

Shifting the perspective on disability: Sports role to promote social inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Disabled people may experience physical, mental, emotional, social, and financial problems because of their limitations. There are many sources of social change, one widely recognized is sport. This study aimed to develop more knowledge about the sport as a social inclusion tool by exploring the experiences of athletes in a Paralympic sport in Colombia. The study utilized interviews with ten wheelchair rugby players from the Colombian National Team in 2020. Through the thematic analysis, six themes emerged: Sport as physical and psychological rehabilitation; sport as a promoter of independence; sport as a way of life; Sport as a catalyst for reshaping perceptions of disability within individual, familial, and societal contexts.; sport as a promoter of family and social relationships and social networks and sport as paid work and economic support The results show that sport contributes to social inclusion through the empowerment of athletes personal, social and economic capacities.

Keywords: Health, Disability, Para-sport, Wheelchair rugby.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of disability encompasses individual elements, social connections, and environmental influences (Serrano Ruiz et al., 2013). It refers to any condition that hinders the body or mind, restricting individuals from engaging in specific activities and interacting within their surroundings (WHO, 2020).

Disability poses a significant public health concern, affecting approximately 16% of the global population, which accounts for over one billion individuals facing substantial challenges in their daily routines. This numbers are increasing, mainly due to the aging population and a higher occurrence of noncommunicable diseases (WHO, 2020).

About 85 million people with disabilities live in Latin America and the Caribbean. A significant portion of this population faces impoverished conditions and encounters various obstacles that hinder their personal growth and ability to participate fully in society (Garcia Mora et al., 2021).

In Colombia, a nation located in northwestern South America, the disability prevalence in 2022 stood at 8%, corresponding to approximately 3,974,522 individuals. This occurrence is more common among women and adults aged 45 and above, with the most prevalent types being visual impairment (44.1%) and physical impairment (22%) (ONU mujeres et al., 2022).

The Disability Inclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean Report indicated that disability has gained growing prominence in policy dialogues concerning education, employment, healthcare, and political engagement. These shifts have paved the way for constructing a future that embraces disability inclusivity. However, achieving complete inclusion for individuals with disabilities still proves to be a challenging and elusive objective (García, 2021).

According to the United Nations Office of Economic and Social Affairs, social inclusion refers to a complex and multi-faceted process. It involves enhancing the chances for individuals to engage actively in society, developing their abilities to meet expected social roles, fostering respectful and acknowledged social connections, and on a larger scale, strengthening the bonds, coherence, integration, and solidarity within the community (Silver, 2015).

Social participation encompasses various aspects of social life, including interacting with others, actively engaging in society, participating in political activities, and advocating for rights. Having supportive relationships creates significant social benefits, leading to feelings of acceptance and validation by others, as well as a sense of being valued by society. Additionally, these relationships provide essential assistance from family and friends whenever needed (Moore et al., 2010).

Access to goods and services is linked to the opportunity to work and earn an income that allows individuals to meet their basic needs and maintain a decent standard of living. This access also extends to education, healthcare, and transportation (Moore et al., 2010).

The United Nations recognizes sport as an important enabler of personal and societal development and its vital role in social inclusion (UN General Assembly, 2015). Participation in sports has been reported to have positive impacts in achieving personal and societal benefits, especially for underrepresented and traditionally marginalized groups as disabled people (Corazza & Dyer, 2017).

Research involving disabled athletes engaged in various adapted sports disciplines, such as boccia and wheelchair basketball, indicates that sports foster diverse avenues of social inclusion (Jaramillo et al., 2012). Moreover, these sports contribute to an enhanced quality of life and promote active social involvement (Alvarez & Ramírez, 2018).

Parasports consist of modified disciplines designed to enable individuals with disabilities and specific attributes to engage in them effectively (Cuevas & Moya, 2014). The most common wheelchair-friendly sports are basketball, hockey, fencing, tennis, and rugby (Gutiérrez & Caus, 2006).

Since the mid-1930s, sports have been promoted as a therapeutic activity in the integral rehabilitation of people with disabilities.

Wheelchair rugby, also known as Quad rugby, is an inclusive sport that has been part of the Paralympic Games since 2000. It is widely played in over 28 countries and caters to athletes of all genders with physical disabilities, primarily those resulting from spinal cord injuries. The game incorporates elements from handball, basketball, and ice hockey to create an exciting and unique sporting experience (Vargas Rojas et al., 2016).

