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

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3 **Exploring women's engagement in leisure sport participation: the influence of serious**
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5 **leisure in Basque pelota**
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10 **Abstract**
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12 Women participate in different sport activities in their leisure time, with different levels of
13 involvement. The aim of this study was to analyse the meanings that underlie women's
14 participation in and commitment to leisure-time sport in traditionally masculine domain
15 sports. Thirty-eight women between 22 and 60 years old participated in this ethnographic
16 study, which used semi-structured interviews. The theoretical framework used for the
17 analysis was informed by a feminist approach and the Serious Leisure Perspective. Inductive
18 coding was employed. The data analysis revealed that recreational and competitive female
19 athletes had different levels of engagement and attributed different meanings to their sport
20 practice depending on their form of participation, their commitment, and the lifestyle built
21 around it. It is concluded that the seriousness with which the activities are carried out
22 influences the sport involvement of female Basque pelota players, which should be taken into
23 account to promote women's leisure time sport.
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40 *Keywords:* recreation, women, sport, Serious Leisure Perspective
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3 **Exploring women's engagement in leisure sport participation: the influence of serious**
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5 **leisure in Basque pelota**
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10 *Leisure-time sport participation in women: experiences and meanings*
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12 The analyses of gender differentiation in leisure concluded that men have greater
13 access to leisure than women (Kay, 2000). This influences gender differences in sports
14 participation. As concluded by Kay, "whether family-related policies encourage women to
15 see themselves mainly as caregivers within the family unit, or as citizens with individualized
16 rights, is likely to affect both their sense of entitlement to personal leisure and their ability to
17 access it" (Kay, 2000, p. 247).
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26 Physical activity and sport are beneficial for mental health in both its psychosocial
27 and affective aspects (World Health Organization, 2020). Participation in recreational sports
28 is considered a way to improve overall quality of life (Anaza & McDowell, 2013). It has also
29 been found that community participation in sport activities improves the physical health of
30 women (Leipert et al., 2011), and that shared leisure experiences can promote closeness and
31 social support (Mair, 2009). Several studies have noted that group participation can facilitate
32 women's persistence in recreational activities and thus affect social relations (Wood &
33 Danylchuk, 2011, 2012). However, there are personal, community-specific, and
34 environmental barriers to them being fulfilled in leisure (Bruner & Chad, 2013), including
35 difficulties with time organization, health problems, fatigue, lack of motivation, and lack of
36 confidence (Kowal & Fortier, 2007; Thompson et al. 2017). Despite this, sport has the ability
37 to promote personal change in women and to become a tool for their empowerment (Deem &
38 Gilroy, 1998); in fact, one of the main objectives of leisure is to promote this empowerment
39 (Freysinger et al., 2013).
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3 The structure of the sports system is (explicitly or implicitly) pyramid-shaped and
4 includes a large number of recreational participants at the bottom who are intended to support
5 a smaller number of competitive and elite participants at the top (Green, 2005). Nevertheless,
6 this organization imposes limitations on community sport development initiatives aimed at
7 women's leisure time, where the main objective is not specifically focused on performance
8 and results (Rich et al. 2019). That is the reason why it is necessary to analyze the specific
9 characteristics of sport programs aimed at women in their leisure time. This should be
10 conducive to reducing barriers, to meet women's interests and preferences, and ultimately,
11 improving the sport level of women in their leisure time (Bruner & Chad, 2013). Along these
12 lines, it has been recommended to use empowerment strategies such as offering “women
13 only”, community or intergenerational programs, and to regularly organize activities
14 throughout the year (Fernandez-Lasa & Usabiaga, 2019; Fleury & Lee, 2006). Recreational
15 groups can be especially beneficial for middle-aged and older women (40-60 years old), as
16 they can help negotiate or resist social disadvantages related to their gender role and age
17 (Green, 1998; Kay, 2000). This improvement in sport levels would help to obtain beneficial
18 health outcomes for both the participating women and other members of their family, in
19 particular their children, by promoting an active lifestyle (Bruner & Chad, 2013). Emphasis
20 has also been made on the need to promote an approach centered on participants rather than
21 on activities, in order to ensure that programs can be more effective to achieve continuous
22 and sustainable participation (Rich et al., 2019). Despite the obstacles that constantly hinder
23 women's participation in sport participation in their leisure time, which could lead them to
24 stop their practice, not all participants abandon their preferred activity; some sought strategies
25 to deal with and overcome these difficulties (Anaza & McDowell, 2013). In the words of
26 these authors, this is why women engage in recreational sport activities in their free time:
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3 these activities give them a sense of purpose to become active, escape their daily routine, and
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5 improve their overall quality of life.
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8 When analyzing the experiences of women from a feminist perspective, Bartram
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10 (2001) concluded that the trajectories of women in leisure sports vary substantially. The
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12 experiences of whitewater kayakers collected by this author showed that sport activities can
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14 become an important part of sportswomen's lives. They often become wholeheartedly
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16 involved in these rewarding activities, despite the cost of practicing these hobbies, which
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18 become somewhat of a "career". However, she also identified experiences in which
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20 involvement decreased and was relatively short-lived, where practice did not require such
21
22 strong skills and abilities. Thus, situations can be found in which the same activity results in
23
24 multiple experiences for athletes, according to the different factors associated with diversity
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26 such as age, social class, athletic ability, and gender (Bartram, 2001).
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31 The participation of women in leisure activities that either involve major resources or
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33 require strong involvement are based on traditional gender power relations. Therefore,
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35 constant negotiation and commitment is needed for women to be able to participate in
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37 demanding leisure activities (Dashper et al., 2020). There are contexts where the meaning
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39 attributed to the sport in question has been related to serious leisure, as proposed by Stebbins
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41 (1992). Sport as serious leisure is an activity that requires spending time on a weekly basis.
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43 This means that it takes on a central role and is highly rewarding, given the feeling of
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45 achievement, contact with others, improved health, and time spent outdoors with the family,
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47 among others (Codina et al., 2020). This is why it is highly relevant to analyze sport practices
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49 using the theory of serious leisure (Romero & Madariaga, 2018).
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54 Many studies have relied on Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) to analyze different
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56 aspects of sport practices, such as running (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2020; Ronkainen et
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58 al., 2017), surfing (Beaumont & Brown, 2015; Portugal et al., 2017), or federated amateur
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3 practices in general (Kim et al., 2016; Iraurgi et al., 2021). There have also been studies that
4 focused on traditional sports (Apostle, 1992; Liu et al., 2016) and on women (Heuser, 2005;
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6 Rahikainen, 2020). For example, Bartram's (2001) paper showed that female whitewater
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8 kayakers experienced different developmental stages during their careers: beginning,
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10 development, establishment, maintenance, and decline or abandonment.
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15 However, not every athlete reaches the same level of involvement. The meanings
16 developed and the seriousness attributed to their activity are defined by a different
17 distribution of time (Hartel, 2014), and their commitment to and level of involvement in that
18 activity. Sport can also be practiced on a less regular basis and may not meet the
19 characteristics of serious leisure, which points to its counterpart, casual leisure (Stebbins,
20 2004).
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29 The authors of this paper have not found any previous research on the experiences and
30 meanings given by women to the practice of competitive and recreational sport participation
31 in connection with participants' commitment to serious leisure. Therefore, there is a need to
32 analyze the contextual, fluid nature of the factors that drive people to engage in leisure sport
33 activities, since different reasons bring with them different benefits and levels of commitment
34 (Shupe & Gagné, 2016). While there is a vast amount of research dedicated to women's
35 experiences in leisure sport, and how hegemonic masculinity impacts women's participation
36 (or lack thereof) in sport, there is a dearth in research about women's sport and recreation in
37 the Spanish context and the Basque Country related to traditional sports. Therefore, the aim
38 of this study was to analyse the meanings that underlie women's participation in and
39 commitment to leisure-time sport in traditionally masculine domain sports.
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57 *Theoretical framework*

