

Development in women's futsal: is high-performance futsal fostering equity or simply reinforcing a gendered culture?

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Development in women's futsal: is high-performance futsal fostering equity or simply reinforcing a gendered culture?

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ABSTRACT

The need to create equitable opportunities for women to engage in sport has been widely acknowledged. However, there is a scarcity of studies that explore the experience of both female athletes and coaches involved in elite women's futsal. To enhance understanding of issues related to equity in women's sport experiences, the present study sought to explore Portuguese coaches and female athletes' perspectives on the status quo in women's futsal. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six coaches and six female athletes involved in elite women's futsal. Findings revealed a perceived lack of support from decision makers towards equity promotion, which led to few affordances being provided for female athletes to thrive. Coaches and female athletes tended to accept the current conventions as the only viable solution to continue to engage in high-performance futsal. Thus, the current system was perceived to reinforce a gendered culture by oppressing and discriminating female athletes. This study reinforces the need for greater awareness and literacy on what should be accepted and tolerated concerning women's rights in elite sport in order to create more just and equitable environments across socio-cultural contexts.

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Introduction

Historically, sports have reflected a gendered culture dominated by masculine values, ideals, and meanings (Fasting et al., 2019). The experiences of women in sport have been often associated with toxic masculinity and inherently with normative understandings about sport practice (Bevan et al., 2021; Bowes et al., 2021; Corvino et al., 2024). In some cases, women who challenge these masculine values, ideals and

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meanings face discrimination, segregation, and numerous barriers that hinder their capacity to be heard (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023).

To enhance understanding of issues related to equity in women's sport experiences, the present study sought to explore Portuguese coaches' and female athletes' perspectives towards the status quo in women's futsal. The study was conducted in Portugal where women's participation in futsal has increased 85.5% in the last decade, growing from 5,406 to 10,028 female participants (Federação Portuguesa de Futebol, 2023). Such growth has been a result of several initiatives. First, the Portuguese Football Federation (2023) has developed programs in primary schools to engage more girls in futsal and promote sport participation. Second, sport organisations that offer opportunities for girls and women to engage in futsal have been provided with additional funding and/or support. Third, the competitive environments for girls and women in futsal have been framed in a similar way to their male counterparts. For instance, the women's first division futsal championship includes the same competitive format as the male first division. Finally, games from the women's first division futsal championship and from all national teams (e.g., under-15; under-19) are transmitted on a specific media channel owned by the Portuguese Football Federation (2023). Thus, it was considered timely to investigate whether the increase in participation rates may (or not) be leading to more equitable opportunities, quality coaching, enhanced competitiveness, as well as more adequate support from sport organisations.

Sport, gender, equality and equity promotion

The concept of gender has been crucial in understanding and confronting emergent inequalities, inequities and systemic oppression. By examining how gender shapes social experiences and access to opportunities, this concept has helped reveal the power dynamics embedded in institutions and practices. In the context of sport, in particular, gender analysis has been essential for questioning traditional norms, challenging exclusionary policies, and advocating for more inclusive and equitable environments for all gender identities (Alsarve, 2024). Indeed, gender inclusive sport can provide meaningful opportunities for all individuals, which is critical for contemporary programming, as well as for a more just and fair society (Bekker et al., 2023).

Attached to the concept of gender inclusive sport have been the notions of equality and equity (Harmon, 2020). In practice, many initiatives aimed at making sport more inclusive have used equality as a key measure of progress (Eime et al., 2022). This notion of equality typically refers to ensuring that all individuals—regardless of their gender—have access to the same opportunities to participate in sport. However, despite these efforts, significant barriers remain for certain groups. It should be noted that access to sport participation for girls and women, and other typically marginalised gender identities (e.g., trans athletes), is still a challenge in a variety of socio-cultural contexts (Corvino et al., 2024; Denison et al., 2021). For instance, adolescent girls across many European countries still have access to sport much later in life (i.e., at 15 years of age) than their male counterparts, which reflects deeper systemic inequalities in sport access and promotion (Emmonds et al., 2024).

In contrast to the notion of equality, which focuses on offering the same opportunities to everyone, regardless of their circumstances, equity recognises these existing

inequalities and seeks to actively reduce them by offering differentiated support tailored to individuals' diverse needs, circumstances, and goals. Within the context of sport, equity implies a concern towards creating adequate opportunities for girls and women in sport based on their developmental needs, lived experiences and desires. This might include designing gender-sensitive training environments, implementing inclusive coaching strategies, and formulating sport policies that respond to the realities of those who have historically been marginalised (Jeanes et al., 2021).

Despite the broad array of efforts aimed at increasing both equality and equity in sport, there are several issues that still impact coaches and female athletes that urgently warrant attention. Understanding how these issues influence female athletes' and coaches' experiences and development in sport can provide crucial insights for building a more equitable sport environment and hopefully society (Fowler, 2021; Lewis et al., 2018). One of these issues is associated with the fact that coaching is still influenced by standards and expectations that derive from male athletes' needs (Haan & Knoppers, 2020). These male-oriented frameworks often dictate what is considered as 'ideal' athletic performance, progression, and training, leaving little room for alternative approaches that might better serve female athletes. The consequences of these practices are far-reaching:

- i. they can negatively impact female athletes' sense of belonging and self-worth. When women do not see their needs or identities reflected in training programs, they may feel undervalued or out of place in sport environments (Guimarães et al., 2023; Tjønndal, 2019);
- ii. they contribute to significant gaps in research. Female athletes remain underrepresented in sports science and coaching studies, resulting in a lack of data to inform practices that suit their specific experiences and needs (Walton et al., 2024);
- iii. these norms help sustain the exclusion of women from leadership and decision-making roles (Barreira, 2021). The perpetuation of male-centered models reinforces stereotypes about who is seen as 'fit' to lead or coach, which marginalises women's voices and limits structural change (Bryan et al., 2021).