In Colombia, wheelchair rugby began to be practiced in 2007 when a young man with a disability visited the United States for rehabilitation and discovered the sport. Upon his return, he introduced the idea, leading to the Archangels Foundation's initiative to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in practicing this sport. As a result, the National Wheelchair Rugby Team was established in 2011, enabling the country to participate in both domestic and international tournaments.

Sport plays a crucial role in advancing social inclusion and has gained significant attention in recent research and global policies (Corazza & Dyer, 2017). As a result, this study's primary objective was to assess how Colombian wheelchair rugby players perceive the impact of sports on their social inclusion.

The Colombian National Wheelchair Rugby Team has ten members. They started practicing sports as part of their rehabilitation process and have practiced wheelchair rugby for over five years. Each member has a disability caused by congenital or acquired spinal cord injuries, resulting in complete loss of lower limb movement and partial loss of upper limb movement.

The sport promotes social cohesion, social development, and peace. It is especially valuable for persons with disabilities stimulating physical rehabilitation and social interaction and achieving social inclusion (Bantjes & Swartz, 2018).

Social inclusion implies having equal access to resources, social and political participation, and full opportunities. In this study, social inclusion through sport can be defined as the process of improving the terms of participation for disadvantaged people, through the improvement of their personal, physical, and mental dimensions promoting their social, economic, and political participation.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This research is a component of the larger project titled "*Visual Function and Perception of Sports as an Inclusive Opportunity for Individuals with Physical Disabilities*," which is supported by La Salle University in Bogota, Colombia. The fieldwork took place at the sports training centre 'Cayetano Cañizares' in 2019, and

it was conducted by a team of three researchers. The interviews were conducted in 2020 using MS Teams video call and were recorded for further analysis.

The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical principles of research and in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and Colombian normative Resolution 8430 of 1993. Informed oral and written consent was obtained. Ethics approval was granted by The Health Ethics Committee of La Salle University, Bogotá Colombia (Act 046, 10 May 2019). Anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy were preserved. The testimonies are labelled with codes.

A qualitative design was used in which an interview was applied to obtain in-depth data from the interviewees, including ten adult athletes nine men and a woman aged between 22 and 38 years who are all members of the Colombian National wheelchair rugby team.

The interviews were conducted between August and September 2020 via MS Teams video call due to the biosecurity measures implemented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The approximate duration of the interviews was between 25 and 45 minutes.

The interviews were Open-ended questions about their perceptions of sports practice and physical and mental health, their relationship with family and society, and their access to goods and services.

RESULTS

This study uses thematic analysis as a method that involves the search in the data set of repeated patterns (themes) that informs the research question. Data Analysis followed six steps: 1. Repeated and active reading of the data; 2. Generation of initial codes; 3 Examining the coded and collected data extracts and looking for potential themes of broader significance; 4. Reviewing themes looking for adequate commonality, coherence, and data between themes; 5. Defining and naming themes building a definition and narrative description of each theme and its pertinence with the research question; 6. Writing the final analysis and description of findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The findings revealed thematic trends from the interviews about the meaning and benefit of sports practice, interaction with society and family as an athlete, family support, access to social services, health, and education, and financial status. Finally, the athlete's perception of the influence of sport is perceived by family and society.

The collective conclusions validate prior research outcomes regarding sports' role in promoting social integration. More insight into athletes' viewpoints is detailed later.

Sports as a physical and psychological rehabilitation tool

Most of these young individuals have found that sports offer a chance for both physical and psychological rehabilitation, assisting them in surpassing their limitations:

*"After my accident 22 years ago, I spent three years in the rehabilitation process, and they informed me that no further progress was possible, essentially limiting me. However, when I discovered and started participating in this sport, I noticed a gradual improvement in my mobility, even in my wheelchair. I consider it the most effective form of rehabilitation for a person with a disability."*A8

Due to its remarkable effectiveness as a rehabilitation choice, athletes expressed their strong recommendation for this sport to other individuals with disabilities:

*"When I communicate with individuals who have recently experienced an accident, I share my personal journey, including my mindset before and after the incident. The intention is to offer them insight into the sport if they are interested. Paralympic sports have the potential to elevate them to a new level of possibilities."*A4

Athletes recognize that engaging in sports not only promotes physical rehabilitation but also significantly enhances their overall health condition:

*"From a physical standpoint, I can make a striking comparison between who I was before engaging in sports and the person I am today; the transformation is remarkable. Moreover, there has been significant improvement in my psychological well-being, igniting a strong desire to continue pursuing this and countless other endeavours; it's an incredible and profound change."*A4

Furthermore, rugby players acknowledge that engaging in sports has contributed to the enhancement of their self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-control. These aspects have been notably affected in a positive manner:

*"After an accident, one may feel the urge to withdraw from social interactions due to low self-esteem. However, engaging in sports has the remarkable effect of boosting self-esteem, not solely because of becoming a high-performance player, but also due to the positive impact it has on one's health and social life. Moreover, it plays a vital role in bolstering individuals' confidence to venture into activities that may differ from their accustomed routines."*A2

Sport as a promoter of independence

Engaging in sports has encouraged young individuals to attain increased independence in their daily activities:

"Your mindset undergoes a significant transformation,"..." One person stated that they no longer require assistance from others; the sport has empowered them to be independent and has completely changed their life." A2"

*"It's like night and day; I used to be completely dependent, unable to even brush my teeth, but now I can manage everything on my own."*A3

Sport as a lifestyle

Engaging in wheelchair rugby has become a lifestyle for these young individuals, offering them fresh outlooks and opportunities:

*"You begin to expand your horizons, realizing that life didn't come to an end with the accident; instead, it marked the beginning of a new chapter. As you learn to live differently, you become adaptable and discover that everything is achievable."*A3

*"Engaging in sports significantly alters one's mindset as it provides a sense of purpose to your life. I believe that God has a purpose for everyone, and this is one of them,"..."This experience has transformed our perspectives, changing how we think and behave."*A6

Sports as a catalyst for reshaping perceptions of disability within individual, familial, and societal contexts

The evolution of wheelchair rugby has brought about a shift in how players perceive their disabilities:

"Our motto is that disability is mental." A7

Athletes report that their families' perceptions of disability have undergone transformation ever since they began participating in wheelchair rugby:

"Previously, my relationship with my family wasn't great. However, ever since I got involved in this sport and achieved numerous accomplishments, they have started to view me differently—with pride and a desire to witness my progress, even though I'm in a wheelchair. This has been a significant source of motivation for them."A5

"The situation undergoes a transformation; my family feels a stronger sense of pride and heightened awareness of the progress being made."A7

Similarly, the players believe that engaging in sports alters society's perception of individuals with disabilities and the understanding of physical disability.

"In the past, there were often numerous prejudices surrounding individuals with disabilities, often seen as 'poor things.' However, today, those notions fade away, as the perspective shifts to view them as athletes, warriors, and individuals who have overcome obstacles to achieve much more than what someone who can walk might accomplish."A4

Sport as a promoter of relationships and social networks

The athletes express that their involvement in the sport has led to a strengthening of their family relationships:

"After experiencing an accident, the initial essential requirement for a person is a supportive family unit, ensuring that they are not left alone during the challenging time."A2

The sport has enabled certain players to cultivate social connections:

"In my situation, sports played a pivotal role because following my accident, I became isolated at home, and my shyness limited my social interactions, leaving me with almost no social life. However, engaging in sports helped me connect with others and improve my ability to interact with people."A2.

Engaging in this activity has additionally enabled them to establish support networks, both among their team members and with other individuals they meet within the sporting environment:

"It's not just sport but the sports environment. Being surrounded by many people with disabilities, I see them as a source of support—individuals I can rely on and confide in, as we share many common experiences."A7

"Indeed, rugby holds great significance as it involves working as a team, dealing with various personalities and emotions."A8

Sport as paid work and financial support

The government's recent acknowledgment of the salaries for the sporting activity performed by these young individuals as members of the Colombian wheelchair rugby team has had a significant impact on their economic situation and lifestyle:

*"When I first started playing rugby, I enjoyed it because it was fun. However, as time went on, we began to achieve remarkable accomplishments, and the results became evident. We have accomplished so much that now we can proudly say we make a living from sports, and it is incredibly rewarding and fulfilling to get paid for doing what you love."*A4

The government's financial acknowledgment has enabled athletes to gain access to the social security system.

*"Now that we receive payment, we have access to healthcare. Previously, I relied on government healthcare, but now I can afford health insurance, which has improved the situation as I can easily schedule appointments when needed."*A7

Furthermore, being athletes grants them individualized attention when it comes to health and nutrition:

*"As athletes, we enjoy the advantage of receiving specialized medical care at the Sports and Recreation Institute, which isn't available through our regular insurance. While we are there, we receive tailored attention in nutrition, physiotherapy, and rehabilitation. This is a significant benefit we have as athletes."*A8

Regarding education, being an athlete appears to provide support for receiving training opportunities before retiring. As one player expressed:

"Recently, I received a call from sports psychology where they discussed my age and the future of my sports career. They inquired about my retirement plans, what I intend to pursue next, and if I have considered staying involved in the sports field. They offered to help guide us towards physical preparation to become coaches. "

DISCUSSION

Sports foster the holistic rehabilitation of athletes as it entails not only physical improvement and consistently pushing the boundaries of their capabilities, but also entails the dedication to strive for continuous improvement, surpassing previous achievements, and achieving specific goals to overcome their limitations.