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3 This study is framed within a feminist approach. As Scraton and Flintoff (2013)
4 suggested, the different feminist perspectives do not totally replace existing ones, but rather
5 contain aspects of the previous ones and are complementary, as they are not mutually
6 exclusive. This article uses different feminist approaches to understand the leisure activities
7 performed by women and the multiple experiences they have in relation to sport. More
8 specifically, the theoretical perspective adopted here focuses on feminisms about women's
9 leisure time (Merelas & Caballo, 2018). The role of women in leisure was invisible until the
10 gender perspective was introduced in the 1980s and 1990s (Scraton, 1994). It is difficult to
11 address the complexity of this perspective in leisure studies based on its definition, since
12 gender roles must be analysed to analyse women's leisure (Henderson, 1990). This study
13 starts from the premise that leisure time is influenced by a patriarchal social structure, where
14 inequalities based on gendered power relation force women to assume roles separate from
15 their individual identity which are related to caregiving work and family responsibilities
16 (Henderson & Shaw, 2006; Merelas & Caballo, 2018). Nevertheless, even though leisure
17 contexts are conducive to women being oppressed, they can also provide an opportunity for
18 women's resistance and empowerment (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991; Shaw, 2001). This
19 feminist approach incorporates the existing diversity among women based on the different
20 intersectional aspects that construct identities (Henderson & Shaw, 2006). In this sense, the
21 analysis of the situations and meanings attributed by women to their experiences in sport will
22 pay special attention to the discrimination and opportunities within this area (Merelas &
23 Caballo, 2018).

