

**MOTHERHOOD AS A TURNING POINT
IN WOMEN'S PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TRAJECTORIES:
A LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE ON GENDERED HEALTH INEQUALITIES**

**LA MATERNITÀ COME EVENTO CRITICO
PER LO SVOLGIMENTO DELL'ATTIVITÀ FISICA:
CICLO DI VITA E DISUGUAGLIANZE DI SALUTE LEGATE AL GENERE**

GIUSEPPE MONTEDURO E ILARIA COLETTA*

Abstract: this study analyzes the trajectories of women's sporting activity across the life course, with particular attention to the role of motherhood in the continuity of physical activity. Adopting a gender and life course perspective, the research investigates how biographical transitions impact the distribution and legitimacy of time dedicated to sport. The study is based on an exploratory qualitative design involving ten women aged 32 to 68. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and video interviews and analyzed using manual thematic analysis. The results show that motherhood acts as a central turning point in women's sporting trajectories, producing a lasting restructuring of daily time and a reduction in the legitimacy of time for oneself. Interruptions in sporting activity tend to transform into cumulative processes of disadvantage, made persistent by organizational constraints, care work, and symbolic mechanisms such as individualizing narratives and guilt. The study highlights how the decline in female sports participation cannot be interpreted as a simple result of individual choices, but as a socially and temporally structured process, with significant implications for the analysis of health inequalities.

Keywords: motherhood – social inequalities – health – physical activity – life courses

* Giuseppe Monteduro, Associate Professor in Sociology GSPS-05/A, University of Molise. Email: giuseppe.monteduro@unimol.it. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1837-2853>
Ilaria Coletta, Degree in Sports, Preventive and Adapted Physical Activity Sciences, University of Molise. Email: ilaria.coletta@studenti.unimol.it

Giuseppe Monteduro and Ilaria Coletta have shared this work. For proper attribution, paragraphs 1, 2, 3, and 6 should be Giuseppe Monteduro. Paragraphs 4 and 5 should be Ilaria Coletta. No funding was received for the research presented here; ethical codes regarding participant engagement (through informed consent) were respected.

Abstract: questo studio analizza i percorsi dell'attività sportiva femminile nel corso della vita, con particolare attenzione al ruolo della maternità nella continuità dell'attività fisica. Adottando una prospettiva di genere e del corso di vita, la ricerca indaga in che modo le transizioni biografiche influenzano la distribuzione e la legittimazione del tempo dedicato allo sport. Lo studio si basa su un disegno qualitativo esplorativo che ha coinvolto dieci donne di età compresa tra i 32 e i 68 anni. I dati sono stati raccolti tramite interviste semi-strutturate e videointerviste e analizzati mediante un'analisi tematica manuale. I risultati mostrano che la maternità agisce come un punto di svolta centrale nei percorsi sportivi delle donne, determinando una riorganizzazione duratura del tempo quotidiano e una riduzione della legittimazione del tempo dedicato a sé stesse. Le interruzioni dell'attività sportiva tendono a trasformarsi in processi cumulativi di svantaggio, resi persistenti da vincoli organizzativi, dal lavoro di cura e da meccanismi simbolici quali narrazioni individualizzanti e senso di colpa. Lo studio evidenzia come il calo della partecipazione femminile allo sport non possa essere interpretato come semplice risultato di scelte individuali, ma come un processo strutturato socialmente e temporalmente, con implicazioni significative per l'analisi delle disuguaglianze sanitarie.

Keywords: maternità– disuguaglianze sociali – salute – attività fisica – percorsi di vita

1. Introduction

Regular physical activity is a crucial determinant of public health, associated with cardiovascular, metabolic, and mental well-being benefits¹. Despite its recognized importance², participation in physical activity is not evenly distributed across the population: inequalities persist that penalize women in particular, both in terms of access and continuity of practice³. Among the many factors contributing to these inequalities, biographical transitions, primarily motherhood, are critical moments capable of interrupting or redefining female sports participation patterns⁴. This study explores how and why motherhood influences women's participation in sports, focusing not only on material constraints (time, organization, resources) but also on the symbolic mechanisms that legitimize or delegitimize its continuation (sense of guilt, narratives of individual responsibility). We adopt a life course perspective to understand sports participation as a dynamic trajectory: biographical transitions act as *turning points* that can generate an

¹ F. Penedo, J. Dahn, 2005; D. Warburton, S. Bredin 2017; C. Malm, J. Jakobsson, A. Isaksson, 2019.

² The specific reference is to the World Health Organization guidelines published in 2020, summarized here: https://www.sportesalute.eu/images/convenzione-80-mln/webinar/Linee_guida_OMS.pdf

³ D. E. Trussell, S. Kerwin, A. Lyn, L. Harris, 2024; J. Ominyi, A. Clifton, 2025.

⁴ H. Gropper, J. John, G. Sudeck, A. Thiel, 2020.

accumulation of disadvantages with respect to long-term health opportunities. The research is based on qualitative interviews and video interviews conducted with adult women with different biographical trajectories. Thematic analysis aims to identify recurring themes in the narratives (interruption, adaptation, renegotiation of time) and to relate this evidence to the theoretical concepts of transition and accumulation. The results show how the suspension or intermittency of sporting activity after childbirth cannot be interpreted solely as an individual choice, but as the outcome of cumulative processes of gender inequality with implications for public health. The article continues with the theoretical framework (sect. 2), the methodology (sect. 3), the results (sect. 4), and the discussion-conclusions (sect. 5), which highlight the theoretical and policy implications for promoting greater accessibility to physical activity.

