

Psycho-institutional and social implications of the practice of women's football in Abomey-Calavi (Benin)

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025, 28(02), 309-318

Publication history: Received on 17 September 2025; revised on 01 November 2025; accepted on 03 November 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.28.2.3652>

Abstract

This article examines the impact of the difficulties encountered by young girls involved in football in Abomey-Calavi. The main objective is to highlight the obstacles that hinder the career choice of female footballers, focusing on gender prejudices and some of the feelings they experience, both within their training framework and in their relationships with loved ones, in the municipality of Abomey-Calavi. The research carried out for this purpose uses a mixed data collection approach. The nature of the work is therefore qualitative and quantitative. Data from 105 informants are used here for quantification purposes. 18 of them contributed to the qualitative aspect of the work. The results highlight three major trends: the existence of realities that are often overlooked but very present in the world of women's football; social remarks and institutional actors having an impact on the practice of this sport by women; and perceptible social gaps between female footballers and their immediate environment. Analyzing these elements highlights the psychological and socio-institutional influences that shape the career paths of young female football enthusiasts, as well as certain deep-seated motivations that drive them to pursue their ambitions despite constraints.

Keywords: Psychological Implications; Gender Stereotypes; Perception Gaps; Resilience; Women's Football; Abomey-Calavi

1. Introduction

Football, a universally popular sport that carries symbols of virility, occupies a central place in social life in Benin. However, the gradual entry of girls into this historically masculine world is challenging established gender norms and raising new social and psychological issues. In Abomey-Calavi, this female participation, still marginal and poorly documented, is accompanied by multiple implications and repercussions linked to stigmatization, prejudice, and various pressures. These constraints illustrate the tension between the individual aspirations of young players and the expectations that frame their career choices.

Despite its global growth, women's football remains relegated to the background of its male counterpart. According to FIFA (2019), women's participation in football increased by 60% in the decade leading up to 2019, but disparities persist in terms of funding, media coverage, and institutional recognition (Bruce, 2016; Trebilcock and Hoeber, 2020).

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Gender inequalities, deeply rooted in the history of sport, are still reflected today in differences in access, recognition, and support. Historically, women have long been excluded from the world of sport. In 19th-century Europe, competitions and clubs were reserved for men, while women's participation was considered contrary to the fragile nature of the female body (Hall, 2016).

These medical and social representations have had a lasting influence on parental and educational attitudes: several recent studies show that girls are even less encouraged to participate in team sports or those perceived as "manly" (Heinze et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2015). This differentiation in sports socialization reflects a symbolic hierarchy of practices according to gender (ACAFS, 2016).

In the field of sport, several authors have shown that sport constitutes a mirror of society, where power relations and gender norms are replayed. Donnelly and Young (1998) emphasize that it is a microcosm of social structures, while Messner (2002) highlights how norms of masculinity shape sports practice. Similarly, Ngo (2018) and Jeanes et al. (2018) point out that the conquest of masculinized sporting spaces by women involves not only a symbolic struggle but also a resistance to institutional and cultural discrimination. In Africa, and particularly in Benin, these issues translate into a tension between modernity and tradition. Social pressures to conform to traditional gender roles can generate psychosocial obstacles (anxiety, low self-esteem or feelings of illegitimacy) among young girls involved in football.

Thus, in a context such as that of Abomey-Calavi, it appears necessary to examine the psychosocial and institutional implications of practicing this sport. This research aims to analyze how female players navigate passion, stigma, and the search for recognition in an environment still largely dominated by certain representations of football and women. In particular, it allows us to identify some stereotypes and representations associated with the practice of women's football, to examine their effects on the players' psychosocial experiences, and to examine certain relationships between female footballers, their families, their coaches, and the local community in order to understand the support and resistance encountered. Finally, we consider the idea of adaptation by female players to cope with social and institutional constraints worth briefly exploring.

