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Obstacles to female participation in a tennis club: a case study

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ABSTRACT

Tennis clubs are spaces where, in addition to practicing a sport, social life takes place, which is an elementary part of them. Along with the benefits considered linked to the healthy outdoor environment, the social experience can work as a stimulus to approach them without having experience in sports. They are also suitable environments for sharing spaces of sociability and the social life that occurs outside the courts has an impact on what happens (or does not happen) inside them. However, it can also lead to exclusions of various kinds. Through ethnographic fieldwork, it was possible to notice the existence of difficulties in accessing the practice of tennis among women members of a club located in the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Within the framework of an ongoing attempt by institutional authorities to reach a greater number of players in Argentina and in the world, it is suggested that addressing the social and cultural dimension of tennis clubs is central not only to bring the sport closer to more potential players, but also to enable access and ensure its permanence.

Key words: socialization, clubs, health, exclusion, participation

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INTRODUCTION

Cradle of great Grand Slam champions such as Guillermo Vilas and Gabriela Sabatini, tennis is one of the ten most practiced sports in Argentina today. As recent studies have shown (Zaputovich, 2025), in the South American country it was one of the few sports enabled for the practice of women since the beginning of the twentieth century. However, tennis as a sport and tennis clubs as social spaces continue to function as male spaces. This tension between the formal qualification of women to play tennis and their de facto exclusion within club spaces is not new: historical research has documented similar dynamics in elite tennis clubs since the late nineteenth century (Boyle, 2019).

According to data from the 2023 National Survey on Physical Activity and Sport, 5.5% of the Argentine population played tennis (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023, p. 41), a slight drop compared to the results of the same study carried out in 2021, which showed 6.2% of the population (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2021, p. 20). According to the results of the 2021 report, there is a mostly male trend towards sports with rackets or paddles (20.2% of men practiced it against 12.5% of women) (p. 21). Other reports (González & Brum, 2024) indicate a 117% growth in the registration of tournaments of the Argentine Tennis Association between 2019 and 2024 and estimate that, at the time of answering the survey, a total of 4.5 million people over the age of 5 played tennis at least once during the last 12 months in Argentina. Research in other contexts has documented that female sex is associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out of tennis, even among young female players (Deelen et al., 2018), suggesting that barriers to female participation are not limited to initial access, but persist throughout the sporting career. Although statistical data are useful for a diagnosis, we consider it pertinent to implement multiple methodologies for the analysis of the situation.



Jeanes et al. (2021) highlight how certain everyday practices and micro-relationships within a community club exclude and marginalize women and girls, despite institutional efforts to foster a more equitable environment. In a context in which the institutions that regulate the sport seek to promote the practice of tennis at a global and national level (González & Brum, 2024), it is necessary to know first-hand the experiences of real players and partners to know what motivated them to approach the sport and what can keep them close to it or distance them. While previous research has highlighted the

role of family and social ties as factors that lead people to choose tennis (Bozkurt, 2022), the present study shows that these same ties can condition the type of participation that women have within the club, initially limiting it to sociability off the court. In this sense, an ethnographic work can offer a novel and fruitful approach to address the issue.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The results presented are a survey carried out in a tennis club located in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires with 650 adult members (in addition to approximately 200 members under 18 years of age). According to the club's own data, between 2016 and 2023, women represented on average 43% of the total number of adult members without major fluctuations (between 45% and 41%). However, the club has two different categories of members: among the "tennis members", who can use the tennis courts, there is a male majority that reaches 62%, while among "social members", those who cannot use the courts, the majority are women (during the indicated period they came to represent 73% of this group, although the latest data indicate that 61% of women are social partners). As in many clubs in the City of Buenos Aires, associating the family offers discounts on the fee, having to meet the requirement that a member be in the category "tennis member", a place generally occupied by a man, which models the places that each member occupies within the club.

During the indicated period there were no significant changes in the club's structure. It can only be observed that, as of 2022, over the total number of female tennis players, there was an increase in those with less than 4 years of seniority in the club (the figure climbed from 16% to 40%). This may indicate that the new members who joined arrived with an explicit interest in playing tennis, unlike what happened previously.