2. Theoretical framework: time, gender and sports practice from a life course perspective

Participation in physical activity is health-related behavior, yet its distribution across the life course is profoundly unequal. Health inequalities have traditionally been analyzed through approaches that emphasize socioeconomic factors (Link and Phelan's fundamental causes theory), material conditions (Marmot's stress and social position theory), or individual lifestyles (the risk factor model). Although these perspectives have significantly contributed to identifying groups more exposed to adverse health outcomes, they tend to treat time as a neutral or residual variable, rather than as a structuring social dimension. The life course perspective⁵, on the other hand, allows us to place time at the center of the analysis, conceiving it not as a simple chronological succession, but as a socially organized dimension, traversed by normative expectations, gender inequalities, and power asymmetries. From this perspective, health behaviors (such as sports participation) are not static outcomes, but processes that are constructed, interrupted, and transformed over time, in relation to biographical transitions and contextual constraints. A key concept of the *Life Course Perspective* is that of transition, understood as a structured passage between life stages that redefines the use, value, and legitimacy of individual time. Events such as entering the labor market, starting a family, and motherhood not only produce a material reorganization of daily activities, but also introduce new temporal hierarchies. Motherhood represents a highly gendered transition (a constraint, drawing on Bird and Rieker's theory of constrained choices⁶) that restructures women's time by assigning socially legitimized priorities to care work and relegating time for oneself, and for sports, to a marginal and negotiable position. Within

⁵ G. H. Elder, 1994.

⁶ Here the reference is to the Constrained Choices Theory: C.E. Bird, P. P. Rieker, 2008.

this framework, time cannot be considered a freely allocatable individual resource, but rather a relational and normatively regulated good, whose availability and legitimacy depend on one's position in the life course and significant relationships. The life course perspective also introduces the concept of linked lives, highlighting how individual time management is intertwined with that of other actors (partners, children, parents) and how these intertwinings directly impact the ability to engage in physical activity. However, these relational constraints tend to remain implicit in individual narratives, contributing to a privatized representation of temporal difficulties. A further distinctive element of this perspective is the concept of accumulation of advantages and disadvantages, which allows us to understand health inequalities as long-term temporal processes. Interruptions in sporting activity associated with biographical transitions do not produce limited short-term effects but generate cumulative consequences that persist over time. The suspension of physical activity during pregnancy, for example, can lead to a progressive loss of health benefits⁷, a reduction in bodily familiarity with movement, and increasing difficulty in resuming it, contributing to the construction of health disadvantage trajectories that consolidate in later stages of life⁸. Compared to other approaches to health inequalities, the life-course perspective therefore allows us to shift the focus from the mere availability of time to the social legitimacy of time⁹. While lifestyle theories tend to interpret sports practice as an expression of individual choices and self-discipline, the life-course approach highlights how time for self-care is unequally distributed and subject to differentiated moral judgments¹⁰. For adult women, time dedicated to sport frequently appears as time «taken» from other duties, rather than a legitimate investment in health¹¹. Within this framework, individualizing narratives that attribute the continuation or interruption of sporting activity to organizational skills, motivation, or willpower can be interpreted as symbolic mechanisms that naturalize temporal inequality. These narratives help conceal the structured nature of women's time and transform social constraints into individual responsibilities. Adopting a life-course perspective thus allows us to make visible the temporal, relational, and symbolic dimensions that permeate women's sporting trajectories, restoring complexity to behaviors often reduced to outcomes of personal choice.

⁷ K. Matvienko-Sikar, J. Pope, A. Cremin, H. Carr, S. Leitão, E. Olander, S. Meaney, 2020.

⁸ R. McKeough, C. Blanchard, H. Piccinini-Vallis 2022

⁹ W. Brown, K. Heesch, Y. Miller, 2009.

¹⁰ W. Brown, S. Trost, 2003.

¹¹ M. Van Mulken, M. Mcallister, J. Lowe, 2016.

3. Survey methodology

3.1 Research design and population involved

The study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach aimed at analyzing how sports participation is constructed, interrupted, and renegotiated in the biographical trajectories of adult women. Qualitative design responds to the need to investigate the meanings attributed to physical activity, time management methods, and the narrative processes through which participants interpret the continuation or abandonment of sports participation throughout their lives. The research is situated within the field of health sociology and adopts a gender and life course perspective, with particular attention to the interaction between individual agency, structural constraints, and significant relationships. In line with this approach, the goal is not to produce statistical generalizations, but to identify recurring social and symbolic mechanisms that contribute to the persistence of gender inequalities in sports participation and, more generally, in health behaviors. The research was conducted in Italy and involved a sample of 10 women aged 32 to 68, characterized by different biographical, family, and work trajectories. We included both women who regularly practice sports and women who had stopped or significantly reduced their participation over the course of their lives, to explore a variety of experiences and temporal configurations of sports participation. Participants were selected through snowball sampling ¹², a strategy consistent with the study's exploratory objective and instrumental in building trust between researchers and interviewees. The heterogeneity of the sample does not meet the criteria of statistical representativeness but rather serves the purpose of highlighting narrative patterns and recurring mechanisms within diverse biographies, consistent with a life-course perspective.

3.2 Data collection tools

Data collection was based on a combination of semi-structured interviews ¹³ and video interviews inspired by the principles of Visual Sociology¹⁴. A total of 10 interviews were conducted, each lasting an average of approximately 45 minutes.

¹² Snowball *sampling* is a non-probability sampling technique used primarily to study hard-to-reach populations. It starts with a few initial participants who, in turn, refer others with similar characteristics. The sample progressively grows «in a chain», like a rolling snowball. See: L.A. Goodman, 1961.

¹³ The semi-structured interview is a qualitative technique based on a set of predefined but flexible questions. The interviewer can change the order of the questions and explore emerging themes during the conversation. It allows for a combination of comparability between interviews and openness to the participant's subjective experience. See: S. Brinkmann, S. Kvale, 2015.