These embedded biases ultimately undermine efforts to promote equity and the development of both female athletes and coaches. By shaping career pathways, limiting access to leadership roles, and stifling participation, male-dominant expectations work against the creation of inclusive and supportive environments (Capranica et al., 2013; Carlsson, 2017; Comley, 2016). Therefore, more critical attention from scholars, practitioners, and institutions is needed to challenge entrenched norms and promote structural transformation in sport. This includes, not only recognising the limitations of current equality-based frameworks, but also embracing an equity-driven agenda that prioritises justice for girls and women. Only through such intentional efforts can sport become a truly inclusive space where everyone, regardless of gender identity, can thrive.

Futsal: the current knowledge base and future pathways

Amongst sports that have been examined, football (soccer) has received particular attention in gender studies because it has been traditionally associated with

masculinity and, in some countries, has also been officially banned for women (François et al., 2022; Mitidieri et al., 2023). However, other sports, such as futsal have received much less attention within the scientific literature (Barreira et al., 2024; Rodriguez, 2021). Although not all sports can and will receive the same level of attention across scholarly efforts, it may be necessary to consider how futsal reflects many of the contemporary issues that negatively impact women's participation in sport.

Similarly to other sports, research on futsal has been dominated by a focus on male athletes' environments, coaching needs and performance contexts (Barreira et al., 2024). There is a scarcity of research focused on female futsal players, which limits the extent to which inequities in this performance environment can be understood and addressed. Scholars have raised awareness about the need to dismantle and disrupt inequities across settings as a way to create more just environments for female athletes (and coaches) who are oppressed, disregarded and ignored by sport systems (Borrueco et al., 2023; Capranica et al., 2013; Haan & Knoppers, 2020).

In recent times, research on women's futsal has increased somewhat moderately, particularly in Brazil, Spain and Portugal (Barreira et al., 2024). These studies have highlighted that sociocultural and historical constraints contribute to an environment where sport organisations, including women themselves, have low expectations for a more just practices in sport systems and organisations (Santos et al., 2024a). In some cases, female futsal athletes face abbreviated, and often low-quality, developmental processes, with limited organisational structure and guidance (Santos et al., 2024a). Moreover, female futsal athletes (like female athletes in general; Emmonds et al., 2024) have often had significantly fewer training and practice opportunities by the time they reach 18 years of age, compared to their male counterparts (Lago-Fuentes et al., 2020). This stark contrast highlights why it is both unreasonable and unfair to expect the same level of performance from male and female futsal athletes, especially when the competitive format is the same, but opportunities for development and preparation are far from equitable (Santos et al., 2024b).

There are other similar issues in futsal, where most high-performance female athletes worldwide are not full-time professionals (Santos et al., 2024a). Many women's teams lack the financial resources and time necessary for travel, accommodation, and overall support to adequately prepare and develop female athletes. Additionally, female futsal clubs often operate under basic conditions and lack essential resources for effective preparation to compete, particularly in high-performance environments. This situation seems to be accepted by much of the athletic community, including female athletes, coaches, and sport administrators, which creates significant barriers for meaningful change to occur (Fatia et al., 2023). A significant challenge in enhancing developmental pathways for female futsal athletes is that their needs and desires are often assessed, based on male standards, despite substantial physiological, historical, cultural, and social differences (O'Brien et al., 2023). Thus, it is crucial for coaches and sports science professionals to consider the specific needs of each athlete, based on their demographic background. To truly value female futsal, it is necessary to recognise the impact of social and cultural constraints. For meaningful growth in the sport, female athletes must be placed at the centre of the process, with their individual needs being addressed (Woods et al., 2020a, 2020b).

Methods

Researchers' paradigmatic decisions and positionalities

In the present study, an Interpretative Description Methodology (IDM; Thorne, 2016) was utilised. Rooted in a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, IDM highlights the need to use research to move practice forward, seeking to resolve practical challenges and problems in everyday life (Ocean et al., 2022). Specifically, a relativist ontology implies that reality is subjective and constructed through individuals' understandings about the social world. On the other hand, a subjectivist epistemology is based on the assumption that knowledge is contingent on individuals' values, beliefs, as well as perceived experiences and social norms (Thorne et al., 2004; Thorne, 2008). Thus, IDM can provide the necessary lenses to tell stories that showcase social, political and historical influences. Moreover, IDM can enable researchers to provide in-depth stories that tackle critical and problematic issues that, in this case, impact female athletes and coaches involved in women's futsal.

Collectively, the authors represent diverse backgrounds, experiences and voices. The first author is a Brazilian researcher with a background as an amateur futsal player. Throughout her life, she has experienced violence in the sports arena, which she now seeks to challenge through her research, pedagogical practices, and sport projects. Within the university where she works, she coordinates women's football and futsal projects aiming to promote a safe environment in which women can experience positive sport development and empower themselves. The second author is a researcher who has been in academia for 10 years. He is also a former high-performance coach, involved in women's futsal in Portugal, which provides him with an understanding about equity, violence and oppression. He believes that exploring the experiences of female athletes and coaches can help disrupt normative understandings about women's sport, here specifically in futsal. The third author is a woman, born and raised in Portugal, in a privileged environment. Despite growing up in a well-developed context, she was involved in a predominantly male-dominated environment (i.e., in sport), and witnessed less visibility in women's competitions, as well as various inequities and inequalities. Nevertheless, with the support of her coaches, she became a coach and later researcher to actively address these issues. As a coach developer, she is dedicated to promoting equity and challenging the status quo. The fourth author is a professional handball coach and a researcher in academia for more than 10 years. She is also a former player with 30 years of experience who has seen first-hand the multiple inequities that impact women in sport. As a sports coach and a researcher, she has been interested and devoted providing a fairer environment for all the girls and women in sport. The last author is a male academic who has worked in different university contexts, studying sport science and sports pedagogy, in Europe, Australia and Scandinavia over the past four decades.