The fieldwork was carried out in two stages. In 2022, the first approach addressed the experience of women members who are players in the interclub tournament, an official team competition organized by the Argentine Tennis Association (AAT). During the second approach, in 2024, the experience of other members could be learned, both male tennis players who competed in the same event and members who played tennis only recreationally. During these periods, the club was accessed as a researcher to carry out participant observation and interviews. 20 interviews were conducted with women members of the club, between 18 and 65 years old. Most of the participants have a university or tertiary education. In terms of seniority as members, the group is heterogeneous: some have been at the club for more than three decades, while others joined in recent years. The selection was made by means of chain sampling (snowball), combining individual and group instances. The names used are fictitious to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

The club under study has characteristics that distinguish it from other local tennis clubs. Unlike the traditional clubs in the northern part of the city, historically linked to British immigration and the upper sectors of Argentine society, this club is in a neighbourhood with a working tradition and had among its founders a prominent presence of people of Italian and Spanish origin. Although the commune in which it is located has the second lowest average family per capita income in the city (IDECBA, 2025), it is clear from the amount of the social contribution (equivalent to 13% of the average of the index) and from the reports about their daily life (vacations abroad, frequent outings to eat, ownership of at least one family car) that their members have a purchasing power higher than the average for the neighbourhood. The club is exclusively for tennis, offers no other sports activities, and has 13 courts. In 2024 it registered 30 adult women's teams, 28 male and 7 mixed teams in the AAT tournaments; In the first half of 2025, the available records show 16 women's, 15 men's and 9 mixed teams, which accounts for a sustained and relatively balanced competitive participation between genders.

CASE STUDY, BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

During the first access to the club, a paradoxical reality was found. Despite being in a tennis club and being members of it, playing tennis was not the most accessible activity for many women. The first interviews conducted with women between 40 and 60 years old, who were part of the club's teams, showed an experience of struggle to facilitate the practice for women.

Rosana, a 55-year-old member who had played tennis at another club before joining, highlighted the healthy atmosphere and safety offered in the middle of the city, which makes the club an "oasis". It is worth noting that Rosana appreciates the codes and etiquette of tennis compared to other sports, which reveals a dimension of social distinction linked to practice (Lim et al., 2022). Inés, 54, came to the club because of her husband and has three daughters who also played tennis there. Her testimony clearly summarizes the experience of many: "The issue of tennis here in the club, women's, is difficult. It was always difficult. Now it is less. We had a training session, teacher, and that's when we all started to get to know each other and we started asking the club to really open the doors for us with the issue of women and participation because it was very masculine, very masculine everything." Another member expressed her experience in forceful terms: "I joined the club much earlier, but I was a member... one of those who drink mate and we are in the square. It was waiting for your husband to finish playing millions of games. So, I say 'it can't be that I only come to drink mate, I have to do something else'. So then I said, 'What's there to do?' Tennis". This scene illustrates the two options that many women had: to meet to chat and drink mate – a practice that allows community ties to be strengthened (Maciel, 2022) but that implied staying off the courts – or playing tennis, an alternative that, as we will see, was more complex than it seemed.

The women reported a series of inconveniences within the club linked to the accessibility to the fields, the availability of schedules to play and the possibility of training with a teacher. Generally, most of the courts were occupied by men, which implied an exclusion of women interested in becoming new players, who had to go to the courts with less maintenance. In addition, the schedules offered to them were during midday, when they took care of household chores or taking care of their children. These restrictions coincide with what was documented by Jenkin et al. (2018), who identified time constraints as one of the main barriers to sports practice, frequently aggravated by caregiving responsibilities. In short, the club was not presented as a favourable environment for the practice of tennis among women (Johnston et al., 2022). The question to be asked is: how is it possible that in a tennis club – where there is no other sport to play – the most accessible activity for a part of its members is not to play

tennis? The answer must be found in culture. Although there are studies that have addressed the issue of the development of a management culture to increase sports participation (Rodríguez et al., 2024), there are not many that address the problems that tennis culture enables around social exclusion.