Furthermore, engaging in sports enhances the physical fitness of athletes by promoting better health and bolstering their emotional well-being. This leads to increased self-esteem and self-confidence, motivating them to strive for personal growth and fostering greater independence in various aspects of their lives. These outcomes align with the favourable effects associated with sports practice highlighted by Bailey in 2005, and the findings of (Alvarez & Ramírez, 2018) on the positive influence of sports on the autonomy and independence of individuals with disabilities.

The results highlight how sports influence the socio-emotional aspects demonstrated through individuals' interactions within themselves, with others, and in social groups within their sociocultural environment. Similar findings have been documented in other studies (Alvarez & Ramírez, 2018).

Within the individual realm, it becomes apparent that sports lead to a transformation in how each wheelchair rugby player perceives physical disability, thereby creating a heightened awareness of their potential. They come to view the real limitation as "*mental*" rather than physical. Moreover, their self-perception undergoes a shift, acknowledging themselves as true "*athletes*." The practice of sports becomes an integral part of their daily lives and a life-long endeavour through which they have attained psychological stability, independence, and social integration, aligning with the findings of the study (Alvarez & Ramírez, 2018).

In the social aspect, athletes emphasize the importance of support networks for people with disabilities throughout the rehabilitation process, as they remain vulnerable and fragile after the loss of functionality. They find that sports serve as a cornerstone for family unity, significantly contributing to strengthening family bonds and relationships.

According to the study conducted by (Camargo & Forero, 2018), family support is a crucial element that greatly facilitates the rehabilitation process for these athletes.

Regarding social interactions within groups, these young individuals express those sports provide them with opportunities to form social networks since teamwork enables them to build their identity within the group. As time progresses, the team evolves into a close-knit family, serving as a support network for each other.

Moreover, sports transform the societal perception of disability by dismantling the barriers of exclusion and promoting the embrace of diversity. This shift changes the social label from an "*underprivileged person*" to that of an "*athlete*" seen as someone who demonstrates resilience and determination. The study conducted by (Jaramillo et al., 2012) reported similar findings.

In this manner, sports emerge as a platform that encourages social inclusion by promoting tolerance, respect, cooperation, loyalty, and friendship, all while upholding the crucial values of fair play—the essential ethical principles of sports (Marivoet, 2014).

As society becomes more conscious and appreciative of athletes with disabilities, their resilience and ability to achieve their full potential despite physical limitations, the perception of these individuals shifts from "*compassion*" to "*admiration*." Consequently, sports bring visibility to the athlete as someone with diverse abilities and capabilities, showcasing their numerous potentials.

These support relationships that generate social value related to the feeling of acceptance from others for what one is, feeling valued by society, and getting help from family or friends when they need it, constitute social ties that promote social inclusion according (Moore et al., 2010).

When athletes experience a sense of belonging and inclusion within a society that supports their personal growth, they transform into individuals who contribute positively to their families, communities, and the broader society (Alvarez & Ramírez, 2018).

In Colombia, starting from the political constitution of 1991, the acknowledgment of the entitlement of every individual to engage in leisure activities, participate in sports, and utilize their leisure time has been established (Gobierno de Colombia, 1991).

Furthermore, Colombia enacted a Law in 1995 that guarantees the advancement, oversight, leisure activities, physical education, and Paralympic sports for individuals with disabilities. (Gobierno de Colombia, 1995).

In the year 2000, the establishment of Law 582 took place. Within this legislation, sport was characterized as an avenue through which individuals with physical, mental, or sensory impairments could foster inclusion and complete engagement, while also serving as a catalyst for emotional, physical, cognitive, and societal advancement. It was additionally recognized as a mechanism for equilibrium and personal fulfilment, constituting a fundamental entitlement for every individual (Gobierno de Colombia, 2000).

Significant modifications have been introduced in the legal framework, as evidenced by Laws 1618 of 2013, 1145 of 2007, and 1346 of 2009. These changes advocate for the acknowledgment of the rights of individuals with disabilities, fostering social backing in alignment with Álvarez and Ramírez (2018). However, there remains substantial effort required to effectively implement these policies and extend the opportunity for sports participation to not only a limited few, but to encompass all individuals with disabilities.