Participants

Participants in the present study were six, high-performance, female futsal athletes and six, high-performance coaches (four men and two women) involved in women's futsal. The female athletes' ages ranged between 24 and 31 years ($M=28.2$ years,

$SD=2.3$), with a range of 8 to 17 years of experience as futsal athletes ($M=13.3$ years, $SD=3.1$). These high-performance female athletes were all currently participating in national championships (i.e., first and second national divisions). Two of the female athletes had represented the Portuguese national team. Coaches were aged between 38 and 46 years ($M=40.8$ years, $SD=4.5$), as well as having a minimum of 6, and a maximum of 20 years, of coaching experience ($M=12.7$ years, $SD=4.6$). All coaches held coaching certifications and coached high-performance teams involved in the women's first division futsal championship.

Procedure

After completing all necessary procedures for ethical approval, the second author contacted a list of 14 coaches and 15 female athletes through a key informant who had extensive links to this sport performance context. Coaches and female athletes were recruited as they provided a comprehensive overview of the processes and mechanisms associated with equality, equity and power-oppression-privilege, and also because they were key actors within the high-performance system. However, it should be noted that these participants were not recruited as clusters (i.e., coaches and female athletes from the same team).

Both coaches and female athletes needed to be involved in women's national futsal leagues that were classified as a high-performance sport environment. This was the only participant recruitment criterion. Such classification was based on the following criteria: (a) coaches and female athletes engaged in competitive environments that involved engagement in multiple national competitions; (b) coaches and female athletes spent, on average, more time in practices and competitions than most female futsal athletes in Portugal; and (c), coaches and female athletes were paid for their performance in futsal. Coaches and female athletes who engaged in recreational futsal programs and provincial competitive environments were not included in the present study. Only six coaches and six female athletes were recruited as saturation was achieved at this point. Therefore, there was no need to recruit additional participants. Moreover, necessary steps were taken to ensure that all participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and the required level of involvement, before providing their consent.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online with all participants. Data collection occurred throughout the competitive season 2023/2024. In line with the study's purposes, an interview guide was developed by the research team, structured into five sections, featuring: (a) demographic questions (e.g., age, coaching experience); (b) the evolution of women's futsal (e.g., how has women's futsal changed over the last years?); (c) emergent challenges in women's futsal (e.g., what challenges do you see as most evident in women's futsal today?); (d) training methods and methodologies (e.g., which training methods and methodologies are currently used in women's futsal?); and (e), future pathways (e.g., what do you think should be changed in women's futsal moving forward?). Interviews lasted an average 78 minutes (coaches) and 45 minutes (athletes).

Data analysis

Interpretive Description Methodology (IDM) involves the use of a diverse range of approaches towards qualitative data analysis (Thorne, 2016). In this case, to provide an in-depth overview of participant stories, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To use RTA with rigour, the analysis occurred throughout a 10-month period as the research team developed temporary understandings about the dataset, questioned these assumptions and revisited the stories being told, refining them with participants until they were deemed clear, coherent and robust. Although RTA emerges through diverse steps, these should not be interpreted as a checklist. Conversely, RTA is a fluid process where all steps are always entangled. The first step involved transcribing the interviews, which was conducted independently by two research assistants. Then, the first and second authors reviewed the transcripts on multiple occasions to develop initial interpretations of the data. At this stage, these authors met in-person to discuss their initial understandings and ideas, considered in light of political, social and cultural variables that impact women's sport. Because of these discussions, initial themes were developed. These initial themes captured the main ideas associated with the participant stories, but still lacked depth, reach and power to expose the issues at stake. Once themes captured these meanings, they were deemed appropriate and capable of providing meaningful insights on the purpose of the study. At this point the final set of themes were assembled, and a written report was completed to illustrate each one.

At the end of the analysis, two main themes were identified, each with two sub-themes. The first theme 'The Status Quo in Women's Futsal - The Lack of Equitable Opportunities' includes the following subthemes: (i) 'the competitive format as a pacifier', which refers to how existing competition structures offer limited opportunities for changes to the status quo to occur and tend to reinforce inequalities; and (ii), 'the environment as the trigger to acknowledge inequities', highlighting how coaches' and female athletes' experiences in futsal reflect systemic gender inequities. The second theme 'Future Pathways for Women's Futsal in Portugal - Current (Im)possibilities' includes the following subthemes: (i) 'a multidisciplinary team - solving immediate challenges', emphasising the need for collaboration across different actors to address urgent gender issues; and (ii), 'the trials and tribulations of an athlete-centered approach', which explores challenges prioritising female athletes' needs within the current high-performance system.