2. Methodological aspects

This research was conducted at the Assaba Football Academy, a sports training center located in the Atlantique department, in the commune of Abomey-Calavi (Republic of Benin), specifically in the Togba district, Houèto neighborhood, near the Houèto General Education College (CEG). This center, headed by President Damien Kassin, frequently uses the CEG field for its training sessions. Created with the aim of mentoring and promoting young talent, the Assaba Football Academy positions itself as an institution committed to the comprehensive training of young Beninese athletes, with an emphasis on the acquisition of physical, technical, and personal skills. In addition to football, the academy offers additional training in athletics, karate, and taekwondo, with the aim of developing athletes who are both physically and mentally well-balanced. Its fundamental objectives are to promote the development of football in Benin, to offer young people structured supervision and to contribute to their development through sport. The academy is distinguished by a gender-based organization: girls are housed on site (in boarding schools), thus promoting complete immersion in the training environment, while boys participate as day students. The academy's sporting performances are a testament to its dynamism. During the 2021-2022 season, the women's team was a finalist in the national championship and achieved promotion to Division 1. In 2022-2023, it ranked third in the Benin women's football championship. The academy also actively participates in youth competitions: the U13 national championship (semi-finals in 2021-2022), the U20 championship (2022), and the U17 Talent League (2023), which it won. These results confirm the growing role of the Assaba Football Academy in the structuring of Beninese football and its commitment to the promotion of women's sport.

This study is part of a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative approaches (Dayer and Charmillot, 2007 and 2012) to capture both individual experiences and the scope of collective trends observed among female players. The qualitative approach collected the players' experiences through semi-structured interviews exploring their feelings, motivations, and the psychosocial difficulties encountered in playing football. The quantitative approach, through a structured questionnaire, identified certain recurring factors contributing to the obstacles encountered, including family pressures, social stereotypes, and institutional constraints. The use of this mixed methodology aims to combine understanding and explanation: to understand the meaning that players give to their sporting commitment, while identifying the variables that influence their careers.

The study population is composed of young female footballers residing in Abomey-Calavi, members or associates of the Assaba Football Academy. This choice is explained by the fact that this population represents a specific group engaged in a sporting practice still perceived as masculine and that it illustrates the issues of resilience, identity and female

emancipation in a local context. The said group as such includes young people aged 10 to 24 (those aged 10 to 19 can be considered as adolescents). These players are therefore in a phase of transition (identity and social construction of self). They practice football (universal team sport, played between two teams of eleven players, the objective of which is to score goals by sending a ball into the opposing net) by personal will and following a dedication that goes beyond simple leisure.

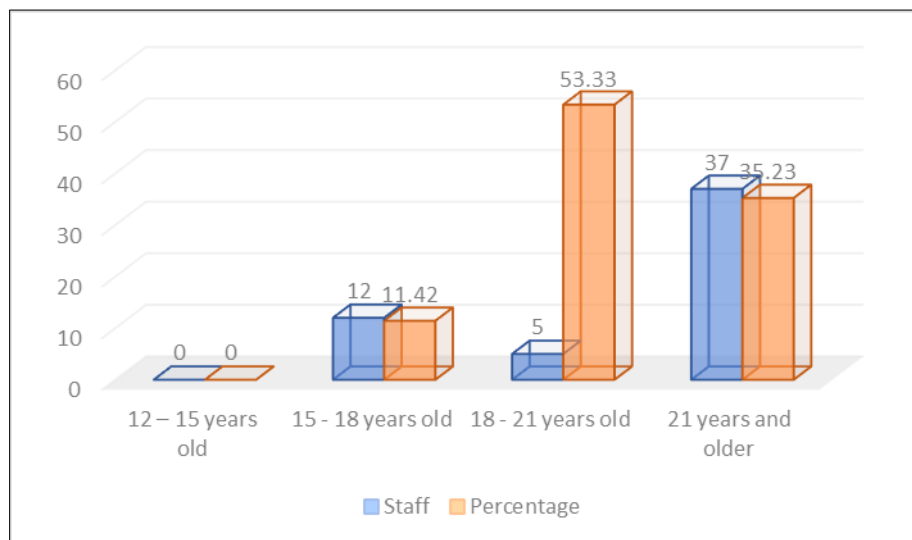


Figure 1 Ages of players and numbers

2.1. Two sampling techniques were combined

The purposive selection method allowed for the deliberate selection of players most representative of the diversity of situations (age, status – internal/external, level of competition). The stratified sampling method used served to create homogeneous subgroups (strata) based on criteria such as age, level of competition, and type of residence (Beaud, 2009). Individuals were then randomly selected within each stratum. The overall sample included 105 young players who responded to the questionnaire. Of these, 18 players were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. These two levels of investigation provided an insight into the realities of women's football in Abomey-Calavi.

