



## Exploring women's engagement in leisure sport participation: the influence of serious leisure in Basque pelota

Uxue Fernandez-Lasa <sup>a</sup>, Miss Olaia Eizagirre-Sagastibeltza<sup>a</sup>, Sheila Romero Da Cruz<sup>b</sup> and Oidui Usabiaga Arruabarrena <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Physical and Sport Education, Faculty of Education and Sport, University of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain; <sup>b</sup>GaituzSport Foundation, Bilbao, Spain

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyse the meanings that underlie women's participation in and commitment to leisure-time sport related to Basque pelota. Thirty-eight women between 22 and 60 years old participated in this ethnographic study, which conducted 21 semi-structured interviews. The theoretical framework used for the analysis was informed by a feminist approach and the Serious Leisure Perspective. A hybrid approach, deductive-inductive coding was employed. The data analysis revealed that recreational and competitive female athletes had different levels of engagement and attributed different meanings to their sport practice depending on their form of participation, their commitment, and the lifestyle built around it. It is concluded that the seriousness with which the activities are carried out influences the sport involvement of female Basque pelota players, which should be taken into account to adapt the activities and make an offer related to the characteristics of each pelotari type's context.

### KEYWORDS

Recreation; women; sport; serious leisure perspective

## Leisure-time sport participation by women: experiences and meanings

A small number of Basque women dedicate much of their leisure time to Basque pelota, an eminently masculine traditional sport, making it a central activity in their lives. The aim of this article was to explore the participation and involvement of adult women in Basque pelota, in its two fields of action (recreational sport and competitive sport), analyzing the meanings that underlie women's participation in and commitment to leisure-time sport related to Basque pelota. Using a feminist perspective and a qualitative approach, based on a deep analysis of the experiences of female pelotaris, different profiles were found in relation to the Serious Leisure Perspective Involvement Scale proposed by Stebbins (2012) and Hartel (2014),

Physical activity and sport are beneficial for mental health in both its psychosocial and affective aspects (World Health Organization 2020). Participation in recreational sports is considered a way to improve the overall quality of life (Anaza and McDowell 2013). It has also been found that community participation in sport activities improves the physical

**CONTACT** Uxue Fernandez-Lasa  uxue.fernandez@ehu.eus  Department of Physical and Sport Education, Faculty of Education and Sport, University of the Basque Country, Lasarteko atea, 71, Vitoria-Gasteiz, 01007 Spain

health of women (Leipert et al. 2011), and that shared leisure experiences can promote closeness and social support (Mair 2009). Several studies have noted that group participation can facilitate women's persistence in recreational activities and thus affect social relations (Wood and Danylchuk 2011, 2012). However, there are personal, community-specific, and environmental barriers to women being fulfilled in leisure (Bruner and Chad 2013), including difficulties with time organization, health problems, fatigue, lack of motivation, and lack of confidence (Kowal and Fortier 2007; Thompson, Vamos, and Daley 2017). Despite this, sport could increase and promote personal change in women and could promote strategies for their empowerment (Deem and Gilroy 1998); in fact, one of the main objectives of leisure is to promote this empowerment (Freysinger et al. 2013).

It is necessary to analyse the specific characteristics of sport programmes aimed at women in their leisure time. This should be conducive to reducing barriers, to meet women's interests and preferences, and ultimately, improving the sport level of women in their leisure time (Bruner and Chad 2013). Along these lines, it has been recommended to use empowerment strategies such as offering 'women only', community or intergenerational programmes, and to regularly organize activities throughout the year (Fernandez-Lasa and Usabiaga 2019; Fleury and Lee 2006). Recreational groups can be especially beneficial for middle-aged and older women (40–60 years old), as they can help negotiate or resist social disadvantages related to their gender role and age (Green 1998; Kay 2000). This improvement in sport levels would help to obtain beneficial health outcomes for both the participating women and other members of their family, in particular their children, by promoting an active lifestyle (Bruner and Chad 2013).

Emphasis has also been made on the need to promote an approach centred on participants rather than on activities, in order to ensure that programmes can be more effective to achieve continuous and sustainable participation (Rich et al. 2019). Despite the obstacles that constantly hinder women's participation in leisure time sport, which could lead them to stop their practice, not all participants abandon their preferred activity; some sought strategies to deal with and overcome these difficulties (Anaza and McDowell 2013). Some women engage in recreational sport activities in their free time due to the fact that these activities give them a sense of purpose to become active, escape their daily routine, and improve their overall quality of life (Anaza and McDowell 2013).

When analyzing the experiences of women from a feminist perspective, Bartram (2001) concluded that the trajectories of women in leisure sports vary substantially. The experiences of whitewater kayakers collected by this author showed that sport activities can become an important part of sports women's lives. They often become wholeheartedly involved in these rewarding activities, despite the cost of practicing these hobbies, which become somewhat of a 'career'. However, Bartram (2001) also identified experiences in which involvement decreased and was relatively short-lived, where practice did not require such strong skills and abilities. Thus, situations can be found in which the same activity results in multiple experiences for athletes, according to the different factors associated with diversity, such as age, social class, athletic ability, and gender (Bartram 2001).