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52 **Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP).** Many studies have used serious leisure to address
53 sports practice. This construct was developed in 1982 by the sociologist Robert A. Stebbins
54 (1992), whose theory was a starting point to promote research on the growing number of
55 activities pursued by amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers.
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3 Serious leisure is framed within the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP). Based on this
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5 conception, Stebbins created a theoretical framework that synthesized the three main forms of
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7 leisure (serious leisure, casual leisure, and project-based leisure) and showed their distinctive
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9 features, similarities, and interrelationships (Stebbins, 2007, 2008). According to this author,
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11 all current leisure activities can be framed within the SLP (Stebbins, 2007, 2014).
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15 Serious leisure explains that participants become so involved in and committed to their
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17 practice that they specialize, improve, reach a better understanding of it, and evolve as they
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19 go along. A peculiar relationship is established between the person and the activity in serious
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21 leisure. Casual leisure can be considered the opposite of serious leisure, since it refers to
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23 activities that are rewarding on an immediate and short-term basis and require little or no
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25 specific training to be enjoyed (Stebbins, 2000, 2007, 2008). Casual leisure can also be
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27 defined as any kind of leisure that cannot be classified as amateur or related to a hobby or a
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29 volunteering activity.
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33 The continuum between serious leisure and casual leisure should be understood as a
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35 tool that helps to compare and describe the characteristics of leisure, and not only to facilitate
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37 comparison between different leisure practices (Shen & Yarnal, 2010). Each person gives
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39 different meanings to their experience based on their perceptions, which constantly inform
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41 research on different leisure practices (Lin, 2009). This transitory, relative, and
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43 complementary nature of the different forms of leisure leads to the need to consider not only
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45 the main types of leisure, but also of the different degrees of seriousness within the same
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47 practice. Stebbins (2012) himself explained that when amateurs are highly dedicated to their
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49 practice, they can be referred to as devotees, and when they are moderately interested, they
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51 can be considered to be merely participants. The difference between them lies in the amount
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53 of time they spend on their practice. This explanation regarding persistence within the SLP
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55 has been empirically demonstrated by several authors (Brown, 2007; Derom & Taks, 2011;
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3 Shen & Yarnal, 2010;). Based on all the previous literature on serious leisure, Hartel (2014)
4 developed the Serious Leisure Perspective Involvement Scale to help researchers in the area
5 to analyze how the different participants engaged in serious leisure over time. This Serious
6 Leisure Perspective Involvement Scale comprises different stages across a continuum, named
7 as follows:
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14 (a) Neophyte. This refers to a participant at the beginning of their serious leisure career,
15 starts with amateur practice and sometimes may inspire a person to seek to become better at
16 the activity in question (Stebbins, 2008).
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21 (b) Participant. Serious leisure pursuits largely unfold "within the framework of a
22 leisure role and its accompanying career centred on the acquisition of skill, knowledge, or
23 experience, or a combination of these three. Such a career requires no small amount of time
24 to take root and grow" (Stebbins, 2007, p. 79).
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30 (c) Moderate devotee. Devotees and participants are operationally distinguished
31 primarily by the different amounts of time they commit to their hobby, as manifested in
32 engaging in the core activity, training, or preparing for it.
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37 (d) Core devotee. A person who is more committed than a moderate devotee and more
38 serious about their activity regarding various aspects (perseverance, effort, perceived
39 benefits, relationships ...) (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003).
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44 (e) Devotee worker. An individual who originally develops their career within a
45 serious leisure activity which can become a job later (Stebbins, 2009).
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49 Using feminist perspectives, the aim of this study was to analyse the different
50 meanings attributed by women to a particular sport practice deemed to be "for men" that was
51 performed in two different forms of sport participation, recreational and competitive. The
52 purpose was to generate further knowledge about the characteristics of the different profiles
53 identified in relation to the Serious Leisure Perspective Involvement Scale proposed by
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3 Stebbins (2012) and Hartel (2014), in order to propose efficient policies aimed at increasing
4 the commitment of adult women to traditionally masculine domain leisure sport activities and
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8 empowering them through these leisure practices.
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10 ***Context: Basque pelota***
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12 This study focuses on a traditional sport that is very popular in the Basque Country
13 (an area located in the north-east Spain and south of France) called Basque pelota. It was
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15 customarily played exclusively by men, because it ranks among those sports that for many
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17 years were regarded as inappropriate for women (González, 2012, 2013). Even though
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19 women may become pelota club members, only 7.04% of all affiliated athletes are women
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21 (Department of Youth and Sports of the Basque Government, 2017). Historically, gender
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23 relations were a barrier for female pelota players to play this sport, due to male domination
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25 and discrimination (Fernandez-Lasa et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in the 1990s Basque pelota
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27 associations opened the courts for women to play the sport as a leisure activity. Furthermore,
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29 in 2005 the Gipuzkoan Federation of Basque Pelota (GFBP) launched a program called
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31 Emakumea Pilotari (female Basque pelota player) to encourage women to play pelota as part
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33 of a social, political, and legislative initiative to foster equality in sport. This program was
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35 designed and implemented in light of the sharp decline in the number of licenses issued to the
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37 women who had begun playing in the 1990s, as approximately half of them had stopped their
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39 practice within ten years for various reasons, including injuries, motherhood, or changing
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41 preferences. The program promoted three areas: school, recreational and competitive sport.
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43 This study focuses on the recreational and competitive modalities. Thanks to this initiative,
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45 which was broadly welcomed, female participation considerably increased in every area and
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47 satisfied the needs of those women who wanted to become Basque pelota players (Fernandez-
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49 Lasa & Usabiaga, 2019).
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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 programs, respectively. An ethnographic study was carried out by the first author of this manuscript with Basque female pelota players who participated in the recreational program. Eighty-three training sessions by 28 women (aged between 22 and 60 years old) were observed. Eleven of the participants were also interviewed using semi-structured interviews. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 Basque pelota female players (aged between 22 and 45 years old) during the same period. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants (Sparks & Smith, 2014). This involved differentiating recreational pelota players from players who had been issued a license by a federation, and who are called competitive players in this study. All the participants received information about the project and gave their consent to participate. Each of the participants was assigned a pseudonym to keep their data anonymous.