¹⁴ Visual sociology is a research approach that uses images (photographs, videos, and other visual materials) as tools to produce and analyze sociological data. Images can be both the object of analysis and a methodological device (e.g., photo-elicitation, participatory photography). It allows us to investigate

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a flexible approach structured around thematic cores consistent with the research objectives:

- history of the relationship with sport;
- phases of continuity, interruption and resumption of the practice;
- significant biographical events;
- reconciliation between sport, work and family responsibilities;
- personal time management;
- role of the relational context.

This approach facilitated the construction of detailed biographical narratives, allowing participants to retrospectively reorganize their sporting experiences throughout their lives. Alongside the verbal dimension, the use of video interviews¹⁵ allowed us to observe nonverbal elements of the narrative (such as hesitations, pauses, voice modulations, and moments of silence), which enriched the analysis of the women's sporting experiences. The visual approach proved particularly useful for capturing emotional and symbolic dimensions related to time management and guilt, which are difficult to express through verbal language alone. The interviews were conducted in settings chosen by the participants (private homes or sports-related environments), primarily for logistical and availability reasons. Specifically, interviews conducted in the participants' homes generally proved longer and more detailed, allowing for a more nuanced narrative.

3.3 Data analysis and research reflexivity

The data were analyzed through a qualitative, manually conducted thematic analysis¹⁶. The interviews were transcribed in full and subjected to in-depth and repeated reading. In the first phase descriptive codes were identified relating to sporting experiences, biographical events, time management, caregiving burdens, and strategies for balancing sport, work, and family life. In a second phase, the codes were reorganized into macro-analytical themes, in dialogue with the theoretical framework and with the concepts of transition, accumulation of advantages and disadvantages, and constrained lives. This process allowed us to reconstruct women's sporting trajectories as temporal processes, highlighting continuities, discontinuities, and *turning points* throughout the life course. Following the interview collection phase, the researchers dedicated approximately a month to reflexive work, which served as an analytical space for distancing themselves

meanings, social practices, and symbolic dimensions that are difficult to explore through verbal language alone. See: D. Harper, 2012.

¹⁵ The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of social research. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study and to have the interviews audio- and video-recorded. The data was anonymized by using initials and removing identifying information, ensuring the confidentiality of the participants.

¹⁶ For one of the interviews, the audio material was partially incomplete due to a technical recording problem; however, the case was retained in the analysis, based on available information.

from the empirical material. This time was spent reviewing the transcripts, comparing emerging interpretations, and critically reflecting on the analytical categories, strengthening interpretative coherence and reducing the risk of immediate or overly impressionistic interpretations. The interview summary tables report, for each case, the prevalent narrative theme, without excluding the presence of transversal themes. The analysis integrated the verbal content of the interviews with observational elements emerging from the video interviews, helping to bring out the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the stories.

Interviews: ID1
Date: 25-10-25
Participant's age: 48
Name: A.A.

Occupation: Self Employed occupation
Sport practiced: None
Family role: Cohabiting partner; daughter aged 7
Educational level: High school diploma (scientific track)

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García- Pereiro, 2020)	"I have always loved movement: dance, athletics, martial arts, and later aerobics, Pilates and finally Plates. When my daughter was little—I was 41 at the time—I prioritised taking care of her. I had to completely reorganise my time, including my decision to go back to university, and I had to take time away from my personal practice."	Interruption due to motherhood; turning point	Emotion in her voice and a distressed look at the beginning of the question; gradually, as she recalls the activities she engaged in, her expression brightens. When speaking about her studies — described as a choice rather than something imposed — her tone becomes more energetic.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self- esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Regaining contact with your body... the sense of well-being it gives you, also being in an environment with other people. It feels like reclaiming time that you had lost. Physical and mental health, staying young."	Identity, health, relationships	When referring to positive role models and delivering her final message, her tone becomes more enthusiastic.
Work–life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"I receive little support from my partner, who works longer hours, and there is often the mindset that women should give something up for the family. I also recognise that sometimes I myself end up following that logic."	Partner support	When speaking about support, her tone of voice lowers; she acknowledges, visibly moved, that the asymmetry is reinforced by the mindset of both partners.
Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	"Most of the time I have given up physical activity so as not to place additional strain on my elderly parents; I rely on them only when I really have no alternative."	Double burden; Welfare policies	Her voice sounds overwhelmed by the perceived or recalled burden.

			"Services such as babysitting, or sports activities for mothers and children together, would be helpful."	Welfare policies	She engages actively in outlining a detailed and vividly imagined proposal.
Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	"Household duties take priority; I always end up giving priority to something else."	Sense of guilt	Her tone of voice becomes more resigned.
Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	"To younger women I would say what I tell myself: I always reproach myself for never finding time for me, and I should almost demand it. As women and as mothers, if we do not prioritise ourselves, sooner or later we pay the price. If we lose our health and are not well, who will take care of the house, the children, their education?"	New generations	Strong emotion is visible at the end of the interview and is explicitly acknowledged by the participant herself.

Appendix 2 **Interview ID: 2**
Date: 24-10-25
Participant's age: 68
Name: C.

Occupation: Retired
Sport practiced: Pilates
Family role: Married; children living independently
Educational level: High school diploma (scientific track)

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García-Pereiro, 2020)	"Before, doing sport was not essential; today it is very important: without it I would fall into depression... it's a need, it's everything — I like feeling well!"	Change over time	Smiles and pauses emphasise how important sport is for her.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self-esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Getting out of breath when walking uphill... that's not an option! I was already thinking about maintaining my autonomy when I was young; today, specific health benefits are added."	Physical well-being, self-esteem, enjoyment	
Work–life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"I never struggled, I never had any work–life balance problems, even when my children were young and I was working."	Work–life balance; support	She responds in a concise and pragmatic manner.
Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	She states that no support is needed: everyone chooses how to allocate the financial resources they have available.	Welfare policies	A strong sense of self-determination is conveyed.
Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	"There has never been any tension: when something makes you feel good, no one in the family experiences it as if you were depriving them of something."	Guilt (absence)	

Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	She believes that physical activity cannot really be recommended, because everyone has their own preferences and, above all, because perseverance and commitment in sport must be instilled from an early age within the family of origin.	New generations
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Appendix 3 **Interview ID: 3** **Occupation: Teacher**
Date: 26-10-25 **Sport practiced: Cardio-fitness training**
Participant's age: 43 **Family role: Married; children aged 10 and 6**
Name: F. **Educational level: Master's degree in Biology**

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García-Pereiro, 2020)	"I have always practised sport since I was a child, out of obligation (for health reasons): swimming; in high school, volleyball. When I started working, I did water aerobics early in the morning and even targeted exercises during pregnancy. After the birth of my first child, only walks with the baby; during Covid, spinning at home consistently. Later, Pilates — with great difficulties in balancing everything — I skipped my lunch break and did not always manage to make everything fit together. Now I train while my children are training, even though I have settled for an activity I do not like very much."	Sport biography; work-life balance	Her tone of voice remains neutral and controlled throughout the interview, without revealing predominant emotions.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self-esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Feeling well: maintaining an active metabolism; psychophysical well-being; mental space."	Health; well-being; balance	Her tone becomes reflective as she speaks about the benefits.
Work-life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"To organise myself, I have to plan ahead. Training together gives me a great advantage... It's just a matter of routine: I prepare the swimming bags on Sunday for Tuesday."	Work-life balance	She explains the solutions she has adopted in a calm and composed tone.
Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	"I don't ask for support: I take my time, I don't ask for concessions and I organise myself. I support myself: I cannot leave the children with anyone and I have to try to organise everything on my own as best as I can."	Partner support; family	She presses her lips together and briefly smiles with a hint of irony before answering.
			"I really appreciate the changing rooms at the swimming pool, where staff help dress and dry the children; for someone else, a transport service might be useful."	Public services; welfare policies	Her tone returns to a descriptive and neutral register.

Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	"I continued training, my husband did not: more a matter of will than anything else. Managing the household is something I take care of. In any case, if he wanted to train, he would not have the burden of family responsibilities."	Perceived gender gap	She gives a slight smile before answering.
Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	"I like, from an educational perspective, the idea of a family that trains together." / "Don't forget about yourselves, because happy women are happy mothers; I think it is important for everyone's well-being!"	Positive role models; final message	In this response as well, her tone remains consistent with a self-motivating stance.

Appendix 4 **Interview ID: 4** **Occupation: Self-employed professional**
Date: 23-10-25 **Sport practiced: Pilates**
Participant's age: 50 **Family role: Married**
Name: J. **Educational level: Master's degree in Law**

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García- Pereiro, 2020)	"I did not have a good relationship with sport because I did not have a good relationship with myself; I did not have a body I liked, I was bullied, and I withdrew into myself because practising sport would have meant exposing myself. Sport also caused me some psychological discomfort. I never practised sport at a competitive level; during my studies, I paid little attention to sport."	Sport biography; discrimination; social judgement	She recounts this with apparent calmness, yet her speech becomes faster; she emphasises that only after her physical appearance improved (through diet) did she gradually approach sport.
			"As an adult, due to a minor health issue, doctors advised me to start walking... From this movement, even though minimal, a physical change began, but also — and above all — a psychological and mental one."	Change over time	She recalls clearly the transition to movement; her tone conveys a gradual yet meaningful impact.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self-esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Reducing stress, a calming effect on myself."	Well-being; health; prevention; inclusion	She speaks with a tone that reflects a clear awareness of the health and preventive benefits.
Work-life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"Self-employment allows me great flexibility; moreover, not having children helps me to have some time for myself."	Time	She acknowledges the situation of other women with greater constraints, but emphasises that "there is always a possibility of choice."

Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	"Nurseries and financial incentives."	Welfare policies	
Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	"I perceive a greater burden compared to my partner, although I admit that I am the one who wants to maintain control of the household; in any case, I manage to find time for my well-being, which I define as a 'matter of priorities'." / "If I can find time for an aperitif, I can also find time for training."	Perceived gender gap	Her tone becomes more severe, almost reproachful toward those who are unwilling to organise themselves.
Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	"Believing in oneself and not allowing oneself to be crushed by prejudice; and, if there is determination, doing what we like with the greatest possible freedom." She explicitly states that she does not perceive marked gender differences on this point today.	New generations; social judgement	She returns to the theme of determination and to earlier references to aesthetic pressures in adolescence; she explicitly states that she does not perceive marked gender differences on this point today.

Appendix 5 **Interview ID: 5** **Occupation: Self-employed professional in the sports sector**
Date: 23-10-25 **Sport practiced: Weight training**
Participant's age: 49 **Family role: Married; children aged 17, 15 and 6**
Name: P. **Educational level: High school diploma; *Bachillerato de Deportes* (Argentina)**

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García-Pereiro, 2020)	"Passionate about sport, whatever it may be: not only watching it, but practising it! Despite limited time, with organisation I manage to do fitness 2–3 times a week. I did skating from the age of 3/4 until I was 20; volleyball until I was 26/27. Due to work commitments, I could no longer attend training sessions and chose the gym, which offered more flexibility. I stopped when my children were born; during Covid, I trained at home, doing lunges with the stroller." / Sport activity was resumed only about six years after the birth of her third child.	Sport biography; readjustment; interruptions and resumption	She initially shows embarrassment at being interviewed (bringing her hands to her face), which quickly dissolves as she enthusiastically relives her sporting history.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self-esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Physical and mental health: prevention. Being 50, I would like to reach later adulthood with good cardiovascular and joint preparation... Secondly, aesthetic motivation — if you train, results come."	Health; prevention; aesthetics	The term "mental" recurs several times throughout the interview
			"When I train, I am motivated to do more — I recharge my batteries! I feel good, good! In the morning I have extra energy; I experience the day differently depending on whether I do physical activity or not."	Balance; well-being	She reinforces the positive effects on her daily life with noticeable emphasis in her voice.
Work–life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"When children are young, it is more difficult to train, but if one has the determination, one does it." / In some periods, she trained on her own, also thanks to working in a sports environment.	Work–life balance; individual responsibility	

Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	"In other countries, there are playrooms in gyms."	Welfare policies	Her facial expression suggests a desire for a service she perceives as almost unattainable.
Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	No significant elements directly attributable to perceptions of guilt or judgement emerge.	Not identified	
Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	"Always finding a way, organising oneself, to train at least twice a week, even just an hour's walk or cycling. Also going to the gym, talking to other people, or not talking and listening to music... it's important!"	New generations	She emphasises the importance of consistency and personal organisation.