The participation of women in leisure activities that either involve major resources or require strong involvement are based on traditional gender power relations (Dilley and

Scrutton 2010; Olive, McCuaig, and Phillips 2015). Therefore, constant negotiation and commitment is needed for women to be able to participate in demanding leisure activities (Dashper, Abbott, and Wallace 2020). There are contexts where the meaning attributed to the sport in question has been related to serious leisure, as proposed by Stebbins (1992). Thus, for example, in the study by Codina, Pestana, and Stebbins (2020) on fitness, this practice was described as serious leisure for some participants who devoted a lot of time to it, acquiring a central role and being highly rewarding for those study participants, given them a sense of achievement, the contact with others, the improvement of health and the time spent outdoors with the family, among other characteristics.

Many studies have relied on Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) to analyse different aspects of sport practices, such as running (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2020; Ronkainen et al. 2018), surfing (Beaumont and Brown 2015; Portugal et al. 2017), or federated amateur practices in general (Kim et al. 2016; Iraurgi et al. 2021). There have also been studies that focused on traditional sports (Apostle 1992; Liu, Bradley, and Burk 2016) and on women (Heuser 2005; Rahikainen 2020). For example, Bartram's (2001) paper showed that female whitewater kayakers experienced different developmental stages during their careers: beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline or abandonment. This is why it is highly relevant to analyse sport practices using the theory of serious leisure (Romero and Madariaga 2018).

However, not every athlete reaches the same level of involvement. The meanings developed and the seriousness attributed to their activity are defined by a different distribution of time (Hartel 2014), and their commitment to and level of involvement in that activity. Sport can also be practiced on a less regular basis and may not meet the characteristics of serious leisure, which points to its counterpart, casual leisure (Stebbins 2004).

The authors of this paper have not found any previous research on women's experiences and meanings attributed to competitive and recreational sport participation in connection with participants' commitment to serious leisure beyond the typical Western sport contexts, such as the unique cultural heritage attached to Basque pelota. That is the reason why a qualitative study of women's participation in Basque pelota was conducted, which is worthwhile because there is limited academic engagement with women's leisure time sport experiences in this traditional masculine domain, in a specific society where despite some improvements gender inequalities against women still exist in the Basque Country (González 2013). Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyse the different meanings that underlie women's participation in and commitment to leisure-time sport related to Basque pelota and Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP).

### **Context: Basque pelota**

This study focuses on a traditional sport that is very popular in the Basque Country (an area located in the north-east Spain and south of France) called Basque pelota. It was customarily played exclusively by men because it ranks among those sports that for many years were regarded as inappropriate for women (González 2012, 2013). Even though women may become pelota club members, only 7.04% of all affiliated athletes are women (Department of Youth and Sports of the Basque Government 2017). Historically, gender relations were a barrier for female pelota players to play this sport, due to male domination and discrimination (Fernandez-Lasa, Usabiaga Arruabarrena, and Soler Prat

2020). Nevertheless, in the 1990s Basque pelota associations opened the courts for women to play the sport as a leisure activity. Furthermore, in 2005 the Gipuzkoan Federation of Basque Pelota (GFBP) launched a programme called Emakumea Pilotari (female Basque pelota player) to encourage women to play pelota as part of a social, political, and legislative initiative to foster equality in sport. This programme was designed and implemented in light of the sharp decline in the number of licenses issued to the women who had begun playing in the 1990s, as approximately half of them had stopped their practice within ten years for various reasons, including injuries, motherhood, or changing preferences. The programme promoted three areas: school, recreational and competitive sport. This study focuses on the recreational and competitive modalities. Thanks to this initiative, which was broadly welcomed, female participation considerably increased in every area and satisfied the needs of those women who wanted to become Basque pelota players (Fernandez-Lasa and Usabiaga 2019).

### **Theoretical framework: feminist approach and Serious Leisure Perspective**

This study is framed within a feminist approach. As Scraton and Flintoff (2013) suggested, different feminist perspectives overlap and are complementary. This article uses a feminist approach to understand the leisure activities performed by women and the multiple experiences they have in relation to sport. More specifically, the theoretical perspective adopted here focuses on feminisms about women's leisure time (Merelas and Caballo 2018). The role of women in leisure was invisible until the gender perspective was introduced in the 1980s and 1990s (Scraton 1994). It is difficult to address the complexity of gender perspective in leisure studies based on the definition of leisure, since gender roles must be analyzed to analyse women's leisure (Henderson 1990). This study starts from the premise that leisure time is influenced by a patriarchal social structure, where inequalities based on gendered power relation force women to assume roles separate from their individual identity, which are related to caregiving work and family responsibilities (Henderson and Shaw 2006; Merelas and Caballo 2018). Nevertheless, even though leisure contexts are conducive to women being oppressed, they can also provide an opportunity for women's resistance and empowerment (Henderson and Dialeschki 1991; Shaw 2001). This feminist approach incorporates the existing diversity among women based on the different intersectional aspects that construct identities (Henderson and Shaw 2006). In this sense, the analysis of the situations and meanings attributed by women to their experiences in sport will pay special attention to the discrimination and opportunities within this area (Merelas and Caballo 2018).

#### ***Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP)***

Many studies have used serious leisure to address sports practice. This construct was developed in 1982 by the sociologist Stebbins (1992), whose theory was a starting point to promote research on the growing number of activities pursued by amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers.

Serious leisure is framed within the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP). Based on this conception, Stebbins created a theoretical framework that synthesized the three main

forms of leisure (serious leisure, casual leisure, and project-based leisure) and showed their distinctive features, similarities, and interrelationships (Stebbins 2007, 2008). According to this author, all current leisure activities can be framed within the SLP (Stebbins 2007, Elkington and Stebbins 2014).