Despite the existing regulatory framework in Colombia concerning adapted sports, there remains a considerable need for further actions to ensure the successful execution of these policies. The objective of this study is to enhance our understanding of para-sports as a means of promoting social inclusion within the context of Colombia.

The acknowledgment of athletes' significance within society initiates with their recognition by the government, which provides them with financial assistance to enhance their pursuits. This aid transforms into an income source that contributes to their financial well-being, consequently improving their living standards and simplifying their access to essential societal amenities such as social services, safety, housing, and education. This accessibility to benefits further contributes to fostering the social integration of athletes. (Moore et al., 2010).

In spite of the swift expansion of the Paralympic Movement, there persists a lack of proportional representation for women and athletes requiring high levels of support (AHSN). Throughout history, both female athletes with disabilities and those with AHSN have encountered unique obstacles hindering their engagement in sports and limiting their presence in elite echelons of Paralympic competition. Nevertheless, contemporary societal and cultural shifts advocating for inclusivity, exemplified by heightened visibility and grassroots opportunities for sports involvement, have contributed to a general rise in participation among athletes from these two categories. It is imperative to explore novel avenues of research in the realm of Paralympic sports to guide forthcoming strategies aimed at maximizing inclusiveness while upholding the standards of elite sports competition.

Engaging in sports fosters social integration by uniting individuals through shared interests, creating a feeling of belonging, presenting chances for skill and competency growth, and enhancing 'community capital.' (Bailey, 2005).

Literature suggests that engaging in sports that prioritize collective participation (such as partner and team sports) could hold greater potential for promoting social inclusion due to the unique opportunities they offer for building relationships, establishing social bonds, and fostering trust among participants. Sports offer a means of integrating individuals with disabilities into society, creating a space for positive social interactions that counteract isolation and low self-esteem. Moreover, they enhance motor skills, leading to improved mobility, independence, and boosted self-confidence (Coalter, 2013; Green, 2008; Parker, 2013).

Furthermore, sports serve as a platform for people with disabilities to enhance their societal involvement, showcase their abilities, and challenge prevailing stereotypes.

Despite the widespread endorsement of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which represents a significant departure from the attitudes and policies of previous decades, there remains a considerable amount of work required to effectively implement these policies.

Ingrained notions about disability and societal attitudes persist, presenting barriers, and within the realm of sports, issues like gender exclusion and limited media backing for Para-sports remain pertinent challenges (Camargo & Forero, 2018).

Disabled women frequently encounter discrimination due to a combination of their gender and disability. Within this group, there is a notable lack of engagement in physical activity, with 93% of disabled women refraining from participating in sports (ONU, 2020). Furthermore, women constitute only a third of disabled athletes in global tournaments. To enhance their well-being and overall quality of life, it is imperative to promote and ensure the participation of disabled women in physical activity, recreational pursuits, and sports programs.

On a nationwide scale, there has been a rise in female involvement within competitive arenas as well. In the most recent iteration of the National Paralympic Games, there was a noteworthy 33% upsurge (from 445 to 595) in female participation when compared to the 2015 Games. Nonetheless, it remains apparent that a substantial imbalance persists between the overall count of male participants (2,465) and their female counterparts (595) (Ruiz, 2020).

The data indicates notable advancements in this area. However, the statistics also affirm that there is still a considerable distance to cover before being able to effectively communicate (and illustrate) that this concern holds a prominent position on the urgent agenda within Colombia's sector. It is crucial at this point to recall Khalida Popal, a significant advocate for women's rights (Ruiz, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research reveal that engaging in sports plays a role in enhancing the social integration of athletes with disabilities. This enhancement occurs by bolstering their individual, communal, and societal abilities, as well as their physical, mental, economic, and political dimensions. These aspects are interconnected with the practice of sports and the underlying values it encompasses.

The enactment of policies addressing disabilities introduces a multifaceted range of difficulties necessitating united endeavours and meticulous strategizing. Despite considerable progress in acknowledging the rights and necessities of those with disabilities, a discernible disparity persists between policy objectives and their successful implementation. Conquering entrenched attitudes, guaranteeing extensive accessibility, furnishing appropriate support services, and cultivating all-embracing settings call for persistent determination and cooperation across diverse domains. As societies progress, it becomes crucial to confront these challenges with inventive remedies, unwavering resolve, and a collaborative determination to forge a future characterized by fairness and inclusiveness for everyone.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The three authors were involved in data collection. They participated in the study's conceptualization, data analysis, and manuscript editing. The first author was mainly responsible for writing and data analysis. The

other authors participated in the drafting and revision of the manuscript and approved the final version to be published.

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