Appendix 6 **Interview ID: 6** **Occupation: Full-time employee professional**
Date: 23-10-25 **Sport practiced: Pilates and Weight training**
Participant's age: 41 **Family role: Not cohabiting**
Name: S. **Educational level: High school diploma; Technical diploma in Information Technology**

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García- Pereiro, 2020)	"I started at 20 with aerobics; later I tried various activities until Pilates, which I appreciate for the combination of mobility, posture, breathing and presence. It also helps you present yourself differently to others."	Sport biography	She started at the age of 20 but has maintained a continuous practice over the years.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self-esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Sport is a fundamental aspect of my life. I train almost every day: it is a moment when I switch off from everything and take care of my body and my mind."	Identity; escape; well-being; balance	Identity; escape; well-being; balance
			"Working on S.: on my body and my mind."		
			"Improving myself, staying in shape, working on myself — body and mind. It's like keeping a car efficient by taking it for regular servicing."	Health; balance; prevention.	
			"Today aesthetic benefits, tomorrow preserved autonomy: I see myself as an efficient elderly woman."	Aesthetics; autonomy	She lists specific benefits.
Work-life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"I don't have many difficulties apart from my full-time job. However, I have to prepare dinner in advance and eat in the car in order to train during my lunch break. I appreciate my colleagues who have greater difficulties, having families."	Fatigue; organisational effort	
Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	"I think that a free playroom would be the easiest solution to implement."	Welfare policies	She refers to the difficulties experienced by women with heavier family responsibilities.

Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	Not identified	
Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	"Doing sport, any kind! Moving, getting to know your body, feeling more confident without focusing on appearance, but finding something that makes you leave the gym happy. Something that is enjoyable. A dose of dopamine that does not come from outside, but from within you!"	New generations She emphasises listening to oneself and seeking activities that generate authentic happiness.

Appendix 7 **Interview ID: 7** **Occupation: Self-employed professional**
Date: 26-10-25 **Sport practiced: Climbing and yoga**
Participant's age: 46 **Family role: Cohabiting; children aged 10 and 8**
Name: T.L. **Educational level: Master's degree**

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García- Pereiro, 2020)	"Mainly swimming from the age of 8 to 18, volleyball in classical high school; but for me sport was also down in the street: football, basketball, volleyball. During university, swimming plus yoga and capoeira — a wonderful experience! During pregnancy, I continued practising yoga and kept climbing until the fifth or sixth month of both pregnancies."	Sport biography	She details the many sports she practised and speaks about them with visible enthusiasm.
			"I stopped when my children were very young, as they require presence, especially for breastfeeding; with two children two years apart, I reduced my sporting activity and suffered a little during that period. Then, if you are used to it, you manage to reintroduce it because it is a priority."	Interruptions	
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self- esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Swimming as a child represented, for me, the opportunity to socialise with my first group of friends; travelling for competitions was a shared travel experience with my family. Not a sacrifice, but an opportunity!"	Socialisation; family bond	As she continues, she becomes more absorbed in her recollection.
			"My love for sport continued: during adolescence, I also came to appreciate its aesthetic value and to understand the other aspects of team play."	Aesthetics; relationships	Her memories become more vivid and detailed.
			"Health, being in shape, mentally active. It is a refuge, a moment that is mine alone, in which I am not 'claimed' by family life."	Health; escape; double burden	The word "refuge" carries a clearly positive connotation.
			"If I exercise, the next day at work I am much more active, calm and focused."	Work	
Work-life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"With great effort, I regained my sporting space after motherhood, and now I am satisfied with my current level of practice. If you are used to integrating sport into your daily life, you manage to find the time: it is a matter of priorities!"	Fatigue	

		"Mine is a particular case because I have made a series of choices to prioritise my children and, for myself, recreational and sporting activities. I have worked very hard on this and therefore I have time, although giving up something economically and in terms of career. I work three mornings; on two I take care of the house; the afternoon is dedicated to my children."	Obstacles; sacrifices	She states that she has achieved an excellent balance between work and private life.
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Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	"We women have a greater sense of responsibility; they (men) are more inclined to dedicate time to themselves. They probably do the right thing — they are more relaxed, lighter — because they know that someone else will make up for it."	Double burden	
			"The greatest support? My mother! She has supported me since I was little and believes in sport (even though she has never been sporty herself). She also lives nearby and I often leave the children with her."	Family	
			"My partner's support did not come immediately in a natural and direct way, but it was sought through my own effort: I had to explain to him that this time was important for me."	Partner support	She smiles and emphasises how much she had to work on this.
			"Facilitated access; but I have not encountered any in my own experience."	Welfare policies	
Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	"Children want to be with their mother! My partner works more hours a day because it is necessary, but we are both aware that being a mother is a second job."	Perceived gender gap	Domestic work is explicitly recognised by both partners as having the same value as paid work.
Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	"See yourselves as women first and foremost; clearly distinguish the role of mother and wife from that of woman, who needs — above all — to care for her body, her mind and her spirit! Everything else comes second."	New generations	