Quality of the research

IDM proposes a series of analytical steps that can be utilised to increase the rigour of the analysis, including: epistemological integrity; representational credibility; analytic logic and interpretive authority (Thorne et al., 2004). Epistemological integrity was considered by ensuring coherence between onto-epistemological assumptions and the strategies and techniques employed. For instance, the investigators in this study exposed their positionality, providing a rationale for all their analytical decisions. Representational credibility was ensured due to the investigators' efforts to connect with participants and their stories, empathising with their feelings, thoughts, experiences and worldviews.

For instance, the research team made efforts to establish rapport and engage with participants in a sincere and transparent manner, letting them know their motivations to conduct this study. Analytic logic and interpretive authority were considered through the use of critical friends. These critical friends were members of the research team who challenged the first and second authors' understandings and perspectives towards the dataset. Specifically, they provided critical thinking that helped the research team look beyond simplistic and normative ways of rationalising, helping identify alternative perspectives towards the analysis and instigating reflections concerning the relationships between the participants' stories and the socio-cultural context at stake.

Results

The status quo in women's futsal: the lack of equitable opportunities

This theme describes participants' perceptions concerning how women's futsal is undervalued by decision makers, as well as lacking necessary support from organisations, particularly sport administrators that hold privileged positions to create equitable sport environments. Hence, *equality* of opportunities emerged as the gold standard for women's futsal in Portugal, which served to minimise the existent gaps between opportunities provided to male athletes and teams, compared to those provided in women's futsal. Interestingly, equality was positioned as a resource to ensure equity. Thus, policies and strategies focused on equality seemed to reassure and motivate coaches and female athletes as they face the complex and challenging plateau of women's futsal in Portugal.

The competitive format as a pacifier

One of the main normative changes that has been implemented by decisions makers in women's futsal in Portugal to foster equity, concerns the competitive format. Normative changes refer to changes that tend to follow male-oriented standards and expectations. Similar to men's futsal, since the competitive season 2021/2022, teams are challenged to compete amongst themselves (i.e., teams from all regions across the country) and later engage in a play-off to determine the winner. Participants viewed this normative change in competitive format as inherently positive:

In the past there were two phases. The first phase included a group with only teams from the north [of the country] and another phase only with teams from the south. Previously, teams already knew who were the four teams that were going to get through [from the north and the south] to the second phase. Now, teams are practicing better and are stronger (Coach José)

Female athletes echoed this sentiment and alluded to how the competitive format was positive for performance development:

Before, there wasn't even a national championship. We competed at the district level, and then the champion of each district would go on to a semi-final or quarterfinals, semi-final, and final of the national cup. That's how the national champion was determined. In other words, there wasn't really a national level competition. From the moment you have a national championship, the best teams will all be together, and if you want to stay there,

you must work very hard. It's also more attractive for coaches, and teams end up investing more because the visibility is different, and all of this helps the growth of the sport. (Athlete Manuela).

Although both coaches and female athletes considered this to be an effective strategy to foster equity, making the competitive format equal to the men's national championship only served the purpose of ensuring equality. Therefore, participants understood equality as equity promotion, which helps explain why changes in the competitive format were considered meaningful and capable of disrupting the status quo in women's futsal. This finding reveals an important nuance: while the replication of the men's competitive model was seen as progress, it reflects a logic of formal equality—offering the same structure to both genders—without necessarily addressing the historical, structural, and resource-based inequalities that characterise women's futsal. The acceptance of this normative change as equity-oriented suggests that, for many participants, equality and equity become nearly interchangeable categories. In this context, adopting the same competitive model as the men's league is viewed, not only as fair, but as essential for legitimising and valuing the women's game. This perspective reflects a broader desire for recognition and inclusion, particularly in light of the sport's history of invisibility and marginalisation. However, it is also crucial to reflect on the limitations of this approach. Simply adopting similar structures does not guarantee equitable conditions for participation, development, and/or visibility. Without parallel actions that consider the specific challenges faced by women's futsal, equality may, in fact, preserve or even deepen existing disparities.

The environment as the trigger to acknowledge inequities

Participants were able to identify various inequities that permeated women's futsal in Portugal. These inequities were associated with formal competitive structures and sport organisations' efforts to offer programming for female athletes. Specifically, they referred to the lack of appropriate conditions for practice (e.g., lack of appropriate practice spaces and time to practice) and the fact there were no national championships for certain age groups at the youth level, which could foster performance development. Furthermore, participants indicated that certain competitive games at the youth level lacked the necessary formal structure (e.g., the clock is not stopped whenever the ball is not in play) and subsequently competitiveness. The absence of formal rules at the youth level served as a way to discriminate female athletes when comparing to their male counterparts. One coach alluded to the need to minimise gender inequities:

Most regional championships did not have the demands they do now. Not all associations organised senior games where the clock is stopped whenever the ball is not in play. To take such big steps now [changes in competitive formats and structure] ... not all teams are ready for the pain the game will provoke, not just physically but even more mentally (Coach José).

Indeed, participants alluded to the need for increased practice time (i.e., most teams only practice twice per week) and appropriate practice spaces that did not have a high risk of injury (e.g., practice spaces with water infiltrations; inappropriate

temperature; and even holes in the floor from the lack of appropriate maintenance). Without appropriate practice conditions, teams and female athletes were unprepared to perform well as highlighted by coach José. Surprisingly, many coaches and female athletes accepted these conventions and still participated in competitive events. Such a normalisation process was deemed as the only viable solution if coaches and female athletes wanted to have possibilities to connect with the sport of futsal at the high-performance level.

