







Is it possible to unite women in sports? Brazilian Women's Chess League: from its foundation to its endurance

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Abstract - Introduction: Chess is a sport modality which the men prevalence obfuscates minorities recognition, for instance the case with women, as they are known more from quantity over quality, they suffer harassment, discrimination and explicit or veiled exclusions which are, when combined, the main aspects for a new justified space creation where women can feel safe. **Objective:** Therefore, this study objectively essays the personal and collective experienced concerns of women in the building blocks forming the conception, development and perspective of the Brazilian Women's Chess League (“Liga Brasileira de Xadrez Feminino” in Portuguese, or LBXF). **Methods:** The qualitative research approach was adopted in view of its experience reporting aspect. The perspective considered was that of the collective members, favoring an internal analysis of the experiences accumulated by those who constitute it. In search of quality to provide a better shape in account of events, the entity creation moments and the work to align the main principles in future issues were critically discriminated. **Results:** The main stages of the League were divided as related to its conception, its development and its future perspectives. Each of them was described in terms of its main milestones, modes of operation and characterization of its members. **Conclusion:** Overall, the institution resolution and purpose are to oppose to the current existing hegemony, hence its actions will be capable to hold in check a historical sovereign controlled and endorsed by men in chess.

Keywords: sport, chess, gender, women, collective.

Contextualization of Brazilian women's chess

Chess is a sport practice^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8} played by people belonging in a diversity of social groups across the globe. They face intersectionality in the concept of race, class and gender⁹. Referring to the latter, women are found in a minority group, globally represented by 198.453 (15%) players compare to 1.112.982 (85%) players, with a total amount of 1.311.435 (100%) officially registered chess players by the International Chess Federation (FIDE – as in French, the organization was originally founded in France and its acronym denotes *Fédération Internationale des Échecs*) regulation. In Brazil, the athletes' numbers echo a massive women's disparity of 4.390 (18%) against the men's portion of 20.683 (82%), with a total amount of 25.073 (100%) registered practitioners over the country^{10,11}.

While women participation is well established in international and national scenarios, the researches dedicated to comprehend their life paths and sociocultural aspects that influenced their journey through a chess player career are very scarce^{12,13}. The Brazilian community of women chess players faces adversities to exist and resist, standing up to inequalities in opportunities with education and socialization during childhood, or even when receiving smaller prizes in women's tournaments as adults. In chess, unlikely other sport modalities, categories related to gender have different configurations, the open tournament is available for all players regardless of gender, and the women's tournament is specifically target to women players. Furthermore, it is not rare to see reports of harassment, discrimination and violence that have been undergone by them. Those common occurrences unite

them as a group and differ them in terms of heterogeneity “When each case is not a case”¹⁴. We can see the urgency in treating these life stories through a concrete reality in everyday life, with one's experiences underlying both objectively and subjectively in their dialectical composing them.

In the light of those matters, it was founded in 2013 the Brazilian Women's Chess League (LBXF) by one of the country's pioneer women to be awarded the title Woman International Master (*WIM*), a sports title granted for life to women which, alongside other technical requirements, achieved 2.200 chess rating points in the international modality. In Brazil, 12 women possess this title. The League is an independent movement that reunites woman-identified chess players. It promotes, develops and interconnects chess players and other involved agents with the sport¹⁵. Currently the goal is to write an academic report about its creation, functionality, intents and, additionally, yet considering the views from its members with their human experiences and the deep effects in occupying those spaces as chess players¹⁶.

The pursued routes throughout the writing process

This study is distinguished as a qualitative analysis approach, using action research as an investigation procedure, mainly focusing on aspects of reported lived events. Experience is recognized for its relevance in the production and discussion of knowledge on a wide variety of topics, where there is a written manifestation of experiences is where a multiplicity of interpretations about reality laid in¹⁷. When knowledge is placed intersecting the processes, whether they are the most singular ones or something predominantly collectivized, it covers concatenation and memory from associative and reflexive abilities translated into a language work. The extension is according to its uniqueness, it becomes an important contemporary scientific product as it “refers to a theoretical-practical construction that proposes the refinement of knowledge about experience itself, from the perspective of a subject-researcher in a given cultural and historical context”¹⁸.

