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## Competitive formats and the competitiveness of women's elite futsal teams: should we follow men's standards?

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### ABSTRACT

Greater attention is needed towards creating more equitable performance environments through socially just approaches for athlete development, aligned with developing appropriate sport policies and competitive spaces. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the impact of changes to the competitive format on championship competitiveness and to critically reflect on the use of the men's competitive models as the guiding factor for changes in women's sports. Findings showed changes in competitive format were insufficient to increase league competitiveness. Indeed, competitiveness, and inherently, performance development require a more nuanced and ecological understanding of female athlete development. The fact that the highest goal difference per game was found in the season 2022/2023 supports this suggestion, implicating an in-depth analysis around political, social and cultural variables to foster gender equity and actual increases in league competitiveness. Moving forward, there may be the need to consider new possibilities for the competitive format for female futsal athletes and other changes within the sport system that can create a truly equitable environment. Sport policies and competitive spaces within high-performance contexts have a critical role to play in ensuring gender equity and cannot simply imitate male sport.

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Sport sciences and performance analysis research have been, for the most part, centred on male athletes' behaviours and performance in practice settings and competitions (e.g. Lebel et al., 2021; Mendes et al., 2022; Méndez-Dominguez et al., 2022). A review conducted by Sarmiento et al. (2022) examined previous research on team performance and match analysis in team ball sports, revealing that women's sports have been neglected and not considered sufficiently in past research. Nonetheless, performance analysis research has started to consider the particularities of female sport participation (Emmonds et al., 2019), especially with regards to futsal, but more efforts are surely needed (Atakan et al., 2019; Barbero-Alvarez et al., 2015; Barth et al., 2016; Beato et al., 2017; Rodriguez, 2021). Armendáriz et al. (2023) reinforces the importance of further studies on female futsal because changes in policy and coaching practice should not be supported by evidence derived from other sports and/or standards set for male athletes. Inequities concerning the lived experiences of women are not exclusive to the sports context as these issues have dominated society throughout history and should be considered when reflecting on practice and competitions (Fraser & Kochanek, 2021; Spaaij et al., 2015).

From an applied standpoint, female sport participation has increased in some socio-cultural contexts such as Portugal (Federação Portuguesa de Futebol, 2023; Santos et al., 2023). However, there are still significant gender inequity issues on a global scale (Bowes et al., 2021; Eime et al., 2021, 2022). Emmonds et al. (2023) highlighted that there are significant decreases in sport participation amongst adolescent females across European countries. Further, there are evident discrepancies between the quantity and

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quality of the opportunities provided to male and female athletes across the developmental spectrum (Eime et al., 2021, 2022), as well as multiple social, cultural and political barriers to participation (Anderson, 2008) that need to be better understood.

For example, training conditions and support infrastructure for female athletes are, in many cases, ineffective due to gender inequities deeply entrenched in contemporary society (Garcia & Croceta, 2022; Machado et al., 2022). Concerning the second variable, social, cultural and political barriers include positioning female athletes as 'honorary males' (Anderson, 2008), reinforcing such misconceptions by prioritizing and misapplying research focused exclusively on male athletes, environments and social spaces (Rodriguez, 2021), as well as developing insufficient sport policies (Meier & Von Uechtriz 2020). Together, these variables influence performance development within high-performance contexts, specifically with regards to female athletes' behaviours and responses in practice settings and competitions (O'Brien et al., 2023; Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2019). Therefore, greater attention must be paid to create more equitable performance environments through socially just approaches in athlete development, as well as developing appropriate sport policies and competitive spaces. Indeed, considering the latter, sport policies and competitive spaces within high-performance contexts have a critical role to play in ensuring gender equity (Alsarve, 2022; Jeanes et al., 2021).