Serious leisure explains that participants become so involved in and committed to their practice that they specialize, improve, reach a better understanding of it, and evolve as they go along. A special relationship is established between the person and the activity in serious leisure. Casual leisure can be considered the opposite of serious leisure, since it refers to activities that are rewarding on an immediate and short-term basis and require little or no specific training to be enjoyed (Stebbins 2000, 2007, 2008). Casual leisure can also be defined as any kind of leisure that cannot be classified as amateur or related to a hobby or a volunteering activity.

The continuum between serious leisure and casual leisure should be understood as a tool that helps to compare and describe the characteristics of leisure, and not only to facilitate comparison between different leisure practices (Shen and Yarnal 2010). Each person gives different meanings to their experience based on their perceptions, which constantly inform research on different leisure practices (Lin 2009). This transitory, relative, and complementary nature of the different forms of leisure leads to the need to consider not only the main types of leisure, but also the different degrees of seriousness within the same practice. Stebbins (2012) himself explained that when amateurs are highly dedicated to their practice, they can be referred to as devotees, and when they are moderately interested, they can be considered to be merely participants. The difference between them lies in the amount of time they spend on their practice. This explanation regarding persistence within the SLP has been empirically demonstrated by several authors (Brown 2007; Derom and Taks 2011; Shen and Yarnal 2010;). Based on all the previous literature on serious leisure, Hartel (2014) developed the Serious Leisure Perspective Involvement Scale to help researchers in the area to analyse how the different participants engaged in serious leisure over time. This Serious Leisure Perspective Involvement Scale comprises different stages across a continuum, named as follows:

- (a) Neophyte. This refers to a participant at the beginning of their serious leisure career, starts with amateur practice and sometimes may inspire a person to seek to become better at the activity in question (Stebbins 2008).
- (b) Participant. Serious leisure pursuits largely unfold 'within the framework of a leisure role and its accompanying career centred on the acquisition of skill, knowledge, or experience, or a combination of these three. Such a career requires no small amount of time to take root and grow' (Stebbins 2007, 79).
- (c) Moderate devotee. Devotees and participants are operationally distinguished primarily by the different amounts of time they commit to their hobby, as manifested in engaging in the core activity, training, or preparing for it.
- (d) Core devotee. A person who is more committed than a moderate devotee and more serious about their activity regarding various aspects (perseverance, effort, perceived benefits, relationships ...) (Siegenthaler and O'Dell 2003).
- (e) Devotee worker. An individual who originally develops their career within a serious leisure activity which can become a job later (Stebbins 2009).

## Methods

This article is part of a study approved by the Ethics of Teaching and Research Commission (CEID) of the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), focused on the experiences of women who play Basque pelota in recreational and competitive programmes, respectively. An ethnographic study was carried out by the first author of this manuscript with Basque female pelota players who participated in the recreational programme. Eighty-three training sessions of the complete training season were observed using participant observation, where 28 women between 22 and 60 years old participated. Eleven of these recreational participants were also interviewed using semi-structured interviews. In addition, 10 Basque pelota female players with federative license (aged between 22 and 45 years old) were interviewed using semi-structured interviews during the same period. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants (Sparks and Smith 2014). All the participants received information about the project and gave their consent to participate voluntarily. Each of the participants was assigned a pseudonym to keep their data anonymous. A flexible semi-structured interview guide (Guba and Lincoln 1994) was used, containing different questions about the main topics of the study.

The data analysis was carried out using a hybrid approach, as it was a combination of both deductive and inductive approaches (Sparks and Smith 2014). ATLAS.ti 6.2 software was used for the coding and categorization of the data (Friese, 2012). Data interpretation was made by the main researcher, using content analysis (Sparks and Smith 2014). The following main themes emerged from the data: form of sport participation, participants' commitment and lifestyle built around the sport activity.

Based on the criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), the data used here were rigorous and true because they were supported by a prolonged stay in the context of the study and by the triangulation of data collection techniques, settings, and informants. They were also verified with the researchers that produced the transcripts and reports throughout the research process.

## Results and discussion

Using the SLP and the continuum proposed by Stebbins (2012) and Hartel (2014), Basque pelota female players could be defined as being amateur athletes, situated half-way between serious leisure and casual leisure. In general terms, participants' reports led to the creation of two main profiles that could be assigned to this sample of players. One of them included competitive athletes (members of a sport federation), and the other consisted of recreational athletes. The main features for each group are presented below, based on the main themes that emerged from the interpretation of the data. These are consistent with aspects that influence the different degrees of seriousness (Stebbins 2008): form of sport participation, participants' commitment, and lifestyle built around the sport activity.