Table 1 Professional and staff profiles

Profile	Numbers	Percentage %
Schoolgirl	00	00
Pupil	23	21.90
Student	55	52.38
Other	27	25.71
Total	105	100

The analysis combined some descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, simple correlations) with thematic content analysis, allowing the identification of emerging categories of meaning integrating the theory of role incongruence (Eagly and Karau 2002). The latter postulates that negative (social) judgments emerge when an individual's behaviors are perceived as incongruous with the expectations (traditionally) assigned to their gender. Gender stereotypes function as normative prescriptions. Similarly, when a woman adopts a role perceived as masculine, she suffers a lack of legitimacy and a negative evaluation. In the case of football, women – whether players, referees or coaches – appear out of step with the expectations in question. Incongruence leads, among other things, to an undervaluation of their technical skills, a symbolic disqualification where their presence is tolerated but perceived as secondary or even abnormal. Applying this theory helps us understand why, despite the progress of women's football, women often remain victims of derogatory judgments and persistent stereotypes. It is from these realities that we can draw the experiences and impacts perceived by the players.

3. Results

3.1. Some overlooked but real aspects of the players' difficulties

The data collected reveals that more than half (55.71%) of the young female footballers surveyed reported having encountered personal problems that had an impact on their sporting activities, while 34.29% claimed to have experienced no such difficulties. These results show that personal experiences, often invisible or minimized in sports analyses, nevertheless constitute a significant factor in the sporting trajectory of many players. Family constraints, economic concerns, or even conflicts between female social roles and sporting demands can indeed weigh on their commitment and performance.

Regarding the social and media perception of women's football, the responses indicate that 56.19% of participants agree and 14.29% strongly agree that the media and society influence how female footballers are perceived. Conversely, a minority (4.76%) strongly disagree and 15.24% disagree consider these influences to be negligible. The majority view highlights the weight of social and gendered representations, where the presence of women in sport, and more specifically in football, remains the subject of stereotypical judgments and symbolic constraints.

There is also a difference between the expectations of girls and boys in football. The results show that 58.10% of female players believe that social expectations of them differ from those imposed on boys, compared to 41.90% who perceive no significant difference

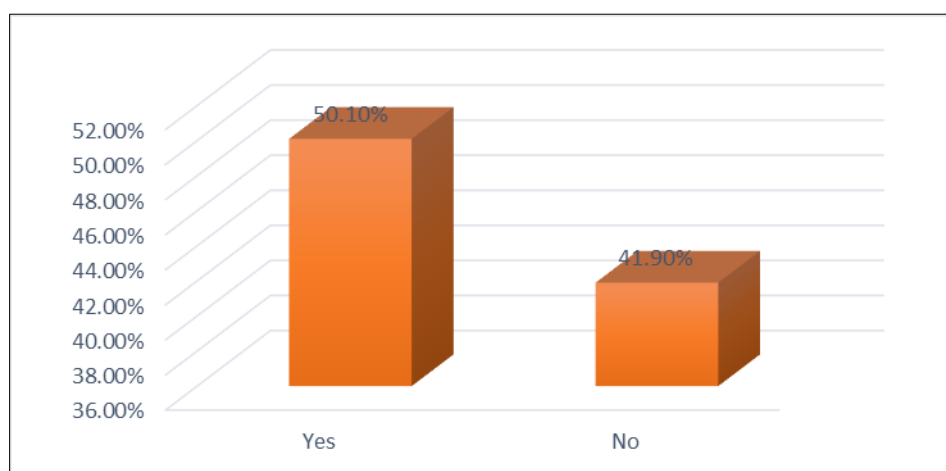


Figure 2 Existence of difference(s) between expectations of girls and boys in football

This perception reflects the persistence of a double standard in how society views women's place in sport: while boys are encouraged to develop strength and competitive qualities, girls remain associated with more traditional roles. As one respondent summarized: "Yes, the expectations are very different. Although I'm a soccer player, society expects me to be a good mother, a good cook..." (A.J. interview, 2024).