Sports organizations play a fundamental role in proposing sports policies and initiatives aimed at fostering increased participation of girls and women in sport (Barreira et al., 2022). Central to these efforts is the provision of opportunities to compete, recognized as a cornerstone for sport development (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). The opportunity for frequent competition in a high-quality environment is crucial for enhancing athletic performance and boosting the popularity of sports amongst girls and women. However, in the realm of women's sports, there is often a scarcity of competitive opportunities, coupled with limitations in the quality of facilities and competitive formats. A recent analysis focused on women's futsal revealed persistent challenges for girls and women in accessing suitable practice venues and competitive opportunities (Barreira et al., 2024). When such inequities are addressed, previous studies have highlighted that gender gaps in competitiveness can be reduced (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023; Frick, 2011).

To achieve the potential of competition, it is crucial that competitive formats are carefully designed to facilitate meaningful opportunities for development. Different competitive formats have been adopted in high-performance sports, each with its particular advantages and limitations. For instance, a group format can reduce the duration and costs of the competitive event, but it might limit the number of matches and the diversity of opponents. Conversely, a round-robin tournament provides a greater number of games and experiences, but it can also extend the duration of the competition and increase logistical challenges. In the case of futsal in Portugal, the round-robin format is used within the first division for male athletes and is considered a benchmark in terms of competitiveness in the sport. Competitiveness in sport is key to attract players and supporters (Scelles et al., 2021). Indeed, competitiveness has been identified as one of the five tenets for the future of sport in promoting a more dynamic, entertaining, and effective game (François et al., 2022).

However, in the context of women's futsal, there is a lack of studies on competitiveness and the impact of different championship formats on team performance. Since 2018, the Portuguese Football Federation has made changes concerning the competitive format of the first division of the Portuguese female futsal championship with the aim of moving closer to the demands of male futsal and ensuring gender equity (Santos et al., 2023). These changes have been aimed at creating a more equitable and socially just performance environment, as well as enhancing competitiveness and performance development (Fatia et al., 2023). Since the season 2021/2022, the competitive format of both male and female athletes within the first division has remained the same, and added support has been provided for sport organisations to increase sport participation rates. Within the current competitive format, teams play against each other (home and away) for most of the season, followed by a play-off to determine the competition winner. This change in the competition format aims to provide a greater volume of playing time and, consequently, increase athlete development. Before the season 2021/2022, teams would play a two-phase championship based on geographical proximity and performance level to determine the teams who would be relegated or stay in the first division, and the championship winner (Martins, 2023).

The changes made in Portuguese futsal reveal certain inconsistencies that warrant meticulous examination. While there is a clear intent to revamp the competition structure in order to cultivate a more

competitive and equitable sport environment, such changes seem to draw heavily from the model of men's sports without adequately considering the socio-cultural nuances inherent to women's participation. Scholars have warned caution against the problematic use of men's sports as a benchmark for women's sport development (Knapp, 2014). This practice not only perpetuates the notion of male superiority but also perpetuates a system with various forms of violence, neglecting alternative approaches to engagement in sport. Consequently, this study aims to: (i) analyze the competitiveness within the first division of women's futsal in Portugal over the past five seasons; (ii) assess the impact of the changes in competitive format on championship competitiveness; and (iii) critically reflect on the use of the men's competitive model as the guiding framework for changes in women's sport.

## Methods

### Sample

In total, 592 competitive games were analysed across seasons (i.e. between seasons 2018/2019 to 2022/2023). Information concerning each competitive fixture was made available through public records provided by the Portuguese Football Federation in their website (i.e. [www.fpf.pt](http://www.fpf.pt)). The season 2020/2021 was not included in the present study because competitions were interrupted multiple times due to the Covid-19 pandemic and public records were not available. There was only one team that trained five times per week (Sport Lisboa & Benfica) as the others trained three times per week or less. None of the athletes and these teams were full-time professionals.