To analyze, report and examine the experience already lived from its content's reflection, it is requiring a dynamic recollection of what is already settled or is to be by the subject's data retained in the present, which it can rise again in subsequently reflections¹⁹. This is conceived in the repeated enrollment and active elaboration by the subject's knowing, enabling it to be implicated and affected in the construction of its research directions over different times. The report acts procedurally in the understandings of experiences from the challenge to articulate knowledge. It marks the individual and the collective the sensation of belonging, at the same time as perceiving,

translating and interpreting referred knowledge. Thus, the significance effect dispenses active participation of authorship and, when linked to the modified concrete reality by the discourse of science, is a theoretical-practical advance enhancer of a certain field of knowledge¹⁸.

It is not any kind of account of events, but a writing that addresses particularly the women's collective history, Perrot recalls that “writing a women's story is a relatively new undertaking and one that reveals a profound transformation: it is closely linked to the conception that women have a history and are not only destined for reproduction”²⁰, as them being agents which have a record of, above all, how the relation between sexes is manifested. Moreover, writing a female experience from scratch means to criticize the very report's structures that are taken as universal in the words entailing it, not only to explain the missing links and voids, but also to provide another possible reading. It is about making the occult being seen, rediscovering traces and questioning the reasons for the silence surrounding women as subjects of history. If “the history of women is inscribed in the genealogy of representations and language”²⁰, since the relations between sexes are different, then the way which their history is written will also be distinct.

The published report was built based in the League members speeches and debates. Notably, some of them were from the “Nucleus of Research and Academic Studies” (NPEA). The meetings that made it possible its urgency were held from remote meetings, mostly on monthly basis over approximately two years. The reflections consolidated in this paper represent a throughout examination of how the conception, development and future perspectives of this collective are organized. All of it was documented and arranged with its own elaboration and by guidelines which its members follow.

From the dream of a space to debate women's chess to the implementation of working groups

The collective was formed from the engagement of its members. The main stages of the League are divided as related to its conception, its development and its future perspectives. In the presented below are the axes for analysis. Each one is critically described, compared with the literature consisting the lived experiences and interpreted by its members optics:

Concept - The first moves outside the chess boards

The LBXF was originated when merging women with several chess backgrounds: organization, arbitration, education, amateur or professional practice, as well as mothers of players. Sharing values such as non-conformity, innovation, fraternity, respect for diversity, ethics, responsibility and teamwork, these women sought to change the Brazilian chess scene. Understanding the Lea-

gue creation when highlighting these principles allow us to navigate through the motivations behind this independent movement, in relation to other institutions associated with chess at a national or international level.

Fraternity, one of the pillars, translates into unity, empathy, mutual support and companionship among its members. By creating a space dedicated to women, the League acknowledged the unique challenges they endure and then promoted actions to build a more welcoming environment for the chess scenario. The non-conformism, also present in the essence of the League, has manifested itself in its very existence, stemming from the active and questioning stance of its members towards the social conventions of chess. The LBXF emerged as a response to the historical under-representation of women in a traditionally male environment as it is with chess^{21,22,23}. And it is broad beyond chess, whether considering the sports environment or society as a whole, especially in the Brazilian capitalist terrain²⁴.

As a collective, the League positions itself in accordance with feminist theories, anchoring in the sociological interpretation of reality as a social construction^{25,26}, which determines certain roles expected of women²³ and, in turn, it reverberates and reproduces in the chess sports context. In addition, we can observe an attempt to unite women and discuss these roles in order to question the impositions and the mainly limitations imposed on women in this environment. The League, therefore, corroborates perspectives prioritizing the comprehension of sociocultural factors, as consequences of women giving up to integrate themselves with the chess world, from competing professionally to ascending in any career within this environment. Among its players, the activities are not limited only to competitive athletes, but also to professors or educators, arbiters, organizers, journalists, streamers, enthusiasts or anyone who recognizes themselves in the women identity and are associate with chess simply because they enjoy it.

Development - pillars of the promotion and perpetuation of women's chess

The League, as a women's collective, has kept up with the world scenario and took heed of issues which affect minority groups, e.g. discrimination, verbal aggression and mostly the aspects related to explicit or veiled violence against women. This issue is still so present that, in the year 2022, FIDE declared the “Year of Women in Chess” in which, in addition to the goal of gender equality, emphasized the need to improve the chess environment for women. In 2023, the same organization spoke out against sexism and sexual abuse in chess after receiving a letter written by more than 100 women reporting the violence²⁷. The Federation outlined that it stands firmly against any behavior and actions based on sexism, including any form of abuse, as well it directs where one should look for the procedure to lodge a complaint at the FIDE's Ethics and

Disciplinary Commission and it ensures full confidentiality^{28,29}.