### ***Form of sport participation: player type, ability and people's gaze***

Federated sport is structured through official championships and matches scheduled during each season, which are held across different municipalities and are mainly

organized by sport clubs and federations. The principal objective of participants of this type in Basque pelota is usually to win the greatest number of matches and championships, focusing on their sport performance. In contrast, recreational courses organized for women are usually organized around school terms and are offered by the sport services of city councils jointly with the GBPF. These sessions do not include any games or championships for participants, who remain outside the competitive field. A study on community sports development initiatives aimed at women's leisure time concluded that the main objective is not performance and achievement of results (Rich et al. 2019), which is consistent with the findings obtained in this study. Gurutze, one of the participants, described it in the following terms:

I can't see myself doing pelota competitions. I think this is about doing exercise and having fun, so I see it as being separate from competition. [...] I don't know, competing is not important for me at the moment. I guess that, if it had been at a different time, perhaps at a different age, if I'd managed to get to a better level, it would have been different; but now that I'm nearly 50, I just have to take things differently. (Gurutze, recreational Basque pelota player)

In addition, the choice as to whether they want to play Basque pelota on a recreational or on a competitive basis is also related to their beginnings and their level of ability. Access to Basque pelota in childhood has other implications with respect to the results demand and improvement of sports skills, since the only existing option for participation at that stage was linked to the competitive context, being necessary to be skilled to progress on the field. In contrast, recreational players did not worry about their performance due to being part of a context where their purpose was not linked to winning in competition, they did not participate in championships, and they did not care whether they were skilled enough to play pelota. In this regard, As Hartel (2014) concluded in her study, the stage that participants approach to their sport practice is different depending on their life stages and influences their sport participation form. In line with Bush (2016), the women who were members of the federation began to play in their childhood, when it was not so common to practice this highly masculinized sport, as Falcous (2017) concluded studying road cyclists and serious leisure meanings. Therefore, they socialized with men and tended to display more aggressive playing styles and being skilful to survive in such a masculine domain (Fernandez-Lasa, Usabiaga Arruabarrena, and Soler Prat 2020) in a social context where gender relations were a barrier for female pelota players to play this sport. Their performance was linked to showing themselves to be better than their rivals and to achieving a successful career based on their skills. As reported by Eider:

When I started, I always played with boys. I played all day. I have always been quite a skilful girl; I was quite good compared to some people.  
(Eider, member of a Basque pelota federation, competitive player)

Similarly, the participants engaged with discourses related to ability or to 'being good at sport', which they reported as having influenced their decisions and their involvement in sport in general and in Basque pelota in particular. In this study, only few women saw themselves as competitive, especially among recreational players. A study by Clark (2012) on athletic ability and performance concluded that selection processes, emphasis on performance results, and ongoing expectations of athletic development were especially relevant to women's participation and sporting identities, an idea that was confirmed in this

study because of the fact that many recreational players thought they were not 'good' enough to compete based on their skills. In this line, it is worth underlining that recreational players learned to play or resumed their practice at a later stage, when they were adults, many of them after having children. This reality reaffirms that women in sport and recreation are often seen as 'women and mothers first' versus sportswomen due to traditional gender norms that suggest the primary role of women is motherhood (Henderson and Shaw 2006). Recreational participants had socialized directly with other women, their main aim was to build new relationships and to boost sisterhood and did not show as much aggressiveness in their game as competitive players, in line with the study by Bush (2016) and Stebbins (2012). The meanings they attributed to their practice were associated with the leisure nature of the activity or the pleasure of playing in a more recreational way, with no competitive edge. A clear example of the pleasure felt when playing is this statement made by Zuriñe:

I have always liked it and it is the best thing I have done in my mature years [...] I honestly believe that I am not competitive. I do it to have a good time. Well, sure, sometimes you get a bit pushy with yourself, you say 'I could have got that one', but I just play to have a good time. Besides, I love it ... well, I don't love it, but I am amazed by how competitive people are. I've always been a bit blasé, so I'm dumbfounded by this. (Zuriñe, recreational Basque pelota player)

In addition, the fear of being judged for their sporting skill had an impact on the athletes, who often looked for other women with whom they could 'do their thing' without being judged (Bush 2016), especially when they played recreationally. This situation was also identified in this study, where participants' attitudes and level of involvement were influenced by the gaze of people outside their activity, what other people would say, and how the players would be perceived by society in general. This was related to categorizing Basque pelota as a sport for men and how this view is deeply rooted in Basque society (González 2012). Nevertheless, recreational players had more doubts about other people's judgement and prejudices related to the suitability of pelota as a sport for female, some of them preferred to play indoors to escape the judgmental gaze of their compatriots, while the competitive women did not worry about others viewpoint and being outsiders, being this result in line with Fernandez-Lasa, Usabiaga Arruabarrena, and Soler Prat (2020) study.

### ***Participants' commitment: time management and sense of purpose***

Subgroups were formed within the players according to their level of commitment, as they were very different depending on the interests, reasons, and contexts involved (regarding both the activities and the practitioners) (Walseth 2006).

When time management was analyzed, it was found that the temporal organization of activities was different. Those women who belonged to a federation participated in the official championships that were usually organized on weekends and had to engage in two or three weekly training sessions to prepare for these competitions. In addition, these athletes had to travel to different courts all over the Basque Country to compete every weekend throughout the season. This continued engagement could be related to the stages of their leisure career as Hartel (2014) described and their sport career development as well, following the research conducted by Bartram (2001). In the previously

mentioned study, the author described different stages in the development of a sport career, as specifically mentioned in the introductory section of the article. Even though not all the female Basque pelota players interviewed went through each of these stages, most of the competitive participants showed a very strong level of commitment and dedicated a lot of time and effort to their sporting activity, giving this sport intense dedication, situating their Basque pelota experience in a larger social context.