### Procedures

Data were compiled and coded in an online form by two of the co-authors (the third and fifth authors). These co-authors coded all games independently throughout a five-month period. It should be noted that futsal is a collective game played indoor, which involves two teams with five players each. If a player is sent off that team will have to play without one player for two minutes (i.e. creating a 5x4 situation). If the team who has five players scores or the two-minute penalty expires, the other team can integrate an athlete (i.e. creating again a 5x5 situation). Each game is comprised of two 20-minute halves. An online form was designed to code each competitive game ( $n=592$ ) according to the following variables: (a) total number of goals scored in a competitive game; (b) goal difference at halftime and at the end of the game; (c) winning team's number of yellow cards; (d) losing team's number of yellow cards; (e) winning team's number of red cards; (f) losing team's number of red cards; (g) number of 5x4 situations for the winning team; and (h), number of 5x4 situations for the losing team. Furthermore, we also examined the stability (defined by changes in positioning of teams in the championship table) throughout the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 seasons. All dependent variables were chosen to provide a global assessment of competitiveness because they enabled a comprehensive understanding about team behaviours and performance over the course of each season.

### Data analysis

Based on the purpose of the present study, several analytical steps were taken. First, through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, normality was assessed. Second, to compare the competitiveness between the different tournament formats the one-way ANOVA test for independent groups was used. Third, to analyse if the competitiveness changed regardless of the competitive format, a univariate test of significance (ANCOVA) was used with the fixed variable being the competitive format (i.e. championship structured by geographical location, level of performance achieved by each team or continuous championship with a play-off) as a covariate, and seasons as random variables. The data averages were adjusted to the competitive format. Fourth, post-hoc analysis was performed using the Bonferroni test. To analyse categorical variables (i.e. 'changes between winners and losers' and 'who scores first wins') crosstabs were used which enabled the research team to test for differences. All data are reported as mean  $\pm$  SD and statistical significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$ . Statistical analyses were performed using Statistical

Package for the Social Sciences (version 25.0, SPSS). Concerning the other types of data collected (i.e. goals scored, conceded, point difference and stability in the championship table), analysis involved quantifying these variables and charting them. Efforts were deployed to examine teams' performance indicators at the end of the first phase and second phases of the continuous championship.

## Results

### Phase 1 – global overview

Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for the diverse competitive formats within each season. Significant differences between seasons were observed for total number of goals scored, highest goal difference, red cards for the losing team, and number of 5x4 situations created in the winning team. In the 2022/2023 season, the teams scored more goals, the losing teams received more red cards, as well as experiencing more 5x4 situations (i.e. overloads favoured numerical inferiority) which highlighted (a) more defensive challenges needed by losing teams and (b), more successful attacks created by winning teams. However, in this season, the second season with a play-off, the greatest goal difference was achieved which does not support an increase in competitiveness. Conversely, in the 2018/2019 season there was, on average, the lowest number of goals scored in comparison with the other seasons. The Covid-19 pandemic did not seem to have significantly influenced competitiveness.

In Table 2, a covariance analysis revealed that there were still differences concerning the total number of goals scored, highest goal difference and 5x4 situations per season. Specifically, ANCOVA showed there was a main effect for season and inherently of the competitive format on total of number goals scored ( $Z=6.0$ ,  $p<0.05$ ,  $ES = 0.03$ ), on highest goal difference per game ( $Z=7.4$ ,  $p<0.05$ ,  $ES = 0.04$ ) and in creation of the number of 5x4 overloads in the winning team ( $Z=2.6$ ,  $ES = 0.01$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

### Phase 2 – in-depth analysis

Considering the latest two seasons (2021/2022 and 2022/2023), whereas the competitive format remained the same, findings supported a decrease in competitiveness and an evident stability in the championship

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for each season.