As part of a plan to increase the number of players developed by the Lawn Tennis Association, Lake (2011) addressed the issue of social exclusion in a London tennis club. There he warned that the economic incentives were not enough since the new members had severe difficulties to integrate into the "established" members, whose barrier was drawn from the tennis culture of the club: level of play, behaviours on and off the court, clothing and etiquette in general.

In the case presented here, a first barrier is that of entry. The club requires the signature of two previous members to authorize the affiliation form. This restricts the access of potential partners who do not have sufficient "social capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). Elizabeth, 62, was able to join thanks to a friend who managed the necessary signatures, despite acknowledging that "I don't have a club life, I'm not a club bug." Her case illustrates that the social capital required for entry can be provided by an informal network, but those who lack such prior ties face a barrier that is not contained in any regulation.

Administrative income is not the only barrier. Patricia, 45, whose husband is also a member but does not play tennis, became associated during her pregnancy because of the green space offered by the club and pointed out that at first it was difficult to bond with established groups, although the bonds "come naturally" over time. It was only years later that he began playing tennis. Carmen, 48, a member since she was 12, recalled: "It's a half-closed club, if they already have a group formed, they don't integrate you much, so it took me several years to meet people to be able to play." After abandoning the practice when she lost her group of friends, she returned around 40 at the invitation of a friend and organized herself with other women to demand better schedules and form teams. It is important to dimension tennis as a group sport: what ensures the permanence of the players is belonging to a team or training group, which discourages abandonment.

The problem of access is structural and exceeds the good or bad intentions of the other partners. On one occasion, a member recalled that "the tennis coordinator grabbed a teacher and told him 'you take care of all these women'", erasing the capacity for agency of the women who had promoted the claim. Once the process was underway, there was a considerable struggle for symbolic spaces, especially the three central courts of the club, the closest to the social headquarters and used in competitions. Originally, when the women trained there, they received expressions of disappointment from many male members who referred to their poor level of play or accused them of leaving the fields in poor condition. In any case, the momentum had effects: in 2018 there were four women's teams, while in 2024 it reached 30 teams. Unlike what was observed by Lim et al. (2022) in tennis clubs in South Korea, where women built their identity around values of respect and distinction within the practice of sport, in the case presented here, women first had to dispute access to the game itself. Tatiana, 39, a member since she was 10 and a competitor since the children's categories, was one of the protagonists of that fight: "For me, women were pleasantly impacted. That today the fields are full of women is spectacular."



For many, the club became a legitimate space to dispute meanings and places. Backed by dozens of women, they managed to organize around a collective claim that also implied putting the body at stake and accessing a dimension that had been forbidden: the practice of sports.

Despite certain favourable results, another aspect to take into account is women's participation in spaces of authority. No woman has presided over the club in its entire history, as is the case in many Buenos Aires clubs and in the AAT itself. Although some members are currently part of the board of directors – such as Carmen, who since the new management is part of the tennis subcommittee and is dedicated to the organization of events aimed at encouraging the participation of members who do not play regularly – women with responsibilities tend to participate only in actions related to the organization of events. The way in which female representation is distributed in the various areas of the club, both at the competitive level and at the level of authorities, is a central aspect to consider.

LIMITATIONS, PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

This study has some limitations that need to be noted. First, the work focused on a single tennis club located in the City of Buenos Aires, which restricts the possibility of generalizing the findings to other institutions with different social, economic, or geographical characteristics. As it is ethnographic research, the information obtained was based mainly on the observation and testimonies of the participants, which implies a reading situated and crossed by the particular conditions of the context investigated.