Furthermore, female players report the existence of intimidating behavior or harassment, as well as some cultural differences and tensions within teams.

- The analysis shows that 25.71% of respondents have never witnessed intimidating behavior or harassment, 28.57% rarely, 23.82% sometimes, and 12.38% often. Although the proportion of direct accounts remains relatively low, these data indicate that forms of bullying and harassment do indeed exist, reflecting an environment still marked by unequal power relations that are sometimes hostile to the empowerment of girls in football.
- 88.57% of respondents believe that cultural differences can cause tensions within their teams, compared to 11.43% who disagree. This perception reflects the identity and regional divides sometimes observed in women's teams, where ethnic, linguistic, or religious affiliations can influence teamwork, communication, and even the distribution of roles.

3.2. Gender remarks as psychosocial and institutional barriers

The persistence of stereotypes related to the practice of women's football is notable in Abomey-Calavi. This is because the majority of female players interviewed acknowledge that football is still perceived as a masculine sport. This fuels various attitudes and psychological pressure. For many, the very fact of being a girl constitutes an obstacle (encountered in various spaces): "Being a girl, first of all, has never been easy, and even more so in a sport of masculine origin. Here, we are constantly being told, at home and at school, that a woman's place is at home and with her husband, not on the pitch." (G.I., interview, 2023)

The questionnaire results confirm this trend: 73.33% of female players share this opinion and 16.19% say that gender stereotypes affect their participation in football. Conversely, 10.48% were neutral. The majority opinion reflects the strength of social norms assigning women domestic roles, incompatible with the visibility, competition, and physical performance associated with football. The interviews also reveal the internalization of these representations ("to tell the truth, we don't look favorably on a girl who plays football. You're either called a tomboy or a girl who doesn't want to get married"; "in my village, they think I don't know how to cook because they see women who cling to the ball as those who don't even know how to turn dough."; "your butt prevents you from running," they say). These sometimes seemingly innocuous remarks reflect forms of psychological and social violence that undermine self-confidence and create tensions among young female footballers. They highlight how this sport, far from being a simple space for play, becomes a space for confronting norms.

Similarly, some forms of misunderstanding and concerns related to the recognition of the players' efforts are notable within the training framework. Indeed, the Assaba Football Academy, the framework for this study, implements significant psychological support: motivational sessions, stress management, work on self-confidence, breathing exercises and visualization before matches, etc. This approach aims to strengthen the resilience and mental performance of the players. However, despite this structure, the respondents report situations of tension and hierarchical disorganization: "we sometimes find ourselves in training in front of the entire staff or the president, everyone gives orders, we no longer know who to obey, and in the end, we are punished." The figures confirm this feeling: 58.10% admit to having been confronted with difficult situations during training sessions. Within this percentage, players approached feel strongly judged or criticized. Coaches' often trivialized comments contribute to reinforcing this feeling: "You hear coaches say that those who don't know anything will always be left on the sidelines. That doesn't encourage performance." These experiences illustrate the ambiguous relationship between coaching and recognition, where girls must constantly prove their legitimacy.

The data shows a striking unanimity: 100% of players consider age to be a barrier in women's football. This perception reflects a double constraint: on the one hand, younger players are judged to be "immature" or "inexperienced," and on the other, older players see their potential undervalued in the face of performance standards ("it seems like we always wait until young people are older to be taken seriously. It's as if we have to wait until we are a certain age before our passion is recognized"; "it's frustrating, even when we have talent, we are sometimes told that we are too young to understand the game. This limits opportunities for young players like me"). This common perception highlights a generational paradox: while football is based on precocious talent and training from a young age, girls must overcome a social expectation of maturity before being legitimized. Age therefore becomes an implicit instrument for regulating access to female professionalism.

Finally, behind these experiences emerges a collective awareness of the psycho-institutional obstacles girls encounter in their careers. Discrimination, recurring remarks, and judgments have a moral impact on the players, who must, despite everything, maintain their motivation: "As a young female footballer, discrimination caught up with me brutally. Sabotaged training sessions and constant criticism based on my gender created a hostile environment. It extinguished the flame of my passion, highlighting that football, supposed to be a refuge, can sometimes reflect the most bitter injustice." (S.O., interview, 2024)

This awareness also reflects a form of resistance: the ability to persevere despite constraints, to build a space for expression and recognition in an environment where legitimacy remains under constant negotiation. Football thus becomes a place of affirmation and emancipation, but also a mirror of the gender relations that are still unequally distributed in the Beninese sporting field.