The data analysis was carried out inductively (Sparks & 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 & 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 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

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 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

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3 had been at a different time, perhaps at a different age, if I'd managed to get to
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5 a better level, it would have been different; but now that I'm nearly 50, I just
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7 have to take things differently. (Gurutze, recreational Basque pelota player)
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10 In addition, the choice as to whether they want to play Basque pelota on a recreational
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12 or on a competitive basis is also related to their beginnings and their level of ability, as the
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14 participants approached their sport practice in different ways depending on their life stages.
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16 In line with Bush (2016), the women who were members of the federation began to play in
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18 their childhood, when it was not so common to practice this highly masculinized sport.
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20 Therefore, they socialized with men and tended to display more aggressive playing styles.
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22 Their performance was linked to showing themselves to be better than their rivals and to
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24 achieving a successful career based on their skills. As reported by Eider:
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28 When I started, I always played with boys. I played all day. I have always
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30 been quite a skilful girl; I was quite good compared to some people.
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32 (Eider, member of a Basque pelota federation. competitive player)
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35 Similarly, the participants engaged with discourses related to ability or to "being good
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37 at sport", which they reported as having influenced their decisions and their involvement in
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39 sport in general and in Basque pelota in particular. In this study, only few women saw
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41 themselves as competitive, especially among recreational players. A study by Clark (2012)
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43 on athletic ability and performance concluded that selection processes, emphasis on
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45 performance results, and ongoing expectations of athletic development were especially
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47 relevant to women's participation and sporting identities, an idea that was confirmed in this
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49 study. In this line, it is worth underlining that recreational players learned to play or resumed
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51 their practice at a later stage, when they were adults, many of them after having children.
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53 This reality reaffirms that women in sport and recreation are often seen as "women and
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55 mothers first" versus sportswomen due to traditional gender norms that suggest the primary
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3 role of women is motherhood (Henderson & Shaw, 2006). Recreational participants had
4 socialized directly with other women, their main aim was to build new relationships and to
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8 boost sisterhood and did not show as much aggressiveness in their game as competitive
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role of women is motherhood (Henderson & 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. The 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 is related to categorizing Basque pelota as a sport for men and how this view is deeply rooted in Basque society (González, 2012).

