport) prizes awarded by the Barcelona Town Hall at this link: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/donesiesport/ca/historials.php>
42. Interview with Encarna Hernández. Fragment 602.
43. The presence of the Catholic Church in public demonstrations was still important throughout the 1950s, as in the case of the Pedal Festival of 1954 in Barcelona (*El Mundo Deportivo*, 31-05-1954, p.

- 6).
44. Interview with Laura and Pepita Biosca, 27 March 2013. Fragment 807.45. Ibid., 1500.
 46. Interview with Adelaida Gascón, 3 December 2013, Vilanova i la Geltrú, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 257.
 47. Interview with Roser Ponsatí, 17 May 2011 Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 65.
 48. Ibid., 117 and 131. The Church authorities were heavily involved in the repression of physical and sport education. Rincón (2010). During the Franco era in Spain, the term “hija de Mar´ia” (daughter of Mary) referred to an unmarried and virgin woman, considered as a model of virtue and purity according to the values imposed by the regime and the Catholic Church.
 49. Interview with Ana Maria Pérez, 17 October 2012 Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 168-79; and Interview with Elsa Verdugo. Fragment, 106–120.
 50. Interview with Adelaida Gascón. Fragment 259–263.
 51. Sección Femenina, Economía doméstica” (1968), Text for bacalaureate, commercial school or teaching school, in Otero, L. (1999), p. 135.
 52. Interview with Pepa Soler. Fragment 79.
 53. Interview with Montserrat Tresserras, 18 March 2013, Madrid, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 660.
 54. Ibid., 707.
 55. Interview with Enriqueta Sisquella. Fragments 975–977.
 56. Interview with Paquita Romeu. Fragment 266.
 57. Interview with Roser Ponsatí. Fragments 65–67. In the same sense, the ‘Patronato de protección de la mujer’ created in 1942, was in charge of surveillance and moral control. He denounced cinemas, swimming pools or dance venues that contravened the rigid norms of the Church (Ortiz, 2006, p. 4).
 58. Interview with Laura and Pepita Biosca. Fragments 809–817.
 59. Interview with Pilar Pons. Fragments 232–234.
 60. Interview with Maria Víctor, 16 October 2012 Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragments 56–56.
 61. Interview with Alícia Guri. Fragment 778.
 62. Interview with Montserrat Mechó, 28 September 2012 Barcelona, Spain, by Dolors Ribalta. Notes in possession of the author. Fragment 338.
 63. GD. Fragment 24.
 64. Ibid., 821.
 65. Interview with Mercè Guix. Fragment 729.
 66. Ibid., 439.
 67. Interview with Pilar Pons. Fragments 320–322.
 68. Dolors Ribalta Alcalde, *Dones, esport i dictadura: la memòria oral d’esportistes catalanes durant la primera etapa del franquisme*, 73.
 69. Law on the Press 14/1966, dated 18 March 1966, *Boletí in Oficial del Estado*, 67, 19 March 1966, pp. 3310–3315.

70. In 1975 the Delegación Nacional de Deportes (DND) commissioned to the company ICSA Gallup a survey on the practice of and interest in sport in Spain. That survey, which was conducted among 2000 citizens, was not published but was later recovered by a sociologist Manuel García Ferrando. The results showed that only 22% of Spanish citizens practiced sport. The rate for women was of 12.8%. Ferrando (2020). Vázquez and Alfaro (2020).

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