3.3. Strained relationship with the social and even sporting

Environment The data collected reveal that the majority of female soccer players surveyed maintain a strained relationship with their immediate social environment (family, friends, or romantic relationships) due to their

involvement in soccer. This conflict illustrates the persistence of gender norms and resistance to transgressing traditionally assigned roles for women.

On the one hand, speaking of family resistance and pressure to conform, more than half of the players (55.23%) report having been pressured to give up the sport, and 30.48% say they felt this pressure particularly strongly. This finding reveals the extent of family regulatory mechanisms aimed at keeping women within spheres of activity deemed appropriate: "My dad told me that if I persisted, I would become a soccer player outside his home." This excerpt illustrates a form of patriarchal sanction aimed at deterring transgression of the female social role. In this context, we see that feminine behavior is perceived through traditional expectations related to respectability and domesticity. On the other hand, the tension between sporting commitment and sentimental norms constitutes another reality of the practice of women's football: "my boyfriend was furious, he threatened to break up with me if I didn't stop." This idea highlights the emotional dimension of the social control exerted on women. Football, as an activity perceived as masculine, confronts female players with a double constraint: having to prove their sporting worthwhile reassuring those around them that they conform to the feminine role.

Furthermore, the repercussions extend to family relationships: 73.33% of respondents acknowledge that the difficulties experienced through their choice influence their relationships with their loved ones. This data reflects a sometimes erosion of family support and fuels a conflict between primary (family) socialization and secondary (sporting) socialization. As the testimony shows ("my family doesn't always understand why I'm so involved in football"), the practice becomes a space for emancipation but also for distancing from the family group. Women's football acts here as a space of resistance, where the girls redefine their priorities and aspirations. They nevertheless experience denigration. One of the players, sometimes a referee during certain matches, mentions sexist remarks ("men referee better than you," is thought in the sports world). These seemingly innocuous remarks contribute to a process of devaluing female competence and reinforcing gender boundaries in sport. This often becomes internalized and leads to demotivation, temporary withdrawal and sometimes even giving up, as suggested by the player who says she has sometimes lost "the desire to return to refereeing."

3.4. Implications of socio-initiative relationships on players: between psychological stress and the quest for personal

Balance Analysis of the collected data reveals that playing women's football is accompanied by a strong emotional and psychological burden for young female footballers. The interviews highlight ambivalent feelings of passion, pride, stress, mental fatigue, and sometimes discouragement. These emotions lie at the intersection of several dimensions: pressure to perform, social recognition, and the management of the athletic and feminine self.

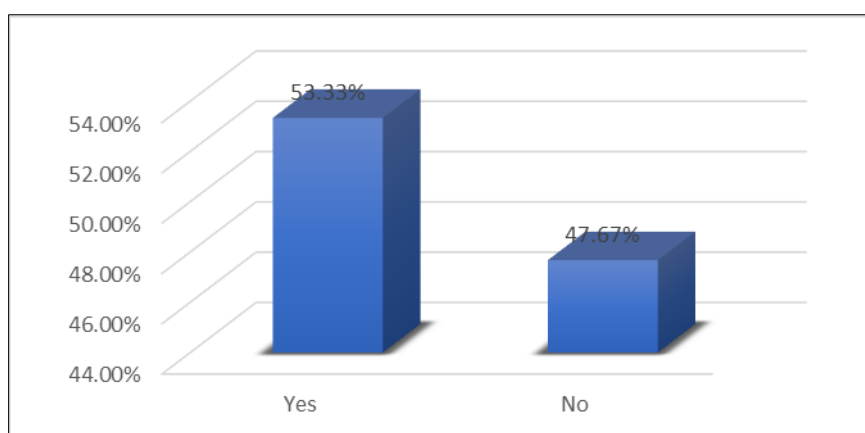
These dimensions include, on the one hand, pressure to perform and the fear of failure. The respondents' comments ("We're sometimes expected to be perfect. It's exhausting to feel like we constantly have to be at the top") reflect a pressure to conform to excellence, often exacerbated by the scarcity of opportunities offered to girls in football. Each match or training session becomes a space of constant evaluation where mistakes are transformed into judgments that can be negative. This internalized pressure leads to performance anxiety that affects motivation, sleep, and emotional balance. This also explains the psychosocial impact on well-being and self-perception that pressure has on the informants. In the figures obtained, 39.04% of players feel affected by the obstacles encountered, and more than half (56.19%) report a significant impact on their self-confidence. These results confirm that the difficulties encountered in women's football are not limited to the sporting level, but affect the construction of individual esteem. Statements such as: "It's like a spiral... you wonder if you're up to it" reveal a form of dissonance where players oscillate between the pride of belonging to a valued group and the emotional fragility generated by confronting structural obstacles.