These topics alarm people about narratives triggering gender stereotypes, which can lead to physical and moral harassment³⁰. Such practices can have a negative impact on women, contributing to lower self-esteem, the formation of a negative self-image and the devaluation of their abilities, both affecting personal and sporting spheres. Thereby through actions and spaces for listening and speaking, the LBXF seeks to inform, giving shelter to and support girls and women in the chess environment. In regard of the younger generations, one of the main challenges for the collective is the permanence of girls in chess, due to structural and cultural barriers that often discourage their pursue in this sport³.

The LBXF stands the issue of gender as one of the central pieces of its work. Gender is understood as a social construct, which defines what is considered masculine or feminine in a given society and time. This formerly construct involves preconceptions about social roles, attributes and behaviors expected of men and women^{31,23,32}. Physical, psychological, behavioral and occupational characteristics. All of them often reinforce inequalities and harmful stereotypes^{33,34,35}. In this situation, one of its actions has included the creation of the “South American Chess Meeting”, that is now in its third edition as part of the activities that belong to the largest chess event on the Brazilian scene. In this event the League's volunteers coordinated activities that initially addressed issues related to these social constructions and then worked on deconstructing these same preconceptions. In all the meetings it was possible to see that the chess scenario still has an under-representation of women, it is often due to the misconception women are less skilled than men^{36,37,38}. By establishing a channel for speaking and listening to complaints of disrespect and harassment, the League fosters a welcoming space and a sense of belonging. Examples of conversations at this event have already been recorded, such as “Are you an arbiter? That's fine, but I'd rather talk to a man”, “if chess doesn't work out, you'll become a model” or “when you were born you choose between being pretty and playing well. You're beautiful”³⁹, them illustrate the sexist and misogynistic nature faced by women, especially in tournament environments. In this way, the meeting's initiative not only strengthens the participants, but also contributes in building a more inclusive and egalitarian chess community. By addressing stereotypes and combating gender inequality and harassment, the League have been in the pursuit to transform the world of chess into a more welcoming and accessible environment for women: by them and for them.

Echoing the ideas of Drucker (1954) and Kawasaki (2004) *apud* Nakagawa (2011)⁴⁰, the latter defines that a business plan, besides beyond financial results, must make sense to the public it is aimed to, it needs to create condi-

tions and seek meaning for its own existence. In this sense, over the 11 years of its existence, the number of participants in the League has reached 401 people. The greater reach required improving the governance, whereas its initial existence was in order to take the League's value proposition. Now it is consolidated in leveraging national women's chess in its various forms of manifestation, beyond its own dome. This was one of the moments in which the strength of the collective was noticed, given the different backgrounds of the members as students, undergraduates, postgraduates, specialists, masters and doctors in various areas of knowledge. They improved the activities' structure, partnerships, resources, relationships, audiences, channels, costs and revenues⁴¹.

The League has several digital communication channels in order to bring together as many members as possible, namely: email, website, Facebook profile, Instagram profile and a WhatsApp community. Activities in order to spread the work were also carried out on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. In person coverage was provided at congresses, seminars, lectures and tournaments. Volunteer work is the League's only and fundamental resource, with communication management and alliances with partners being crucial to reaching a greater number of people and making the actions a reality both in terms of execution and dissemination, citing support from companies, publishers, freelancers and independent sponsors. Volunteering is an important factor in maintaining and running the League due to its variable expenses, such as offering prizes and incentives in the championships it promotes and the submission and presentation of academic papers. It should be noted that both the tangible and intangible assets that the League has access to have been converted for the Brazilian women's chess community, without obtaining any form of profit from its members.

With this wide range of activities, respecting both individual and collective interests, teamwork was distributed through the creation of specific areas of activity. This is how the League became active through a working group and project cores to strengthen its management, communication, organization of tournaments, research and academic-scientific dissemination on women's chess, institutional relations and coordination with those responsible for events in the sport. All of these are critically described and mirrored below. It constitutes the pillars on which this collective is built on:

Executive and decision-making working group

The Executive and Decision-Making Working Group is the strategic core of the League. It is responsible for managing the other community groups and making decisions related to the projects developed or supported by the LBOXF. Its activities cover the competitive, academic, communication and relationship spheres, as well as other areas of activity that the collective may require. Among its

responsibilities is included: scheduling monthly meetings, managing the entry of new members into their respective groups, responding to messages addressed to the League, managing contacts, maintaining the website, as well as planning and monitoring projects and activities.