Moreover, female athletes reported how they entered senior teams at 13/14 years old and had to play with, and compete against, other female athletes aged 30/35 years. This competitive environment created an age gap, which reinforced the fact that female athletes needed to become subservient to the demands and conventions of decision makers if they wanted to have a chance to compete in futsal:

I started playing seven-a-side football at the club when I was 9 years old. I was the only girl at the time, playing with the boys. And it went on like this from ages 9 to 12, as mixed-gender teams were only allowed until the end of the infant category. After that, it had to be all-girls teams. And it was precisely at age 12 that I joined futsal. I started at Club A, which is in a neighboring municipality. And from 12 to 13 years old, when I started playing, I immediately began as a senior. So, at 12 years old, I was playing with women who were 30, 35 (Athlete Madeira)

and

I am 28 years old and have been a federated futsal athlete since I was 13, playing in the senior category. I started at [omitted to ensure anonymity] in the senior women's futsal team; at that time, there was no youth development program (Athlete Raquel)

Based on previous notions, another component of the status quo in women's futsal in Portugal refers to the lack of time per week for high-performance teams to practice. Most teams practise 2 to 3 times per week at night, after working hours (i.e., between 8.30 pm and 11.30 pm). However, there are youth level male teams who practise more times per week and earlier in the day. Two coaches acknowledged how the lack of time to practise hindered athlete development and created evident gender inequities:

We practice twice per week... When you practice twice per week with very few logistical conditions because we do not have our own sports hall...as good as the athletes can be, as good you are as a coach...the time to practice takes a toll. (Coach Fernando)

and

It seems almost a miracle, right? To do what we do with 2 or 3 practices...it would be great if we could have 4, 5 practices per week... (Coach Júlia)

Hence, practice hours created numerous challenges for female athletes to perform within high-performance context. Specifically, female athletes seemed to be in a highly professional and demanding environment, but with few supportive conditions to perform and develop: 'in our team we do not have any professional athletes. We have athletes that must drive 80/90 kilometers to practice. As the week progresses, they become tired from the workload plus the travelling, and it shows' (Coach José). Hence, female athletes' workload and training demands were understandably perceived to be linked with high levels of fatigue:

We trained three times a week, two hours each time, and it got to a point where we were exhausted. By the middle of the season, muscle injuries started to appear. So, it became a thing where if we won, we didn't train on Monday. Towards the middle/end of the season, this happened a few times, where our reward for winning was not having to train because we were so exhausted. (Athlete Raquel)

The lack of practice time can have an impact on how coaches prepare their teams to play and structure practice. Thus, coaches tended to focus their concerns on opposition performance characteristics, particularly on how they could develop the best strategy to take advantage of other teams' weaknesses: 'Studying the opponents counts a lot. With three practices if I can do something different in the next game... studying the opponent, how they defend, attack and setting a plan...' (Coach Júlia) and 'There are coaches that have been here too long and that do not have an idea for the team...' (Coach André). Coaches did not have a clear idea about how to set up a team developmental model that included intentions towards how the team should attack, defend and play, independently of opposition characteristics. Subsequently, female athletes were not aware of coaches' ideas and expectations for the team. When questioned about the team's developmental model they tended to respond that the game is played with a strong will and teamwork, which reflects a lack of tactical understanding. One athlete elaborated on this: 'I think [the team's developmental model] depends on how the game goes...' (Athlete Magda). Another athlete mentioned that:

I think our greatest strength as a team was the fact that we were extremely united. Extremely united. We have a very cohesive group; I usually say it's a close-knit group. And I think that's our greatest strength. In terms of the game, I think we are a team with a lot of spirit. With a lot of spirit. Very determined. (Athlete Madeira)

The numerous inequities cited by participants had evident impacts on female athletes' ability to perform and develop, become professionals, as well as on their overall health, fitness and self-worth.

Future pathways for women's futsal in Portugal: current (im)possibilities a multidisciplinary team: solving immediate challenges

Based on the current status quo in women's futsal in Portugal, participants indicated the importance of having a multidisciplinary support team that could help mediate current challenges such as fostering performance development. Participants also alluded to the relevance of athlete professionalisation in women's futsal in Portugal. Beyond a professionalised climate with high demands, coaches and female athletes highlighted the need to create professional career pathways and adequate conditions. Coach Júlia seemed to be overwhelmed with the numerous tasks at stake: 'I was the driver, the one who takes care of the players' equipment, the psychologist...' This scenario reflects how limited resources and structural shortcomings force coaches and female athletes to assume roles beyond their professional scope, undermining their ability to focus solely on performance and development. Moreover, Coach Fernando stated how athlete and team professionalisation could help organisations include multidisciplinary teams to support coaches and female athletes:

We talk about athlete professionalisation, but team professionalization is also paramount. I can talk about my own case. As soon as I start a full-time job that includes 40 hours per week, my availability to think and prepare practice is not the same. In other words, I must put much more effort to sustain a quality practice...

Despite recognising the feasibility and necessity of multidisciplinary teams and professionalisation, participants' discourses revealed a disconnect between these aspirations and the priorities of sport administrators. Gender inequities in women's futsal were not widely perceived as urgent concerns warranting immediate action and/or resource allocation by those in power. This is critical given that many sport organisations, especially their administrative leadership, possess the financial capacity to implement such structural changes, but often choose to allocate funds elsewhere. Coach José expressed this dilemma, stating: 'It is necessary to create conditions, but we face financial issues that have been the main obstacle'. Similarly, Coach Júlia pointed to a lack of institutional value attributed to women's futsal:

I will give you an example. Is it possible to pay a physiologist? Yes! If you ask any president from a national sport organisation, many of them can pay...Now, what happens is that they [sport administrators] give no value [to women's futsal] (Coach Júlia)

These findings reflect how sport organisations hold power positions and privilege that can make women's futsal in Portugal a more equitable space. Nonetheless, sport administrators have yet to use their power positions and privilege to create additional possibilities for athlete development, which is a cause for concern. A culture where female athletes have limited possibilities to partake in what is recognised as a high-performance sport creates an oppressive environment where female athletes and coaches are pressured to perform under inappropriate conditions. Such systemic issues neglect not only hinder athletic development, but also perpetuates gender inequities, signalling an urgent need for institutional accountability and strategic investment targeted at elevating women's futsal to a truly professional and equitable standard.