Appendix 8 **Interview ID: 8** **Occupation: Part-time employee**
Date: 16-10-25 **Sport practiced: Pilates**
Participant's age: 41 **Family role: Cohabiting; daughter aged 8**
Name: A. **Educational level: Bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences**

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García-Pereiro, 2020)	"I never practiced any sport until I became independent, because my parents never had time or, in any case, never gave it the right priority. So I never played sports as a child; I did a little gym when I started university, to keep fit, purely for aesthetic reasons."	Beginning	When talking about childhood and the lack of sporting experience, the pace quickens and the tone becomes slightly resentful.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self-esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Now, however, I realize that my relationship with sport and physical activity in general has really changed. Today, I need it for my physical and mental well-being."	Balance	The voice calms down and relaxes in relation to the most recent experience.
Work-life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use			
Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital			
Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	<i>A technical problem during recording caused the loss of part of interview no. 8. The preserved part was transcribed faithfully and used for analysis; the missing recording does not compromise the quality of the data, as the content central to the research had already been expressed in the saved section.</i>		

Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion
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Appendix 9 **Interview ID: 9** **Occupation: employee**
Date: 10/23/25 **Sport practiced: Pilates**
Participant age: 32 **Role within the family: wife and new mother for two months**
Name: G. **Education: master's degree in Economics**

Main Theme		Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García-Pereiro, 2020)	"I have always practiced sports in my life, more or less intensely, because I have always had weight problems. So initially, I associated sports very much with physical appearance, often disregarding the psychological benefits that came with it. Today, with pregnancy and breastfeeding, I can only go for walks with my baby."	Beginning, motherhood, change	She states that she has always trained, but inconsistently and with ups and downs.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self-esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"For a long time, I sought refuge in sports to feel better about myself, which led me to overdo it and almost reject exercise altogether. Then I decided to do activities that made me feel good psychologically and that would eventually bring me physical benefits as well."	Aesthetic conditioning; search for balance	The term "refuge" is used in a negative sense, as a form of hiding.
Work-life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"Before I got pregnant, I had no trouble working out: I always managed to find time during my lunch break, partly because I work for a company that takes great care of its employees in every way. And I don't think things will change now that I'm a mom."	Time	She exercised during his lunch break and did not perceive any obstacles; the birth of the child could change his routine, but he does not express this as a problem.
Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	"I received significant support at work: flexible hours, fitness classes within the company as part of the employee benefits package, and a mothers' area where I could bring my children with me."	Company welfare policies	High level of corporate support; does not mention partners or family as resources.
Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	"I have never experienced discrimination in sports as a woman."	Discrimination	Refers mainly to competitive sports, never practiced.

Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	“I would tell young women that movement is fundamental in life. If there is physical movement, there is also inner movement: everything is connected. Movement must always be present, because it triggers positive mechanisms for the whole person. And you feel its absence when you are unable to practice it.”	Empowerment	Messaggio positivo ed edificante; sottolinea l’effetto trasformativo del movimento
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Appendix 10 **Interview ID: 10**
Date: 10/25/25
Participant age: 46
Name: T.P.

Occupation: Self-Employed occupation
Sports practiced: None
Role within the family: Married; 10-year-old son
Education: High school diploma, Master's degree

Main Theme	Specific codes	Theoretical references/notes	Excerpt	Thematic code	Field notes (visual, paralinguistic and discursive elements)
Sport biography and life course	Beginning, interruptions, resumption, motherhood, pandemic, turning point, change over time	Life trajectory and turning points (Elder, 1994; Clemente C García-Pereiro, 2020)	"I did a lot of sports when I was a girl: I was involved in many activities. Then I got engaged and we left the gym to go to dance school."	Sports biography	She does not go into detail about the activities she has done; she does not indulge in sporting memories.
			"Then I got married and, with the birth of my first child, I devoted my time to him for many years."	interruptions, maternity	Very focused on family roles.
Motivations and meanings of sport	Well-being, health, identity, balance, escape, self-esteem	Sport as experience of agency and subjective well-being	"Then, thanks to a dear friend, I started doing Pilates again. At first I was a little skeptical, being used to more energetic activities, but then I came to appreciate all the benefits."	Well-being	The benefits are not listed in detail.
Work-life balance and obstacles	Time constraints, double burden, domestic work, fatigue, role conflict	Gendered division of labour; ISTAT data on time use	"I did Pilates for a few years, but I've stopped now due to family and work commitments. I do some exercises on my own."	Role conflict	
			"My child has lots of commitments, which I prioritize—he plays two sports—plus work, home, family... I train on my own, having previously learned from my teacher."	Role conflict	Confirms the priority given to the family.
Support and resources	Partner support, family, social network, public services, welfare policies	Linked lives theory and social capital	"My husband helps me a lot at home, but I believe that we women perform many tasks that, unfortunately, fall to us: they are tasks that are more suited to women."	Partner support, perceived gender gap	
			"A babysitter who picks up the child, takes them to soccer practice, or helps them with their homework."	Welfare policies	

Perceptions of gender and gender sickness	Discrimination, stereotypes, sense of guilt, internalised guilt, social judgement	Perceived and internalised gender gap; gender sickness	"The man is a bit more free."	Perceived gender gap	She smiles.
Visions and future messages	Desire for change, positive role models, empowerment, new generations	Pedagogical approach to well-being and gender equality promotion	"Devote time to our children and family, but also make time for ourselves because I believe we really need it."	Positive role models; final message	

4. Results

The results of the qualitative analysis show how women's sporting activity presents a profoundly dynamic trajectory, marked by discontinuities, renegotiations, and adjustments that are unevenly distributed throughout the life course. Analyzing the narratives allows us to reconstruct how biographical events, temporal constraints, and symbolic mechanisms interact to produce differentiated pathways for accessing and continuing sporting activity.