Despite these limitations, the results obtained offer relevant contributions for institutional management and the promotion of sport. The case presented here can function as an illustrative example of possible conquests for women in access to sports practice, useful to make visible to the responsible institutions the existence of obstacles that are most likely reproduced in other institutions with similar forms of sociability. From a broader institutional level, the formation of spaces in which women can talk about their experience and a situation that remains imperceptible until the internal dynamics of the clubs are known can be encouraged. In a second instance, incentives could be considered for the presentation of women's teams in competitions as a way to consolidate their participation.

However, it should be noted that the obstacles identified are of a structural and cultural nature and are not resolved through the implementation of formal inclusion programs. The central problem is not one of quotas or formal representation, but of a historically masculine sports culture that has reproduced, within the clubs, the same roles that women occupy in other areas of social life. The training schedules offered to women were incompatible with their domestic responsibilities not because the club had an explicitly discriminatory policy, but because this unequal distribution of care work was never considered an institutional problem.

It is worth comparing the case presented here with the one analysed by Hang (2020) at the Club Gimnasia y Esgrima La Plata, where a group of members formally organized a gender area to introduce this perspective into the institutional structure of the club. The difference between the two cases is significant: while in Gimnasia the transformation was based on the articulation with the feminist movement, in the tennis club studied here the changes took place without the creation of any specific commission, through the sustained impulse of a group of women who faced successive refusals until they consolidated small victories. Both cases illustrate that changes in the conditions of female participation in clubs are possible, but that the ways in which they are produced depend on the institutional context, the political culture of the sport and the historical moment.

In this sense, it should be noted that the current national situation presents different conditions from those of the period in which women's participation in the club studied grew. In a context where policies aimed at gender equality are under public attack by state institutions, it is unrealistic to assume that clubs will spontaneously opt for inclusion programmes on these terms. This does not invalidate the importance of continuing to point out existing obstacles but rather forces us to think about viable interventions within real institutional logics, recognizing that the most lasting changes have historically been those conceived and conquered from within.

While reviewing similar experiences in other research from different parts of the globe may suggest a common cultural root in integration issues, future studies could compare different clubs, regions or institutional profiles, as well as integrate the perspective of other relevant actors such as coaches or managers. It would also be valuable to explore whether the barriers vary according to the age group within the same club, given that in the case presented, female participation is especially active in categories of over 40 years of age (Jenkin et al., 2018). This would contribute to a broader vision of the factors that condition inclusion in sport.

CONCLUSIONS

We suggest that there are issues rooted in the culture of tennis that make it possible to observe it as a sport enabled for women, but in which even within the clubs themselves they can face obstacles to practice. Some may refer to the cost of practicing it, but issues related to the integration of groups and incorporation into those already established should be focused with greater attention. In the attempt to increase the number of players, they should not be sought exclusively away from the field of tennis, but, many times, within the same clubs.

It is worth noting that many times the entry into the culture of tennis is not motivated by starting to practice the sport, but by a set of benefits linked to the clubs: maintenance of social status, a sense of security, physical well-being in the open air, and the comfort of sharing time with previous friends. It should not be lost sight of the fact that in different contexts around the world there has been research that shows difficulties in integration within tennis clubs, expressed in unequal allocation of resources or in the refusal to incorporate new members into already established groups. This dynamic may be motivated, as in the case presented, by gender reasons, but this is not the only aspect to consider.

We see then that the club remains a masculine space, where, as Johnston et al. (2022, p. 32) observe, "it is not surprising that the allocation of important resources often favours men's and boys' teams". However, the possibility of transformation and incorporation of new players has been evident. Even after having established themselves as teams, these groups continue to experience situations of inequality that manifest themselves in displacement in symbolic spaces or decision-making. As we observe at the club, opportunities for women to play tennis remain more limited, in part because their participation continues to be inscribed within an ornamental and subordinate logic. As long as this hierarchy is not questioned, the established order remains undisturbed. When an attempt is made to reverse this logic, tensions emerge that manifest themselves both on the physical level – the dispute over certain fields – and on the symbolic level – access to management positions or certain benefits. This dynamic allows us to understand why, even though tennis seems to offer greater advantages compared to other disciplines, structures of inequality persist in it that limit women's full access to sports.

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