Variables	All (n=592)	Previous format		New format	
		2018/2019 (n=103)	2019/2020* (n=151)	2021/2022 (n=193)	2022/2023 (n=145)
Total of goals scored	5.6±2.8	5.2±2.6	5.2±2.8	5.5±2.7 <sup>a,b</sup>	6.5±3.0 <sup>c</sup>
Highest goal difference	3.4±2.3	3.2±2.1	3.0±1.8	3.3±2.2 <sup>a,b</sup>	4.1±2.7 <sup>c</sup>
Winning team's yellow cards	0.9±1.0	0.8±1.0	0.9±1.1	0.8±0.9	1.0±1.1
Losing team's yellow cards	1.1±1.2	1.2±1.2	1.1±1.2	1.0±1.1	1.3±1.3
Winning team's red cards	0.0±0.2	0.0±0.1	0.0±0.2	0.0±0.1	0.1±0.2
Losing team's red cards	0.1±0.3	0.1±0.2	0.1±0.4 <sup>a</sup>	0.1±0.2 <sup>b</sup>	0.1±0.3 <sup>b</sup>
5x4 situations for the winning team	0.1±0.3	0.0±0.2	0.1±0.4 <sup>a</sup>	0.1±0.2 <sup>b</sup>	0.1±0.2 <sup>b</sup>
5x4 situations for the losing team	0.0±0.2	0.0±0.1	0.0±0.2	0.0±0.1	0.1±0.2

Notes: \*Covid-19 pandemic and first confinement. Data are presented as mean±standard deviation.

<sup>a</sup> $P\leq 0.05$ , significant difference compared to 2018/2019.

<sup>b</sup> $P\leq 0.05$ , significant difference compared to 2019/2020.

<sup>c</sup> $P\leq 0.05$ , significant difference compared to 2021/2022.

Table 2. Changes in indices of football performance after each season.

Variables	2018/2019	2019/2020	2021/2022	2022/2023
Total of goals scored*	5.3±0.3 (4.7–5.9)	5.2±0.2 (4.7–5.5)	5.5±0.2 (5.1–5.9)	6.4±0.2 (6.0–6.9)
Highest goal difference*	3.2±0.2 (2.8–3.7)	2.9±0.2 (2.5–3.3)	3.3±0.2 (2.9–3.6)	4.1±0.2 (3.7–4.5)
Winning team's yellow cards	0.7±0.1 (0.5–0.9)	0.9±0.8 (0.8–1.1)	0.8±0.7 (6.9–10.0)	1.1±0.8 (0.9–1.2)
Losing team's yellow cards	1.0±0.1 (0.8–1.3)	1.2±0.1 (10.0–1.4)	1.0±0.1 (0.8–1.1)	1.3±0.1 (1.1–1.5)
Winning team's red cards	0.0±0.0 (0.0–0.0)	0.0±0.0 (0.0–0.1)	0.0±0.0 (0.0–0.0)	0.1±0.1 (0.0–0.1)
Losing team's red cards	0.0±0.0 (0.0–0.1)	0.1±0.1 (0.1–0.1)	0.1±0.1 (0.0–0.1)	0.1±0.1 (0.0–0.1)
5x4 situations for winning team *	0.0±0.0 (0.0–0.1)	0.1±0.1 (0.1–0.1)	0.1±0.1 (0.0–0.1)	0.1±0.1 (0.0–0.1)
5x4 situations for losing team	0.0±0.0 (0.0–0.0)	0.0±0.0 (0.0–0.1)	0.0±0.0 (0.0–0.0)	0.1±0.1 (0.0–0.1)

Note: \*Season main effect (ANCOVA:  $p<0.05$  at post-season). Data are presented as mean±standard deviation (minimum – maximum).

table (see Figure 1 for an overview of the findings). In the season 2021/2022 there were 14 teams in total. Half way through the continuous phase of the championship the first team in the table was Sport Lisboa & Benfica with 37 points (13 games played, 12 wins and 1 tie), and 69 goals scored, 6 goals conceded. The 7th team in the championship table was Águias de Santa Marta with 21 points (13 games played, 7 wins and 6 losses), and 38 goals scored, 35 goals conceded. The last team in the championship table was Desportivo de Chaves with 3 points (13 games played, 0 wins, 3 ties and 10 losses), and 16 goals scored, 47 goals conceded. From the first to the seventh team in the championship table there was a 16-point difference; 31 goals scored difference; and 29 goals conceded difference. From the first to the last team in the championship table there was a 34-point difference; 53 goals scored difference; and 41 goals conceded difference.