The trials and tribulations of an athlete-centered approach

Participants acknowledged the need to move beyond coach-centered approaches that are less time-consuming, which recurrently turn female athletes into 'pawns' in coaches' plans. Furthermore, coaches justified the use of coach-centered approaches as a way to manage the gaps and limitations of youth sport programs, as well as the impacts of gender inequities throughout athletes' developmental processes. Also, coaches alluded to how practice time influenced how they could create new roles and responsibilities for female athletes as learners:

Before it was like a joystick [to play a videogame] athletes do this and that...Today, I speak for myself, I practice with the focus on the athletes and their decisions. Now can you do this in 2 or 3 practices? It is something I cannot do... (Coach Júlia).

Female athletes recognised how they were passive recipients in the coaching process, feeling like 'pawns' for coaches to use: 'The coach explain the activity in a board... sets what he wants us to do, how we should position ourselves, the way

we play...’ (Athlete Raquel) and ‘They [coaches] give us “the food ready to eat”. They do not explain the purpose...’ (Athlete Manuela).

Nonetheless, female athletes alluded to the need for an athlete-centered approach. The same athlete cited above reinforced the need to develop different approaches towards athlete development that could help emancipate female athletes:

They [coaches] must teach. Give us tools so we can understand the game, what is happening...The major success for a coach is not to have the team playing like A, B or C. It is to change how we think. (Athlete Manuela)

Despite the fact that coaches recognised how female athletes were victims of numerous gender inequities throughout their developmental pathways, they used this as the rationale for employing coach-centered approaches. Based on participants’ perspectives, coach-centered approaches reduced female athletes to passive learners unable (not unwilling) to take an active role in the learning process. Following the rationale laid out by coaches, coach-centered approaches can become a part of a vicious cycle that continuously oppresses female athletes for years to come. In other words, if female athletes are not positioned as active learners in high-performance sport contexts they may continue to take a passive role in their learning process. Looking at female athletes as passive learners can impact their interactions with their peers, motivation, ability to endure the challenges, as well as performance development. Moreover, such an approach towards coaching female athletes can also reinforce perverse beliefs that position women as incomplete, unable and/or unworthy of performing certain tasks and achieving certain objectives, which is a cause for concern. Therefore, these findings highlight the need for coaches to take risks, consider female athletes’ actual needs and wants, as well as break this vicious cycle.

Summary of findings

This study exposed a series of structural and cultural constraints that reinforce gender inequities within women’s futsal in Portugal, despite recent normative changes intended to promote equity. The key findings of the study can be summarised as follows:

- **equality framed as equity**, the replication of the men’s competitive format was perceived as a positive step, though it mostly addressed equality in structure rather than equity in conditions;
- **inadequate training conditions**, female athletes faced poor practice environments, including limited training hours, substandard facilities, and safety risks, which were normalised as part of participating in high-performance futsal;
- **underdeveloped youth pathways**, a lack of structured developmental programs and early competitive opportunities led to late specialisation and uneven transitions into senior-level play;
- **absence of professionalisation**, despite high demands, female athletes and coaches operated under non-professional conditions, with limited institutional support and no multidisciplinary teams to support their work.

- **systemic undervaluing by sport administrators**, participants noted that while resources exist, decision makers consistently deprioritized investment in women's futsal, reflecting broader gender biases;
- **coach-centered learning environments**, coaching practices were predominantly directive and content-driven, limiting female athletes' agency and reinforcing the notion that they are passive learners.

Together, these findings paint a picture of a sport system that maintains the appearance of progress while continuing to operate under deeply gendered norms and practices. True equity, as suggested by participants, requires not just structural reforms, but also a shift in culture—one that values the experiences, voices, and developmental needs of female athletes and coaches in meaningful ways.

Discussion

The present study sought out to explore Portuguese coaches and female athletes' perspectives towards the status quo in women's futsal. Hopefully, these findings can inspire more research to be conducted within this line of inquiry, as well as additional efforts to be deployed by policymakers and scholars across diverse socio-cultural contexts towards equality and equity promotion.

Findings showed that changes in the competitive format were deemed inherently positive due to an increase in competitiveness amongst teams. Indeed, following male-oriented standards and expectations was considered to be a way to foster equity. However, a recent study conducted within women's futsal in Portugal pointed to the fact that there has actually been a decrease in competitiveness amongst teams (Santos et al., 2024b). The study conducted by Santos et al. (2024b) emphasised how changing the competitive format is not enough to push the dial towards the development of equitable sport environments. Other researchers have highlighted how the development of equitable sport environments may require an athlete-centered approach that acknowledges the intersection between the affordances provided, the emergent social and cultural constraints, as well as female athletes' specific needs (Woods et al., 2020a). Considering that many female athletes in Portugal enter the youth sport landscape only at adolescence and have experienced significantly less training and practice by the age of 18 years compared to their male counterparts, it is reasonable to assume that participants may see equality as equity promotion. Moreover, developing coaches and female athletes' awareness of the current status quo in women's futsal and the need to envisioning alternatives to foster equity promotion can help create the necessary critical mass moving forward.