In line with the results obtained by Bush (2016) in her study on female surfers, female pelota players also contributed a more social, complementary style, while identifying themselves as serious athletes who demonstrated their own athletic abilities, overcoming a lot of difficulties to enhance their skills and sport abilities. In addition, it could be concluded that in Basque pelota, relationships with other women also reinforced their identities and strategies to reduce the discrepancies between their representations and their self-concepts, thus using the sport activity for their own empowerment as in the study of Freysinger et al. (2013). Competitive pelota players did this because they were able to combine their sport with their professions and used it to cope with stress caused by the daily routine, illness or work difficulties, consistent with what was concluded in Bush's (2016) study of surfers.

Within the recreational modality, the weekly and annual time commitment was less significant, since there was only one practice session per week, and there was no need for players to adapt to the weekend competition calendar. The enjoyment of their practice was limited to the weekday when the course was taught.

Maybe because they haven't even proposed that to me ... if someone at some point asked me 'so, shall we play pelota?', I might go, I'm not saying I wouldn't, but this hasn't happened. I'd just put the material in my bag and see you next week. (Karmele, recreational pelota player)

The sessions were held in the same town or village where participants lived, so there was no need for them to travel. It was also found that these women practiced recreational sport activities in their free time, and therefore their sense of purpose was related to finding an escape from everyday life and improving their quality of life in general through physical activity, as they had other responsibilities related to childcaring and gender stereotypes related to what is expected by being a 'good' mother in the Basque society, consistent with what was concluded by Anaza and McDowell (2013).

Plans change with children. You can't go out like you used to, and it's a good opportunity to be with people. (Jaione, recreational Basque pelota player)

### ***Lifestyle: players' belonging and responsibilities***

The level of commitment can also be measured by the hours spent outside the specific scope of the activity, that is, by the duties carried out by the players beyond their role as athletes. The recreational pelota players in the study had a person who led the training sessions (hired by the municipal service or the federation) and the players merely attended the sessions that were held during the week, without assuming any further responsibilities. The role these pelotaris fulfilled was the role of a player. However, in the case of those participants who were members of the federation, competitive players, the sport was part of their lifestyle. Many participants organized their lives

around Basque pelota, acquiring the sport a central role in their leisure time. In this commitment level, some of them took on the role as players, coaches, and managers of a club more than once, as they wanted other players to engage in this sport and improve the situation they lived before as girls with access struggles to pelota.

When I was pregnant, I stopped playing competitions at one time and I started training girls (in 1992). 20 years later, I continue being the coach of our club as well as playing matches (Ibone, Basque pelota player and member of the federation, and coach)

This is consistent with the study by Jaeger et al. (2010), who concluded that, despite progress in expanding women's participation in sport, maintaining involvement requires that women diversify their roles, and suggest actions to encourage, expand and consolidate female participation in all spheres of sport competition. Regarding the need to take up decision-making positions, Ibone noted:

Most of those responsible for pelota clubs are men. That is why women have to step in to meet the needs of women. This is how I see it. I think that's missing, someone to take care of the girls, that is what I am doing in my club. (Ibone, Basque pelota player and member of the federation)

The ties female players formed with other female players were closely related to the link they had to the sport, since the establishment and strengthening of social relationships and the sense of belonging was also different depending on the mode of sport participation. The competitive players felt that they were part of the community. They developed social relations with other players, helping each other to challenge constraints and stereotypes, forging ongoing friendships, and making plans outside the court to strengthen their ties. Regarding their sport practice, they also organized specific unscheduled meets outside the scope of championships and matches. This has been and continues to be a way to reinforce their identities through relationships with other women, and the ways in which these identities are enacted and negotiated are often different from those of their male counterparts, as they act to build and maintain their community, being an important element in the subculture of female pelota players, consistent with the findings of the other study (Bush 2016) where female athletes differ from sportsmen. The connection with women, both inside and outside the activity, seemed to shape and reinforce the identity of women as athletes, confirming their sense of belonging.

It's like another family. When championships start, you're already looking forward to playing. So, you try to show how well you play, but at the same time, you have a game and then a meeting, so you stay and see them. In the end it is a family. I spend more hours with the women I play with than at home, ha, ha. It's true that you make really good friends. [...] You're not equally close to all of them, but the truth is that when feel close to someone, you become really good friends. (Nekane, Basque pelota player and member of the federation, competitive player)

For women who played recreationally, however, in most cases, these friendships or meetings were limited to the weekly training session. There were no continuing or further ties beyond the court, as stated by Zuriñe:

The truth is, I don't know much about the women who are in the group. I mean, we don't do stuff together in everyday life; when we see each other on the street we just say 'hello'. My

relationship with them comes from the course we do, playing at the court. (Zuriñe, recreational Basque pelota player)

Nonetheless, this study found that the meanings attributed to the sport activity by the participants differed according to the type of practice and the commitment of each of them, related to a masculine domain sport in the Basque Country and its deeply rooted social and cultural stereotypes. Those players who were members of the pelota federation, competitive players, could be linked to the SLP 'devotee' profile (Hartel 2014), whereas those who played recreationally were closer to the category of 'participants' or could be said to engage in casual leisure, according to their characteristics (Hartel 2014; Stebbins 2012). This analysis is based on the experiences of women at the beginning of their sport practice and the level of skill, involvement, and time dedicated to the activity, including the lifestyle created around these leisure time activities.