4.1 Sporting trajectories and socialization to movement in the early stages of life

In most narratives, participants place the beginning of their relationship with sport during childhood and adolescence, albeit with varying intensity and meaning. In some trajectories, early sports socialization appears regular and continuous, supported by supportive family and institutional contexts ¹. In these cases, sport is described as a central component of youth experience, associated with a sense of belonging, recognition, and identity construction. Conversely, other participants report a fragmented, marginal, or late-starting sport practice, often lacking a strong symbolic investment. In these trajectories, sport tends to occupy a peripheral position in the construction of personal identity and appears more exposed to interruptions or abandonment during subsequent biographical transitions. These initial differences are significant because they contribute to shaping a different relationship with sport practice over time. Intense sports socialization appears to provide symbolic and physical resources that, while not guaranteeing continuity of practice into adulthood, influence how interruptions are experienced and interpreted.

4.2 Motherhood as a turning point in women's sporting trajectories

The analysis clearly shows that motherhood represents the most significant biographical turning point in the participants' sporting trajectories. The birth of children introduces a profound reorganization of daily time, priorities, and roles, directly impacting the ability to maintain regular sports participation. In the narratives, motherhood is frequently associated with an initial suspension of sports participation, described as temporary and related to immediate care needs. However, in many cases, this suspension tends to extend over time, progressively transforming into a structural reduction or a lasting interruption of physical activity. The difficulty in resuming is not attributed to a single event but emerges as the result of a combination of constraints that accumulate

¹ As widely documented in the scientific literature: B. Peng, J. Ng, A. Ha, 2023.

over time. Motherhood therefore acts as a temporal restructuring mechanism ², redefining the hierarchy of daily activities and the legitimacy of time for oneself. Time dedicated to sports is progressively subordinated to family responsibilities and represented as expendable, without such sacrifice being thematized as an expression of gender inequality.

4.3 Accumulation of constraints and invisible organizational work

The difficulties of maintaining regular sports participation do not end with the transition to motherhood but are consolidated through the accumulation of constraints that extend overtime. Entering or establishing a job, increasing family responsibilities, and managing daily life further constrain the time available for sports. A recurring theme in the narratives concerns the placement of sports participation within residual time slots, particularly the lunch break. This time is identified as one of the few compatibles with work and family commitments, yet it appears to be heavily conditioned by intense, invisible organizational work. Training during the lunch break requires advance planning of the day, managing meals and travel, as well as constant negotiation of time (thus remaining subject to the model of constrained choice). This organizational work often remains implicit and is not recognized as such. The difficulties encountered in maintaining sports participation are frequently interpreted as the result of a poor individual capacity for self-organization, rather than the effect of structural and relational constraints that accumulate over the course of life.

4.4 Individualizing narratives and emotional experiences

A common thread throughout the narratives concerns the ways in which participants interpret the continuity or interruption of sports practice. In several cases, a highly individualized interpretation emerges, according to which time for training is a matter of personal choice, motivation, or self-discipline, even in the presence of heavy care burdens and limited support. Within this framework, emotional experiences related to personal time management take on relevance. A sense of guilt frequently accompanies the decision to dedicate time to sports, especially when this involves reorganizing family commitments. Through observation of nonverbal cues (hesitations, silences, voice modulations), these experiences become particularly evident, even though they are not always explicitly expressed. These mechanisms contribute to naturalizing the discontinuity of sports practice, reinforcing the representation of sport as a sphere of individual responsibility and blurring the visibility of gender inequalities that shape access to personal time.

² Confirming what has been documented: M. R. Van Mulken, M. McAllister, J. B. Lowe, 2016.

4.5 Divergent trajectories and persistence of sports practice

Despite the constraints described, some participants manage to maintain or resume sports participation, albeit in adapted forms. In these cases, sport is described as a fundamental space for personal recognition and psychological well-being, perceived as necessary to maintain emotional balance throughout life. However, the motivations behind sport participation appear profoundly transformed compared to youthful stages. While in early life, sport was often associated with performance goals or body control, in adulthood it takes on the significance of a space for self-care, stress management, and identity continuity. Trajectories characterized by intense sporting socialization in early life are particularly relevant. In these cases, cessation of practice in adulthood is accompanied by feelings of loss and frustration, while resumption, even partial, appears supported by the symbolic value attributed to sport as a central component of personal identity. The sporting past thus continues to function as a symbolic resource that legitimizes current practice, despite the difficulties encountered.

5. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate how women's participation in sports cannot be interpreted as a simple individual choice but must be understood as the outcome of complex temporal processes that unfold across the life course. Through the analysis of participants' narratives, it becomes clear how biographical events, organizational constraints, and symbolic mechanisms interact to produce unequal trajectories of access to and continuity in physical activity. Consistent with the life course perspective, the sporting trajectories of the women interviewed are profoundly influenced by biographical transitions such as entering the labor market, starting a family, and motherhood. However, what emerges most forcefully is not only the material impact of these events, but the way they restructure daily time and the legitimacy of time for oneself. Motherhood emerges as a *turning point* that redefines temporal hierarchies, subordinating sporting activity to caregiving responsibilities and rendering sporting time a residual and constantly negotiated space. A key contribution of this study concerns the analysis of the processes of accumulation of disadvantage. Pregnancy-related interruptions in sports practice do not end in a temporary phase, but tend to produce cumulative effects over time, making it progressively more difficult to resume physical activity. In this sense, discontinuity in sports emerges as a process that builds over the life course, contributing to the construction of unequal health trajectories. This evidence reinforces the idea that health inequalities are not the result of single exposure or