Participants' commitment

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3 Subgroups were formed within the players according to their level of commitment, as
4 they were very different depending on the interests, reasons, and contexts involved (regarding
5 both the activities and the practitioners) (Walseth, 2006).
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10 When time management was analysed, it was found that the temporal organization of
11 activities was different. Those women who belonged to a federation participated in the
12 official championships that are usually held on weekends and had to engage in two or three
13 weekly training sessions to prepare for these competitions. In addition, these athletes had to
14 travel to different courts all over the Basque Country to compete every weekend throughout
15 the season. This continued engagement could be related to the stages of their career
16 development, following the research conducted by Bartram (2001). Her study described
17 different stages in the development of a sport career, as specifically mentioned in the
18 introductory section of the article. Even though not all the female Basque pelota players
19 interviewed went through each of these stages, most of the competitive participants showed a
20 very strong level of commitment and dedicated a lot of time and effort to their sporting
21 activity.
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38 In line with the results obtained by Bush (2016) in her study on female surfers, female
39 pelota players also contributed a more social, complementary style, while identifying
40 themselves as serious athletes who demonstrated their own athletic abilities. In addition, it
41 could be concluded that in Basque pelota, relationships with other women also reinforced
42 their identities and strategies to reduce the discrepancies between their representations and
43 their self-concepts, thus using the sport activity for their own empowerment (Freysinger et al.
44 2013). They did this because they were able to combine their sport with their professions and
45 used it to cope with stress caused by illness or work difficulties (Bush, 2016).
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56 Within the recreational modality, the weekly and annual time commitment was less
57 significant, since there was only one practice session per week, and there was no need for
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1
2
3 players to adapt to the weekend competition calendar. The enjoyment of their practice was
4
5 limited to the weekday when the course was taught.
6

7
8 Maybe because they haven't even proposed that to me... if someone at some
9
10 point asked me "so, shall we play pelota?", I might go, I'm not saying I
11
12 wouldn't, but this hasn't happened. I'd just put the material in my bag and see
13
14 you next week. (Karmele, recreational pelota player)
15
16

17 The sessions were held in the same town or village where participants lived, so there
18
19 was no need for them to travel. It was also found that these women practiced recreational
20
21 sport activities in their free time, and therefore their sense of purpose was related to finding
22
23 an escape from everyday life and improving their quality of life in general through physical
24
25 activity (Anaza & McDowell, 2013).
26
27

28 Plans change with children. You can't go out like you used to, and it's a good
29
30 opportunity to be with people. (Jaione, recreational Basque pelota player)
31
32

33 *Lifestyle*

34
35 The level of commitment can also be measured by the hours spent outside the specific
36
37 scope of the activity, that is, by the duties carried out by the players beyond their role as
38
39 athletes. The recreational pelota players in the study had a person who led the training
40
41 sessions (hired by the municipal service or the federation) and the players merely attended the
42
43 sessions that were held during the week, without assuming any further responsibilities.
44
45 However, in the case of those participants who were members of the federation, competitive
46
47 players, the sport was part of their lifestyle. Many issues could revolve around pelota; some
48
49 of them took on a role as players, coaches, and managers of a club more than once. This is
50
51 consistent with the study by Jaeger et al. (2010), who concluded that, despite progress in
52
53 expanding women's participation in sport, maintaining involvement requires that women
54
55 diversify their roles, and suggest actions to encourage, expand and consolidate female
56
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1
2
3 participation in all spheres of sport competition. Regarding the need to take up decision-
4
5 making positions, Ibone noted:

6
7
8 Most of those responsible for pelota clubs are men. That is why women have
9
10 to step in to meet the needs of women. This is how I see it. I think that's
11
12 missing, someone to take care of the girls, that is what I am doing in my club.
13
14 (Ibone, Basque pelota player and member of the federation)