## Conclusions

This study has found that there is a relationship between the concept of serious leisure and women's experiences when they play traditionally masculine domain sports in the Basque Country. Despite the fact that women's leisure-time sport experiences have different meanings for different individuals, there is a continuum where female athletes can be placed according to their varying degrees of 'seriousness', their trajectories, and their experiences in the field. This yields a distinction between those who belonged to the federation, who played pelota on a competitive basis, and those who engaged in their practice on a recreational basis. Pelota players in the competitive field devoted much time to their practice, and their main objectives included preparing for and participating in competitions. In addition, their relationship with the activity extended to other aspects of their life, as they were involved in roles related to the management of their clubs and strengthened friendship ties with other participants. For the recreational participants, their weekly pelota session was part of their routine, where the leisure or pleasant nature of the activity predominated. Unlike competitive pelota players, their relationships with other participants were limited to the activity they shared once a week. Moreover, they combine their sport activity with gender roles and family responsibilities.

According to the results obtained in this study, competitive organized sport performed by women in the Basque Country is associated with a certain lifestyle, an important commitment to practice and equal participants. In contrast, recreational practice can be an interesting strategy for those who do not like competition or cannot face the level of commitment required to engage in serious leisure to a considerable degree, taking into account that they prioritize other gender roles such as caregiving over their sport participation. While they will not reach the strong commitment of competitive players, they can still generate an ongoing sense of enjoyment and social relationships that can lead to them becoming self-empowered, trying to become active, escape their daily routine, and improve their overall quality of life.

In conclusion, leisure-time sport activities such as pelota aimed at women should be designed based on aspects such as the form of sport participation, women's level of

commitment and the lifestyle built in relation to these activities. Therefore, when designing leisure sport programmes and activities for women in the Basque Country, they should be based on the meanings attributed to their practice by the female practitioners, ensuring that they fit in with their daily lives, and that their needs and interests are met.

## Disclosure statement

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

## ORCID

Uxue Fernandez-Lasa  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9528-6579>

Oidui Usabiaga Arruabarrena  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1935-8961>

## References

- Allen-Collinson, J., and J. Hockey. 2020. "Switch off the Headwork! Everyday Organizational Crossings in Identity Transformations from Academic to Runner." In *The Routledge International Handbook of Organizational Autoethnography*, edited by A. F. Herrmann, 313–326. London: Routledge.
- Anaza, E., and J. McDowell. 2013. "An Investigation of Constraints Restricting Urban Nigerian Women from Participating in Recreational Sport Activities." *Journal of Leisure Research* 45 (3): 324–344. doi:10.18666/jlr-2013-v45-i3-3154.
- Apostle, R. 1992. "Curling for Cash: The "Professionalization" of a Popular Canadian Sport." *Culture (Canadian Ethnology Society)* 12 (2): 17–28.
- Bartram, S. A. 2001. "Serious Leisure Careers Among Whitewater Kayakers: A Feminist Perspective." *World Leisure Journal* 43 (2): 4–11. doi:10.1080/04419057.2001.9674225.
- Beaumont, E., and D. H. K. Brown. 2015. "Once a Local Surfer, Always a Local Surfer": Local Surfing Careers in a Southwest English Village." *Leisure Sciences* 37 (1): 68–86. doi:10.1080/01490400.2014.952462.
- Brown, C. A. 2007. "The Carolina Shaggers: Dance as Serious Leisure." *Journal of Leisure Research* 39: 623–647. doi:10.1080/00222216.2007.11950125.
- Bruner, B., and K. Chad. 2013. "Physical Activity Attitudes, Beliefs, and Practices among Women in a Woodland Cree Community." *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* 10 (8): 1119–1127. doi:10.1123/jpah.10.8.1119.
- Bush, L. 2016. "Creating Our Own Lineup: Identities and Shared Cultural Norms of Surfing Women in a U.S. East Coast Community." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 45 (3): 290–318. doi:10.1177/0891241614556346.
- Clark, S. 2012. "Being 'Good at Sport': Talent, Ability and Young Women's Sporting Participation." *Sociology* 46 (6): 1178–1193. doi:10.1177/0038038511435061.
- Codina, N., J. V. Pestana, and R. A. Stebbins. 2020. "Fitness Training as a Body-Centered Hobby: The Serious Leisure Perspective for Explaining Exercise Practice." *Revista de Psicología del Deporte/ Journal of Sport Psychology* 29 (2): 73–81.
- Dasher, K., J. Abbott, and C. Wallace. 2020. "'Do Horses Cause Divorces?' Autoethnographic Insights on Family, Relationships and Resource-Intensive Leisure." *Annals of Leisure Research* 23 (3): 304–321. doi:10.1080/11745398.2019.1616573.
- Deem, R., and S. Gilroy. 1998. "Physical Activity, Life-Long Learning and Empowerment – Situating Sport in Women's Leisure." *Sport, Education and Society* 3 (1): 89–104. doi:10.1080/1357332980030106.
- Department of Youth and Sports of the Basque Government. 2017. "Evolution of the number of federated sports women. License history 2012–2016." [https://www.euskadi.eus/web01-a2kirola/es/contenidos/informacion/berdintasuna\\_estadistikak/es\\_es/index.shtml](https://www.euskadi.eus/web01-a2kirola/es/contenidos/informacion/berdintasuna_estadistikak/es_es/index.shtml).