By the end of the continuous phase of the championship, the first team in the table was still Sport Lisboa & Benfica with 72 points (26 games played, 23 wins and 3 tie), and 131 goals scored, 23 goals conceded. The 7th team in the championship table was also still Águias de Santa Marta with 35 points (26 games played, 6 wins, 2 ties and 18 losses), and 69 goals scored, 86 goals conceded. The last team in the championship table was still Desportivo de Chaves with 6 points (26 games played, 3 ties and 23 losses), and 40 goals scored, 134 goals conceded. Compared with the first phase, differences across performance variables remained similar (see Figure 1).

In the season 2022/2023 there were 12 teams in total. Half way through the continuous phase of the championship the first team in the table was Sport Lisboa & Benfica with 33 points (11 games played, 11 wins), and 78 goals scored and 9 goals conceded. The 6th team in the championship table was Águias de Santa Marta, as in the previous season, with 17 points (13 games played, 7 wins and 6 losses), and 38 goals scored and 35 goals conceded. The last team was Quinta dos Lombos with 0 points (11 games played, 11 losses), and 15 goals scored, 59 goals conceded. There was a 16-point difference between the first and sixth team (the same as last season) in the table as in the previous season. Further, there was a difference in 49 goals (higher than the previous season); 26 goals conceded difference. From the first to the last team in the championship table there is a 63-point difference (higher than the previous season); 63 goals scored difference (higher than last season); and a difference in 41 goals conceded. By the end of the continuous championship phase, the teams that were first, sixth and last in the table remained the same, and differences across performance variables were similar to the previous season and to the first phase of the current season (see Figure 1).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was three-fold: (i) analyze the competitiveness within the first division of women's futsal in Portugal over the past five seasons; (ii) assess the impact of the changes in competitive format on championship competitiveness; and (iii) critically reflect on the use of the men's competitive

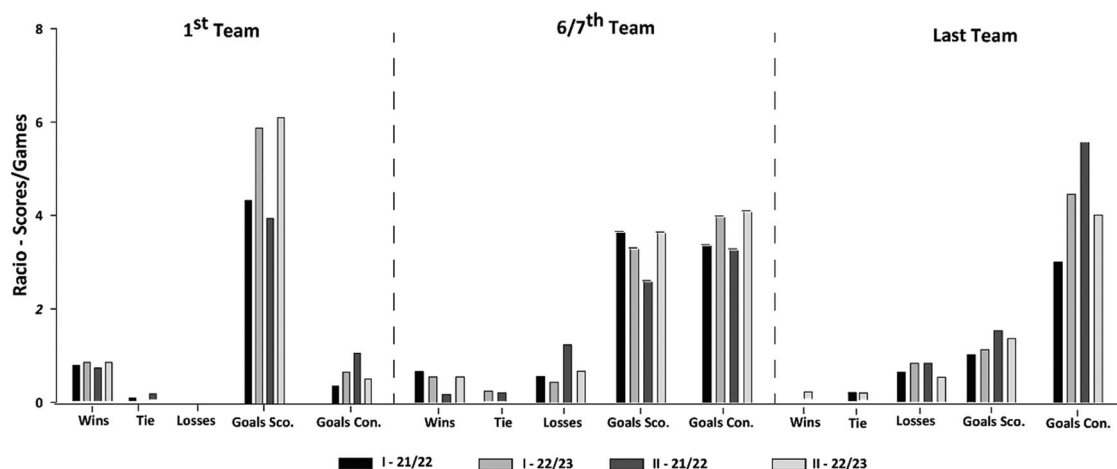


Figure 1. Data from the seasons 2021/2022 and 2022/2023.

model as the guiding framework for changes in women's sport. Several studies have focused on male futsal athletes in Portugal (e.g. Mendes et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2023), but no efforts have been deployed thus far to analyse competitive performance of female futsal athletes. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine competitiveness for female athletes, specifically within the futsal context. Findings showed that changes in the competitive format following the men's standards were insufficient to move the dial concerning an increase in league competitiveness.