The early integration of adolescent girls into adult women's teams, often due to the lack of structured youth pathways, raises critical questions about athlete development and wellbeing. While such arrangements may offer access to higher levels of competition, they also expose young players—sometimes as young as 12 or 13 years of age—to physical, psychological, and social challenges that they may not be developmentally prepared for. Drummond et al. (2021) emphasise that sport systems should prioritise age-appropriate environments that foster belonging, confidence, and skill development, particularly for girls who already face higher dropout rates due to

sociocultural barriers and structural inequities. The absence of youth-level options can thus reinforce gendered vulnerabilities by forcing girls into competitive spaces dominated by older and more physically mature athletes. This mismatch may compromise their performance, confidence, and long-term retention in sport. As such, tailored pathways that provide gradual transitions and peer-appropriate competition are not just beneficial—they are essential for equitable sport development.

By neglecting the existence of multiple historical, political, cultural and social constraints that impact female athlete development can contribute to maintaining the status quo, disguised by the hope of more and better developmental opportunities. Hence, using male standards to legitimise and sell women's futsal in Portugal and women's sport, more generally, may become a double-edge sword that only benefits some female athletes on the short-term. In other words, female athletes who lack the necessary critical consciousness to reflect on the perversity of following men's standards may find changes in competitive formats highly relevant for an equity promotion agenda. However, it is important to bear in mind how such change may also serve to neglect the fact that women in sport are still treated as 'honorary males' and face oppression as we write this paper (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023; Spaaij et al., 2015).

Based on previous notions, participants were also able to identify numerous gender inequities that permeate women's futsal. Indeed, coaches highlighted the lack of value provided to women's futsal in Portugal. The lack of appropriate conditions for teams to perform well reflects how policymakers and sport administrators view, postulate and position women's futsal. Ultimately, the (lack of) value provided to female athletes' experiences necessarily limits future pathways for the sport (see Richard et al., 2023). Recent policies have attempted to increase women's participation numbers that can serve to fulfil a public health mandate and attain profit for sport organisations (Bekker et al., 2023; Bevan et al., 2021). Nonetheless, increasing women's participation numbers may be considered insufficient to overcome decades of discrimination, oppression and ultimately evident inequities that have contributed to the prevalent idea that sport is a male-centered arena (Carlsson, 2017; Comley, 2016). The configuration of sports practice and competitive events can provide strong messages for young female athletes and society in general (Eime et al., 2022). This is why providing the necessary structure for female athletes to compete and practice is pivotal as a minimum standard for equity promotion. Appropriate conditions for female athletes to compete and practice can then influence competitiveness, as well as create broader, exciting pathways for the game of futsal to grow and reach those who wish to become active in this context.

These findings emphasise how female athletes seem to be pushed towards enduring what it takes to compete, including practising at night and on very few occasions per week. This is also a reality for female national team players who compete in different sociocultural contexts (Martins et al., 2018). It is important to acknowledge that practising 2 or 3 times per week may not even be sufficient to meet current guidelines for the World Health Organisation concerning physical activity (Bull et al., 2020). Moreover, such a training volume may be deemed clearly inappropriate for sustaining high-performance levels in sport and may instigate unjust comparisons between the performance of male and female teams (Calleja-Gonzalez et al., 2020). It should be noted that male, high-performance futsal teams in Portugal practise four

times per week, which in this case creates the necessary foundation to foster performance development. Therefore, a question may be posed: why do female futsal teams have such limited opportunities to practice? It is reasonable to assume that many teams face constraints because they do not own the spaces where they practice. However, in many other cases there are organisational priorities where more attention is given first to male youth level teams and men's teams, before finally considering female teams. For example, one coach trained one of most representative teams in Portugal that has substantial funds available, as well as their own infrastructures to practice. Nonetheless, this team still only train 2 or 3 times per week, which creates concerning inequities that have been described in past literature (Fatia et al., 2023; Till et al., 2022). This reality showcases how sport administrators have yet to prioritise female athletes' needs and truly invest in women's futsal in a way that is equitable and just.

Overall, these findings suggest that coaches have low expectations for performance development and try to manage the best they can. However, female athletes' understandings about the game and coaches' expectations suggest evident incongruencies not expected in high-performance contexts, which is a cause for concern. How can we expect more equitable opportunities for female athletes when coaches seem to devalue their own practice and refuse their responsibility to create a team developmental model? The answer to this question is paramount to enrich practice environments (Davids et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2020a). Past literature has highlighted the need for coaches to intentionally influence how their teams play, as well as envision the connection between the game to be played and practice environments as deeply connected (Davids et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2020b).

If high-performance sport is to become an equitable environment that does not perpetuate a gendered culture, more efforts may need to be deployed towards female athletes and team professionalisation as a right, instead of an impossibility thus far. Past research has focused on increasing effort towards envisioning professionalisation pathways for teams, coaches and female athletes, as well as further understanding the processes and mechanisms needed to achieve this (O'Brien et al., 2023). However, practitioners and researchers may need to be aware that athlete, coach and team professionalisation may not be enough to disrupt the status quo in women's futsal in Portugal and move the dial towards gender equity (Garcia & Croceta, 2022). To foster equity, female athletes and coaches may need to increase awareness about the inequities and injustices that permeate the futsal performance system and take critical action (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023). Surprisingly, coaches and female athletes involved in the present study, despite acknowledging multiple cases of oppression and discrimination, still conformed to the status quo and accepted to participate in high-performance sport under these conditions. More literacy on what should be accepted, tolerated and, ultimately, women's rights in high performance sport can help create more equitable environments, as well as create boundaries concerning what is just and ethical in contemporary society (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023).