Furthermore, emotional imbalance has repercussions at school and/or at the academic and social levels. Nearly 81% of respondents admitted to struggling to maintain a stable emotional balance in the face of challenges. Interactions between sport, school, training, and (close) society spill over into other aspects of daily life. The excerpt: "I sometimes relive these humiliations, even while I'm playing" demonstrates the persistence of sports trauma and the lack of appropriate psychological support within training facilities. Indeed, one of the striking findings is that 86.67% of female players have never sought or received psychological support:

Table 2 Seeking psychological support to cope with obstacles in football

Answers	Numbers	Percentage %
Never	91	86,67
Rarely	14	13,33
Sometimes	00	00
Often	00	00
Always	00	00
Total	105	100

This result highlights a major institutional gap in addressing the mental well-being of female athletes. The testimonies ("we never really thought it was an option. We manage with our teammates, but external support could perhaps help"; "there is still a stigma around psychological support. We don't want to appear weak") illustrate a kind of invisibility of emotional vulnerability in the (female) sports environment, perceived as an attack on virility and mental strength (dominant values of football, symbol of masculinity). Coaches' support helps reduce the feeling of unease among players. But frequently, the latter rely on emotional self-management through peer solidarity; this recourse nevertheless remains limited due to the lack of suitable listening devices. This means that the majority of female footballers believe they can overcome the obstacles encountered with appropriate support:

**Figure 3** Ability to overcome obstacles in football with appropriate support

The testimonies collected confirm the trend of the existence of obstacles. However, doubt, moral fatigue and loss of confidence appear as recurring experiences, but rarely definitive. As one player points out, "there are times when everything seems too difficult, but I have never seriously considered giving up." This perseverance reflects an internalized resilience, that is, the ability to maintain commitment despite constraints, by reinvesting passion as the main driving force ("I often have moments of doubt, especially after difficult matches. But, at the end of the day, the love for the game outweighs the difficulties").

However, these words also reveal that the mental strength demonstrated by the players is not innate: it is constructed and depends on the type of support they have. The appropriate support mentioned (above) refers here as much to the moral support of family or teammates, as to institutional recognition (coaches, clubs, management). In other words, the performance and perseverance of female footballers are part of a context where social interactions play a decisive role in stress management and stabilizing the feeling of personal effectiveness. These words finally show that the resilience of the female footballers of Abomey-Calavi (or Assaba Football Academy) is not limited to an individual posture of resistance: it reflects a means in the face of an environment still pervaded by gender conceptions. Football becomes a space for learning consistency, emotional control and dignity, where each victory over oneself also represents a victory over the social norms that hinder their recognition ("It depends on the day, but overall, I think I'm not mentally strong enough. The obstacles in football affect too much the way I see myself").

4. Discussion

The results of our interviews largely align with the findings established in the scientific literature on the psychological and social effects of gender stereotypes in sport. Research by Messner (2011) and Eime et al. (2013) shows that tensions between athletic performance and conformity to gendered social expectations can produce a range of mental disorders such as anxiety, loss of confidence, and psychological exhaustion. These dimensions are clearly evident in the narratives collected: many players express moments of doubt, discouragement, or demotivation linked to external judgments or a lack of recognition of their skills.