In the first phase of the analysis, competitiveness decreased throughout the seasons examined which is cause for concern. Across seasons, the changes made to the championship structure, by itself, may be considered insufficient to actually impact female futsal athletes' performance and subsequently the overall competitiveness in this context. In other words, the competitive format was insufficient to move the needle concerning an increase in league competitiveness. For instance, the highest goal difference per game was found in the season 2022/2023. Such findings may be explained by several macro and micro-level factors such as policy, culture and system-level support that may warrant reflection. Nonetheless, the Covid-19 pandemic did not have a significant impact on competitiveness which contradicts findings of previous studies (O'Shea et al., 2023). Indeed, competitiveness and performance development require a nuanced and ecological understanding of athlete development in women and in sport science (Woods et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2023).

Previous studies have raised the need to avoid standardizing changes in environmental affordances per male athletes' needs and characteristics (Emmonds et al., 2019; Fraser & Kochanek, 2023). One can even raise the question more explicitly: should female futsal athletes be warranted equity (i.e. adequate opportunities based on their specific needs) instead of equality (i.e., the same opportunities as men)? Reinforcing the need to pose this question, Fraser and Kochanek (2023) stated:

Ensuring that sport is an empowering context for all athletes to optimise their capacities requires that sport leaders acknowledge how female athletes have been and continue to be constrained within male-dominated sport...change requires a coalitional effort to contest sexist culture. Sport leaders must make a more robust commitment to gender equity in and through sport (p. 13).

Based on these issues and state of affairs, resorting to the same competitive format as their male counterparts may not be the best approach to create a truly equitable environment and induce increases in competitiveness in sport. First, none of these teams and subsequently athletes are full-time professionals as they have other jobs, roles and responsibilities that create barriers for performance development such as lack of sleep, fatigue and practice hours (Queiroz, 2023). Also, the fact that amateur teams compete with semi-professional teams (e.g. Sport Lisboa & Benfica) can help explain female futsal athletes' performances and the overall competitiveness of the league. Second, many female athletes face many inequities throughout their pathway as athletes such as early specialization, late entry in the sport, lack of meaningful learning opportunities and discrimination (e.g. Curran et al., 2019; Jayanthi & Dugas, 2017). Third, there was only one team that trained five times per week (i.e. Sport Lisboa & Benfica) as the others trained three times per week or even less (e.g. Desportivo Chaves) which recognisably impacts performance (e.g. Capranica et al., 2013). Hence, while changes in competitive format were proposed to enhance the competition's equality and increase competitiveness, its implementation without consideration of the historical and cultural factors that influence women's lived experiences in sport hindered the potential benefits of sport policy.

Through the second phase of the analysis, decreases in competitiveness become more evident through variables such as the number of goals scored, conceded, as well as the place in the championship table. Within this context, deconstructing existent inequities and the potential pitfalls in the way a sport system is organisationally framed may require policy changes that go beyond competitive formats. Davids and Araújo (2010) advanced the concept of *organismic asymmetry* that highlights the need to understand the individual-environmental influences that translate into a process of becoming entangled with the world. In the case of female futsal in Portugal, such entanglement necessarily involves funding available, youth sport experiences, quality of coaching, practice hours, social value provided to female futsal and the prevalence of a male-dominated culture. Taken together, these factors help explain the status quo for competitiveness in Portugal which may require efforts to increase justice and equity for female athletes.



Current efforts made by the Portuguese Football Federation include a certification process for all teams in the first division that include variables such as sport organisations' efforts to foster female futsal participation. This certification process requires first division teams to fulfill multiple criteria that represent quality high performance sport. However, a question may need to be posed: Should this certification process be revisited to include a greater emphasis on equity, social justice and empowerment? Superficial approaches towards female high performance sport participation may pave the way for perverse ways to reproduce and maintain the status quo (Borrueco et al., 2022). Moving forward, efforts could be deployed towards the implementation of novel competitive formats that are feasible, manageable and adjust to athletes' needs for development. Market-driven decisions that promote equality come at a cost of the novelty and the risk-taking needed to break the vicious cycle of inequity and discrimination for female athletes. For instance, a ladder type of competitive format whereas teams move up a place in the championship table after a win could potentially help increase competitiveness. For instance, different competitive formats could potentially help increase competitiveness (e.g. ladder-type competitive format). The current competitive format fosters stagnation in the results and creates a significant competitive gap between teams that may be difficult to overcome in the next decade.