These findings emphasise the impact of the status quo on coaching, particularly how the hypermasculine culture prevalent in the Portuguese futsal context permeates coaching practice. Specifically, female athletes were positioned as passive recipients

that should reproduce behaviours and perform according to coaches' intentions. Moreover, female athletes have been perceived as always in deficit (i.e., not fully capable), as well as lacking the necessary competencies to understand the game of futsal and make appropriate decisions in complex situations. Consequently, participants deemed the dominant approach to be focused on coaches and contents instead of female athletes and their environments. Previous studies have recognised the limitations of creating contexts that induce female athletes to reproduce techniques and become passive learners. These limitations include a lack of tactical awareness, motivation and meaningful engagement in sport practice (Woods et al., 2020a; Woods et al., 2020b; Woods et al., 2023). On this notion, coach-centered approaches disregard individual-environment relationships as skills that are 'practiced in a decontextualized manner in isolated, unopposed practice based around the reproduction of a putative gold-standard movement template' (Woods et al., 2020b, p. 13).

Moving forward, conceptualizations of athlete development may need to be reimagined to position female athletes as fully capable, respecting their rights and possibilities to find novel ways to experience, play and connect with futsal. A disregard for this approach by coaches may represent a highly intricate and complex reality influenced by many historical, social, political and cultural variables. It should be noted that current coaching practices are a representation of beliefs and values in contemporary society (Harmon, 2020). Current conventions towards coaching female athletes derive from the agency of socio-cultural and historical variables such as (a) a history of oppression against women as Portugal is a young democracy (before 1975 women had limited rights and predefined roles); (b) the recent emancipation of women in society and sport; and (c) the fact Portugal is still a highly conservative society with traditional values. Therefore, it is important to draw attention to the need to provide pathways for athlete-centered coaching approaches to emerge through caring and inclusive coaching practices. Thus, there are necessarily power relations at play when women enter male-dominated spaces such as futsal and coaching (Eime et al., 2022). Moreover, coach education and coach learning are also largely influenced by male perspectives, experiences and views, which helps maintain unwarranted conceptions towards athlete development in women's sport (Guimarães et al., 2023). Indeed, coach education and appropriately trained coach developers can play a pivotal role in helping coaches understand the status quo and the effects of existent inequities. This can help coaches develop efforts towards deploying more just coaching practices (see Pavlidis et al., 2025).

Practical implications

The lack of appropriate structures, the indifference of decision makers and the various forms of oppression reported in high-performance women's futsal indicate an urgent need to provide meaningful practice environments. Thus, it may be necessary to ensure that female athletes, coaches and staff members can (not *should* or *have to*) become full-time professionals with their set of rights, not just obligations. Such a possibility may lead to an improvement in teams' competitiveness, an increase in the sport's popularity, as well as achieving greater social recognition and capital. Changes can be prompted by policymakers and sport administrators who, until now, have

chosen to maintain the status quo and exert their control over the sport. The main findings of this study have the potential to raise the necessary awareness that can encourage critical action and a greater political will to create the possibility of professionalisation in women's futsal. Moreover, due to the limited practice opportunities, female athletes remain silent and accept any conditions provided in training and competition. These conditions can lead to the normalisation of inequities throughout the athlete developmental process.

To challenge the status quo in Portugal and across socio-cultural contexts that face similar challenges, it may be necessary to promote developmental programs committed to fostering increases in critical consciousness amongst all sport decision makers, including female athletes, coaches and sport administrators. Critical consciousness can be a resource to identify inequities and challenge them. In light of this proposal, we argue that equity should not be evaluated solely by the number of participants involved in a sport and/or equality of standards between men and women (i.e., distorting what equity stands for). Conversely, we suggest careful consideration of the quality of athlete experiences and coaching practices. Important indicators to assess women's sport may include the (a) quality of sport facilities; (b) whether athlete, coaches and other staff members have the possibility to become full-time professionals; (c) the development of relationships that provide a safe environment for female athletes to stand against oppression; (d) contextualised coach education programs that align with female athletes' needs.

Conclusions

The present study is an initial attempt to provide a contribution to this line of inquiry. However, there are several limitations and future directions that need to be acknowledged. The current study could have included coaches and female athletes from the same team, which could have provided a more in-depth understanding of the status quo across diverse sport organisations (i.e., through a case study approach). Future studies can attempt to include clusters of coaches and female athletes, and devise efforts to explore gender inequities in women's futsal through longitudinal, ethnographic, or mixed-method designs. Moreover, the present study only included a sample of coaches who were mainly male, while female coaches were underrepresented. Although this distribution reflects the gender gap in high-performance futsal, more efforts could have been deployed to include the voices of female coaches across diverse settings. Moving forward, studies may attempt to include and consider the perspectives of female coaches across a range of coaching contexts. A comparative analysis between diverse coaching contexts (e.g., participation, high-performance) could offer valuable insights into structural and cultural differences concerning gender equity. Also, there is the need for future research to attempt to include policymakers and sport administrators, as well as consider their perspectives and practices towards equity promotion across contexts.

Hopefully, this study can potentially prompt new possibilities for developing research on women's futsal. Given the complexity of the issues at stake, we suggest that female athletes, researchers, sport administrators and coaches could work together to explore novel and more just pathways for development in women's futsal.

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Data availability statement

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

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