- Derom, I., and M. Taks. 2011. "Participant's Experiences in two Types of Sporting Events: A Quest for Evidence of the SL-CL Continuum." *Journal of Leisure Research* 43 (3): 383–402. doi:10.1080/00222216.2011.11950242.
- Dilley, R. E., and S. J. Scraton. 2010. "Women, Climbing and Serious Leisure." *Leisure Studies* 29 (2): 125–141. doi:10.1080/02614360903401927.
- Elkington, S., and R. A. Stebbins. 2014. *The serious leisure perspective: An introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Falcous, M. 2017. "Why We Ride: Road Cyclists, Meaning, and Lifestyles." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 41 (3): 239–255. doi:10.1177/0193723517696968.
- Fernandez-Lasa, U., and O. Usabiaga. 2019. "Emakumea Pilotari: The Impact of a Recreational Program Designed with and for Female Basque Pelota Players." *Apunts Educació Física i Esports* 137: 129–141. doi:10.5672/apunts.2014-0983.es.(2019/3).137.10.
- Fernandez-Lasa, U., O. Usabiaga Arruabarrena, and S. Soler Prat. 2020. "Juggling on the Court: Exploring Female Basque Pelota Players' Experiences and Empowerment Strategies." *Journal of Gender Studies* 29 (5): 496–507. doi:10.1080/09589236.2019.1618703.
- Fleury, J., and S. M. Lee. 2006. "The Social Ecological Model and Physical Activity in African American Women." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 37 (1): 129–140. doi:10.1007/s10464-005-9002-7.
- Freysinger, V. J., S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, and M. D. Bialeschki. 2013. "Expanding Opportunities for Leisure." In *Leisure, Women, and Gender*, edited by V. J. Freysinger, S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, and M. D. Bialeschki, 85–95. Urbana, Illinois: Venture Publishing, Inc.
- Friese, S. 2012. *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti*. London: Sage Publications.
- González, O. 2012. *Basque Pelota: A Ritual, an Aesthetic*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies, UV of Nevada.
- González, O. 2013. "Displaced bodies: Gender, sport, and cultural domination in the Basque court." *AIBR, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 08 (1): 83–110.
- Green, E. 1998. "'Women Doing Friendship': An Analysis of Women's Leisure as a Site of Identity Construction, Empowerment and Resistance." *Leisure Studies* 17: 171–185. doi:10.1080/026143698375114.
- Guba, E., and Y. Lincoln. 1994. "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research (1st ed.)*, edited by N. Denzin, and Y. Lincoln, 105–117. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Hartel, I. 2014. "Diagrams of Serious Leisure Perspective." SLP website: <https://www.seriousleisure.net/slp-diagrams.html>.
- Henderson, K. A. 1990. "The Meaning of Leisure for Women: An Integrative Review of the Research." *Journal of Leisure Research* 22 (3): 228–243. doi:10.1080/00222216.1990.11969827.
- Henderson, K. A., and M. D. Bialeschki. 1991. "A Sense of Entitlement to Leisure as Constraint and Empowerment for Women." *Leisure Sciences* 13 (1): 51–65. doi:10.1080/01490409109513124.
- Henderson, K. A., and S. M. Shaw. 2006. "Leisure and Gender: Challenges and Opportunities for Feminist Research." In *A Handbook of Leisure Studies*, edited by C. Rojek, S. M. Shaw, and A. J. Veal, 216–230. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Heuser, L. 2005. "We're not Too old to Play Sports: The Career of Women Lawn Bowlers." *Leisure Studies* 24: 45–60. doi:10.1080/0201436042000250131.
- Iraurgi, I., S. Romero, A. Madariaga, and D. Araujo. 2021. "The Relationship Between Serious Leisure and Recreation Specialization in Sportspeople with and Without Physical Disabilities." *Heliyon* 7 (2): e06295. doi:10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06295.
- Jaeger, A. A., P. B. Gomes, P. Silva, and S. V. Goellner. 2010. "Trajetórias de Mulheres no Esporte em Portugal: Assimetrias, Resistências e Possibilidades [Women's Trajectories in Sports in Portugal: Asymmetries, Resistance and Possibilities]." *Movimento (ESEFID/UFRGS)* 16 (1): 245–267. doi:10.22456/1982-8918.3825.
- Kay, T. 2000. "Leisure, Gender and Family: The Influence of Social Policy." *Leisure Studies* 19 (4): 247–265. doi:10.1080/02614360050118823.