To impact this significant competitive gap between teams, youth futsal programs targeting female athletes need to be contextualized and appropriately tailored to facilitate meaningful and equitable opportunities that can later impact high performance. Considering the inequities present in today's contemporary sport landscape (Haan & Knoppers, 2020), female futsal athletes may need to practice for longer, have more support and be given the opportunity to experience each developmental stage to the fullest. On this notion, policy needs to set clear and concrete standards for quality female athlete development, and effectively monitor sport organisations' strategies to achieve this objective.

Coach education has also been dominated by male models of performance (e.g. Lewis et al., 2018). We should bear in mind that:

Although the coaches try to consciously position male and female athletes on the same level, avoiding reference to physical differences and purporting to coach them the same, this idea of sameness remains an empty ideology as they use discourses that constitute men as 'the' elite athlete and women as being weaker than men. This so-called sameness translates into a social hierarchy (Haan & Knoppers, 2020, p. 643).

Thus, new ways of doing and thinking are needed for coach education to actually become contextualized and escape the void of sameness (Woods et al., 2022). Future coach education becoming could include female futsal athlete-centered discussions around emergent issues such as pregnancy (Davenport et al., 2023) and sexual violence (Gaedicke et al., 2021).

## Conclusions

Although this study can yield novel insights, there are several limitations that need to be considered. Only a low set of indicators were used to assess competitiveness which requires tempering implications derived from this study. The indicators did not include performance variables such as actual team behaviours in games. However, this study can open new possibilities for exploring female futsal in Portugal and elsewhere. Future studies may attempt to understand competitiveness through game analysis, as well as examine decision makers' perceptions of the factors that hinder performance and game development. Also, research amongst this line of inquiry can hold the power to deconstruct inequities and thrive for justice which may imply engaging into theoretical exercises to reposition coaching female athletes. Ontological and epistemological diversity can pave the way for new iterations concerning the process of becoming a female futsal athlete (e.g. Woods et al., 2023) and towards coaching (e.g. Camiré, 2023). Finally, studies that can involve designing and implementing contextualized coach education programming may be of value to help coaches navigate the complex cultural, social and political influences that impact coaching. More so, genuine and credible actions need to be undertaken to facilitate meaningful change that necessarily exposes injustices, inequities and violence that are not in the past. This is undoubtedly the role of research and policy in a contemporary post-pandemic world.

Moving forward, there is the need to think about athlete development, coaching and sport policy through the lenses of equity. However, the male dominated culture that characterizes contemporary high

performance sport ensures female athletes are provided with equality. Specifically, female athletes must fulfil expectations set for their male counterparts with a scarcity of financial gains, social recognition, as well as quality opportunities to develop and perform. It is important to bear in mind sport policy can be weaponized to serve a neoliberal agenda that leaves equity and ultimately justice as secondary objectives. Indeed, the changes made in competitive formats throughout the seasons examined can serve the purpose of rejecting other proposals for the development of women's futsal that require more funds and time, which requires reflection. A neoliberal agenda may involve using winning and records to camouflage inequities and create a false sense of justice. By doing so, sport policy only reinforces historical and cultural forms of oppression on female athletes and helps maintain the status quo. In other words, winning and records achieved by some do not reflect the lived experiences of most high performance female athletes. More efforts are surely needed to develop practices that aim to foster equity, justice and necessarily challenge the status quo.

### Authors' contributions

FS, PN and KD conceptualized and designed the manuscript. FS, DN, JC, MF, JB and KD were responsible for drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. FS, DN and JC analyzed the data. FS and PN were responsible for interpreting the data. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [FS], upon reasonable request.

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