Some studies expand on this interpretation by highlighting that persistent gender stereotypes in sport maintain a hierarchy of masculine over feminine roles. This hierarchy results in practices of exclusion, mockery, or intimidation, which are reminiscent of the comments of our respondents who mentioned remarks about their appearance or the devaluation of their performances. These micro-violences contribute to the internalization of the masculine norm as the legitimate reference for sport, thus reinforcing the marginalization of girls in disciplines perceived as masculine. International literature also sheds light on the media coverage and differentiated recognition of female athletes. Studies by E. Sherry et al. (2016) and MacArthur et al. (2017) show that, even when they are visible in the media, female athletes are often represented in passive or sexualized postures, their bodies becoming the main object of media discourse. This type of gaze contributes to confining women to a double constraint: to perform well while remaining compliant with feminine aesthetic standards. A tension that several female footballers in this research express by saying that their body shape ("buttocks", "strength", etc.) and the fact of knowing how to "cook" are grounds for judgment.

Other studies (ACAFS, 2016; E. Mogaji et al., 2021) point out that the lack of viable economic prospects in women's sport also hinders players' ambitions. Structural insecurity, combined with a lack of institutional recognition, fuels doubt about the legitimacy of a long-term women's sporting project. This same reality is found in the accounts of respondents forced to choose between their passion and family or romantic expectations. Finally, several studies (Cosentino, 2017; Danford, 2019; Reid, 2016) highlight the forms of professional exclusion experienced by women in sports environments: they must prove their competence more, adopt more authoritarian behaviors to be heard, and face a lack of female role models and mentoring. These observations resonate with our respondents' comments about the need to "be courageous," to "hold on despite everything."

Thus, all the empirical and theoretical data converge toward the same interpretation: the difficulties encountered by Beninese female footballers are not solely a result of material constraints or personal obstacles, but of a system of gender relations that structures their experience. These relations are expressed both in daily interactions (mockery, judgment, family pressure) and in institutional arrangements, contributing to the reproduction of gender inequalities in sport and pushing young female footballers to demonstrate resilience. This is also broadly consistent with the opinions related to the role incongruity theory of Eagly and Karau (2002), as mentioned above (see choices made in the methodological section).

5. Conclusion

In light of all the elements analyzed, it appears that the constraints experienced by young female soccer players are rooted in psychological, social, and institutional contexts. The obstacles encountered gender stereotypes, lack of recognition, and limited emotional support generate internal tensions, affecting their confidence, well-being, and self-perception. However, these difficulties do not systematically lead to abandonment. On the contrary, the interviews reveal forms of resilience and passionate attachment to soccer. This perseverance reflects a strong connection to the sport, which becomes a space for surpassing oneself and gender hierarchies. Thus, beyond psychological suffering, behaviors based on solidarity between teammates, the quest for recognition, and reaffirmation of oneself as a legitimate athlete emerge.

The data also highlight several forms of structural and symbolic constraints that shape the experience of young girls involved in soccer. These constraints are not limited to the sporting dimension, but refer to social processes and gendered role construction. Indeed, football remains perceived in the collective imagination as a male activity, valuing physical strength, combativeness and the public visibility of qualities often dissonant with the norms traditionally associated with femininity (gentleness, reserve, domesticity) (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Behind the statistics mentioned are forms of social control exercised through family, peers or the training institution studied, which tend to remind girls of their place in society or their (physiological) defect. This tension between sporting vocation and gendered expectations produces a feeling of ambivalence in several respondents, torn between passion, commitment and guilt regarding the norms.

In short, the difficulties experienced by these players are not solely a result of their individual experiences, but are part of a set of relationships. They reflect the structural limitations of girls' access to a historically masculinized sport and invite us to rethink the conditions for truly inclusive and egalitarian professionalization of women's football in Benin.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

All four authors acknowledge that there is no conflict of interest. They all agree with what is written in this article. In accordance with the requirements of transparency and scientific integrity, we, the authors of this study, declare that we have no conflict of interest, whether financial, commercial or otherwise, that could influence the results or interpretations of our research on initiation rites in Benin, thus guaranteeing the independence and objectivity of our work and ensuring the credibility of our conclusions.

Statement of informed consent

We obtained consent from all participants in this study.

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