isolated choices, but of social mechanisms that operate cumulatively and temporally structured³. Particularly relevant is the role of individualizing narratives that permeate participants' accounts. Difficulties in maintaining regular sports practice are frequently interpreted in terms of a lack of motivation, discipline, or organizational skills, even in the presence of objective constraints related to caregiving and workloads. These narratives reflect broader processes of individualization of life trajectories, which shift responsibility for inequalities to the individual level, blurring the visibility of the structural and relational dimensions that produce them. In this context, the sense of guilt associated with time dedicated to sports emerges as a central symbolic mechanism (within the framework of a social model that views health as an individual duty ⁴). The analysis of emotional experiences, also made possible using video interviews, shows how time for self-care is frequently perceived as time taken away from other duties, rather than as a legitimate investment in health. The sense of guilt thus contributes to delegitimizing women's time spent practicing sports, making sports practice fragile and easily sacrificed in the middle stages of adult life. Another analytically relevant element concerns the role of family relationships, particularly the absence of reference to the partner in the participants' narratives. Managing sports time is predominantly described as an individual responsibility, through a detailed description of daily routines, without the partner emerging as an actor involved in the redistribution of care work. This narrative silence takes on analytical value, as it helps naturalize the idea that organizing time and giving up sports are exclusively women's issues, reinforcing an individualized interpretation of the difficulties encountered. The reference to parents also appears ambivalent. While in some cases, support from the older generation represents a concrete resource for time management, in others, a tension emerges between the need for help and the responsibility of caring for elderly or perceived fragile parents. This intermediate position further undermines the ability to legitimize time for oneself, placing sports participation within a web of intergenerational obligations that limit its continuity. Overall, the findings suggest that interventions aimed exclusively at expanding sports options or organizational flexibility risk being insufficient unless accompanied by a broader reflection on the cultural models that govern the distribution and legitimacy of time. Even when participants indicate the need for material support—such as childcare services or more flexible schedules—it emerges that the problem is not limited to the availability of resources, but rather involves more profoundly how time for self-care is symbolically authorized or denied. Finally, the study highlights how, despite the constraints described, sports participation can represent for some women an indispensable space for identity continuity and psychological well-being. In these cases, sports are championed as a necessary means of maintaining emotional balance, even at the cost of intense

³ D. Dannefer, 2003.

⁴ The reference here is to studies on «healthism»: see D. Lupton, 1995.

adaptation and justification. This confirms that sports participation cannot be reduced to an ancillary aspect of leisure time but must be recognized as a central component of health and well-being processes throughout life.

6. Conclusions

This study analyzed women's sports participation from a gender and life-course perspective, aiming to understand how access, continuity, and interruption of physical activity are constructed and interpreted in the biographical trajectories of adult women. Through a qualitative analysis of narratives, the research highlighted how the discontinuity of sports participation cannot be explained solely in terms of individual choices or contingent constraints, but must be interpreted as the outcome of social, temporal, and symbolic processes that unfold across the life course. Consistent with the life-course perspective, the findings demonstrate how biographical events such as entering the labor market, starting a family, and motherhood act as turning points capable of redefining the distribution and legitimacy of daily time⁵. Motherhood emerges as a crucial turning point that triggers profoundly asymmetric processes of temporal reorganization, having a lasting impact on the ability to maintain regular sports participation. In this sense, the interruption or reduction of physical activity does not appear as a simple temporary interlude, but as a mechanism that can contribute to the accumulation of long-term health disadvantages. A key contribution of this study concerns the attention to the symbolic mechanisms that accompany these processes. The individualizing narratives through which participants interpret their sporting trajectories tend to transform structural and relational constraints into personal responsibilities, reinforcing a moralized interpretation of time for oneself. In this context, the sense of guilt associated with sports practice emerges as a relevant social device, contributing to the delegitimation of women's sporting time and making it more easily expendable, especially in the middle stages of adult life (Harmen 2016). Adopting a life-course perspective also highlights how sport practice cannot be understood by isolating the individual from their relational context. The concept of constrained lives proves particularly useful for interpreting the intertwining of family responsibilities, intergenerational relationships, and the possibility of accessing time for self-care. However, the analysis shows how these relational dimensions often remain invisible in narratives, contributing to a privatized representation of the difficulties encountered. Methodologically, the integration of qualitative interviews with tools inspired by Visual Sociology allowed us to capture emotional and symbolic dimensions that are difficult to access through verbal language alone. Attention to hesitations, silences, and voice

⁵ L. C. Sayer, P. England, M. Bittman, S. M. Bianchi, 2009.

modulations enriched the analysis of women's sporting experiences, revealing tensions and ambivalences that permeate the relationship between time, care, and well-being. Overall, the study suggests that interventions geared exclusively toward expanding sports offerings or organizational flexibility risk being insufficient unless accompanied by a broader reflection on the cultural models that govern the legitimacy of women's personal time. Even when material resources and support services are available, the ability to participate in sports crucially depends on the symbolic recognition of the right to time for self-care as a legitimate component of health. In conclusion, this work contributes to the debate on gender inequalities in health by demonstrating how female sports participation should be interpreted not as an individual choice, but as a socially and temporally structured process. Recognizing the role of biographical transitions, accumulation mechanisms, and the symbolic dimensions that inform sporting trajectories is a fundamental step in understanding and addressing the persistence of gender inequalities in accessing the benefits of physical activity across the life course.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the small number of participants and the qualitative nature of the research design do not allow for statistical generalizations; however, these methodological choices are consistent with the study's exploratory objective and the aim of identifying recurring social and symbolic mechanisms in women's sporting trajectories. Second, the analysis relies on retrospective narratives, which may be influenced by subjective reworking of experience; at the same time, this aspect represents an analytical resource for understanding the interpretative frameworks through which women attribute meaning to their sporting activity throughout their lives. Finally, the focus on a specific national context suggests caution in extending the findings to other sociocultural contexts, paving the way for future comparative research that can explore the role of welfare policies and cultural models in shaping gender inequalities in sporting activity.

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