15
16
17 The ties female players formed with other athletes were closely related to the link they
18
19 had to the sport, since the establishment and strengthening of social relationships was also
20
21 different depending on the mode of sport participation. The competitive players felt that they
22
23 were part of the community. They developed social relations with other players, helping each
24
25 other to challenge constraints and stereotypes, forging ongoing friendships, and making plans
26
27 outside the court to strengthen their ties. Regarding their sport practice, they also organized
28
29 specific unscheduled meets outside the scope of championships and matches. This has been
30
31 and continues to be a way to reinforce their identities through relationships with other
32
33 women, and the ways in which these identities are enacted and negotiated were often
34
35 different from those of their male counterparts (Bush, 2016). The connection with women,
36
37 both inside and outside the activity, seemed to shape and reinforce the identity of women as
38
39 athletes, confirming their sense of belonging (Bush, 2016).
40
41
42
43

44
45 It's like another family. When championships start, you're already looking
46
47 forward to playing. So, you try to show how well you play, but at the same
48
49 time, you have a game and then a meeting, so you stay and see them. In the
50
51 end it is a family. I spend more hours with the women I play with than at
52
53 home, ha, ha. It's true that you make really good friends. [...] You're not
54
55 equally close to all of them, but the truth is that when feel close to someone,
56
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1
2
3 you become really good friends. (Nekane, Basque pelota player and member
4
5 of the federation, competitive player)
6
7

8 For women who played recreationally, however, in most cases these friendships or
9
10 meetings were limited to the weekly training session. There were no continuing or further ties
11
12 beyond the court, as stated by Zuriñe:
13

14 The truth is, I don't know much about the women who are in the group. I
15
16 mean, we don't do stuff together in everyday life; when we see each other on
17
18 the street we just say 'hello'. My relationship with them comes from the course
19
20 we do, playing at the court. (Zuriñe, recreational Basque pelota player)
21
22
23

24 Nonetheless, this study found that the meanings attributed to the sport activity by the
25
26 participants differed according to the type of practice and the commitment of each of them.
27
28 Those players who were members of the pelota federation, competitive players, could be
29
30 linked to the SLP 'devotee' profile (Hartel, 2014), whereas those who played recreationally
31
32 were closer to the category of 'participants' or could be said to engage in casual leisure,
33
34 according to their characteristics (Hartel, 2014; Stebbins, 2012). This analysis is based on the
35
36 experiences of women at the beginning of their sport practice and the level of skill,
37
38 involvement, and time dedicated to the activity, including the lifestyle created around these
39
40 leisure time activities.
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43

44 **Conclusions**

45
46 This study has found that there is a relationship between the concept of serious leisure
47
48 and women's experiences when they play traditionally masculine domain sports in the Basque
49
50 Country. Despite the fact that women's leisure-time sport experiences have different
51
52 meanings for different individuals, there is a continuum where female athletes can be placed
53
54 according to their varying degrees of "seriousness", their trajectories, and their experiences in
55
56 the field. This yields a distinction between those who belonged to the federation, who played
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1
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3 pelota on a competitive basis, and those who engaged in their practice on a recreational basis.
4
5 Pelota players in the competitive field devoted much time to their practice, and their main
6
7 objectives included preparing for and participating in competitions. In addition, their
8
9 relationship with the activity extended to other aspects of their life, as they were involved in
10
11 roles related to the management of their clubs and strengthened friendship ties with other
12
13 participants. For the recreational participants, their weekly pelota session was part of their
14
15 routine, where the leisure or pleasant nature of the activity predominated. Unlike competitive
16
17 pelota players, their relationships with other participants were limited to the activity they
18
19 shared once a week. Moreover, they combine their sport activity with gender roles and family
20
21 responsibilities.
22
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26 According to the results obtained in this study, competitive organized sport performed
27
28 by women is associated with a certain lifestyle, an important commitment to practice and
29
30 equal participants. In contrast, recreational practice can be an interesting strategy for those
31
32 who do not like competition or cannot face the level of commitment required to engage in
33
34 serious leisure to a considerable degree. While they will not reach the strong commitment of
35
36 competitive players, they can still generate an ongoing sense of enjoyment and social
37
38 relationships that can lead to them becoming self-empowered, trying to become active,
39
40 escape their daily routine, and improve their overall quality of life.
41
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44

45 In conclusion, leisure-time sport activities aimed at women should be designed based
46
47 on aspects such as the form of sport participation, women's level of commitment and the
48
49 lifestyle built in relation to these activities. Therefore, when designing leisure sport programs
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51 and activities for women, they should be based on the meanings attributed to their practice by
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53 the female practitioners, ensuring that they fit in with their daily lives, and that their needs
54
55 and interests are met.
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