- Kim, J., M. Kim, K. A. Henderson, A. Han, and S. H. Park. 2016. "Serious Engagement in Sport and Health Benefits among Korean Immigrants in the USA." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 11 (1): 1–9. doi:10.3402/qhw.v11.31340.
- Kowal, J., and M. S. Fortier. 2007. "Physical Activity Behavior Change in Middle-Aged and Older Women: The Role of Barriers and of Environmental Characteristics." *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 30 (3): 233–242. doi:10.1007/s10865-007-9102-y.
- Leipert, B. D., R. Plunkett, D. Meagher-Stewart, L. Scruby, H. Mair, and K. B. Wamsley. 2011. "I Can't Imagine my Life Without it!". *Curling and Health Promotion: A Photovoice Study.* *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research* 43: 60–78.
- Lin, W. 2009. *A study of casual and serious golfers: Testing serious leisure theory.* (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (UMI No. 3498685).
- Liu, H.-L., M. J. Bradley, and B. Burk. 2016. "I am Roller Derby: The Serious Leisure and Leisure Identity of Roller Derby Participants." *World Leisure Journal* 58 (1): 28–43. doi:10.1080/16078055.2015.1083466.
- Mair, H. 2009. "Club Life: Third Place and Shared Leisure in Rural Canada." *Leisure Sciences* 31 (5): 450–465. doi:10.1080/01490400903199740.
- Merelas, T., and B. Caballo. 2018. "Enfoques feministas sobre los tiempos de ocio de las mujeres." In *Ocio y participación social en entornos comunitarios*, edited by A. Madariaga, and A. Ponce de León, 101–117. La Rioja, Spain: University of La Rioja.
- Olive, R., L. McCuaig, and M. G. Phillips. 2015. "Women's Recreational Surfing: A Patronising Experience." *Sport, Education and Society* 20 (2): 258–276. doi:10.1080/13573322.2012.754752.
- Portugal, A., F. Campos, F. Martins, and R. Melo. 2017. "Understanding the Relation Between Serious Surfing, Surfing Profile, Surf Travel Behavior and Destination Attributes Preferences." *European Journal of Tourism Research* 16: 57–73.
- Rahikainen, K. 2020. "Climbing as a Lifestyle Sport and Serious Leisure in China." *Leisure/Loisir* 44 (2): 175–197. doi:10.1080/14927713.2020.1760123.
- Rich, K., M. Nicholson, E. Randle, A. Donaldson, P. O'Halloran, K. Staley, P. Kappelides, R. Nelson, and R. Belski. 2019. "Participant-Centered Sport Development: A Case Study Using the Leisure Constraints of Women in Regional Communities." *Leisure Sciences*, 44 (3): 323–342. doi:10.1080/01490400.2018.1553124.
- Romero, S., and A. Madariaga. 2018. "Ocio serio y deporte. Revisión del estado de la cuestión." In *Sports and Society: An Approach from Leisure*, edited by S. Romero, and Y. Lázaro, 39–60. Documentos de estudios de ocio, 62. Bilbao: University of Deusto.
- Ronkainen, N. J., A. Shuman, T. Ding, S. You, and L. Xu. 2018. "Running Fever: Understanding Runner Identities in Shanghai Through Turning Point Narratives." *Leisure Studies* 37 (2): 211–222. doi:10.1080/02614367.2017.1324513.
- Scraton, S. 1994. "The Changing World of Women and Leisure: Feminism, 'Postfeminism' and Leisure." *Leisure Studies* 13 (4): 249–261. doi:10.1080/02614369409510674.
- Scraton, S., and A. Flintoff. 2013. "Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport." In *A Companion to Sport*, edited by D. L. Andrews, and B. Carrington, 96–111. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Shaw, S. M. 2001. "Conceptualizing Resistance: Women's Leisure as Political Practice." *Journal of Leisure Research* 33 (2): 186–201. doi:10.1080/00222216.2001.11949937.
- Shen, X. S., and C. Yarnal. 2010. "Blowing Open the Serious Leisure-Casual Leisure Dichotomy: What's In There?" *Leisure Sciences* 32: 162–179. doi:10.1080/01490400903547179.
- Siegenthaler, K. L., and I. O'Dell. 2003. "Older Golfers: Serious Leisure and Successful Aging." *World Leisure Journal* 45 (1): 45–52. doi:10.1080/04419057.2003.9674304.
- Sparks, A., and B. Smith. 2014. *Qualitative Research Methods in Sport, Exercise and Health: From Process to Product.* London: Routledge.
- Stebbins, R. A. 1992. *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure.* Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Stebbins, R. A. 2000. "Un estilo de vida óptimo de ocio: combinar ocio serio y casual en la búsqueda del bienestar personal." In *Ocio y desarrollo humano. Propuestas para el 6º Congreso Mundial de Ocio*, edited by M. Cuenca, 109–116. Bilbao: University of Deusto & World Leisure.

- Stebbins, R. A. 2004. *Between Work and Leisure: The Common Ground of two Separate Worlds*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Stebbins, R. A. 2007. *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for our Time*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Stebbins, R. A. 2008. "Right Leisure, Serious, Casual or Project-Based." *NeuroRehabilitation* 23 (4): 335–341. doi:[10.3233/NRE-2008-23407](https://doi.org/10.3233/NRE-2008-23407).
- Stebbins, R. 2009. "Serious Leisure and Work." *Sociology Compass* 3 (5): 764–774. doi:[10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00233.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00233.x).
- Stebbins, R. A. 2012. "Comment on Scott: Recreation Specialization and the SL-CL Continuum." *Leisure Sciences* 34: 372–374. doi:[10.1080/01490400.2012.687646](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2012.687646).
- Thompson, E. L., C. A. Vamos, and E. M. Daley. 2017. "Physical Activity During Pregnancy and the Role of Theory in Promoting Positive Behavior Change: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Sport and Health Science* 6 (2): 198–206. doi:[10.1016/j.jshs.2015.08.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jshs.2015.08.001).
- Walseth, K. 2006. "Sport and Belonging." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41 (3-4): 447–464. doi:[10.1177/1012690207079510](https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690207079510).
- Wood, L., and K. Danylchuk. 2011. "Playing our way: Contributions of Social Groups to Women's Continued Participation in Golf." *Leisure Sciences* 33: 366–381. doi:[10.1080/01490400.2011.606778](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2011.606778).
- Wood, L., and K. Danylchuk. 2012. "Constraints and Negotiation Processes in a Women's Recreational Sport Group." *Journal of Leisure Research* 44 (4): 463–485. doi:[10.1080/00222216.2012.11950274](https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2012.11950274).
- World Health Organization. 2020. *WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour: At a Glance*. World Health Organization. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.