It is currently made up of 15 members who meet monthly in a virtual environment to deliberate on the League's strategic actions. In addition to that, the group is responsible for defining partnerships, establishing contact with professors, educators, coaches, referees and other professionals to joint initiatives to strengthen the League's projects or support partners. Its work is essential to ensure cohesion between the volunteers, between the different sectors and to foster the activities development promoted by the organization.

Center for research and academic studies

The League's most active collective. It aims to portray, discuss and understand the reality of women's chess in Brazil and abroad and being viewed as an innovative and original approach for being the only Brazilian research group aimed specifically at this audience. The group is currently made up of 15 volunteers interested in reading, writing, reflecting and publishing content related to the reality of women's chess in Brazil and abroad, thus contributing to the development of girls and women in the chess environment. Their activities include analyzing research forms, drafting and discussing texts from current literature, translating materials relevant to the Brazilian academic field and identifying appropriate magazines and journals for publishing produced work.

Unlike the group previously explained, there is no fixed schedule for monthly meetings. The participants organize themselves flexibly, according to specific demands and the availability of time and effort to develop their academic productions. In a collaborative way where they contribute to the advancement of knowledge in women's chess and world chess, promoting the construction and dissemination of relevant knowledge on the established themes, composed of doctors, masters and undergraduates. In two years of activity the group has produced an extensive paper, it was published in channel's congresses, along with two books chapters and a journal's article, classified with Qualis A metric, which demonstrates its work potential and growth in the face of the possibilities of contributions. Especially with the large areas of Education, Physical Education and Sport, Gender and Sociology that it has faced.

Social media and communication center

The Social Media and Communication Center is responsible for managing and divulging LBOXF's activities, focusing on the main social interaction platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and the open WhatsApp's community group. Its work goes beyond the mere dissemination

of information, also involving the production of graphic materials, the design creation for publications and the establishment of partnerships with other related communities.

Currently, the group has 14 members who are responsible for various initiatives as fundamental to strengthening the LBXF, such as divulging online and face-to-face tournaments, disseminating published academic works and spreading the word about its activities in general. The group was responsible for creating the entire visual identity of the events, including promotional artwork, promotional calls and reminders. It was also responsible for announcing competition results and other relevant information to ensure broad visibility and engagement for the tournaments. With an integrated and creative approach, the Social Media and Communications Center not only expands the LBXF's reaching, but also consolidates its presence in the Brazilian women's chess scene and the entire chess community.

Arbitration center

The Arbitration Center is the most recent Brazilian Women's Chess League branch. Its goal is to articulate women arbiters at the national level, in order to promote conversations that engage the dissemination of chess laws. It is currently made up of 30 members and its main challenge is to initiate its actions and promote activities that involve its management, for instance as holding meetings.

As one of the LBXF's initiatives, it involves the promotion of tournaments and groups in an integrated way in competitions, especially in the supervision of online competitions. This group ranges from International Arbiters (IA), the highest title conferred in terms of requirements in chess arbitration, to Auxiliary Arbiters (AA), which is the first stair's step to grow.

Tournament circuit center

Beginning in 2023, the LBXF promoted greater women participation through its Chess Circuits. These events were organized in four online stages and culminating in a face-to-face final in January as the largest widespread tournament in Brazil. A milestone in promoting and fostering women's chess. Also in this year, the Ellen Giese Circuit was made, followed by the Ruth Volk Cardoso Circuit in 2024. Both honored outstanding chess players and their contributions to the history of women's chess in Brazil.

The organized tournaments by this center are exclusively aimed at women, while covering all age groups. In addition to awarding prizes to the general top three classified players, there are also specific categories, which broaden the opportunities for recognition and encourage the continued practice of the sport, including classes with renowned personalities in the sport are offered to absolutely all participants in each stage of the circuit. This

broader and more democratic approach to the awards aims not only to increase participation, but also to motivate and consolidate the presence of women in the competitive scene. Currently the Tournament Circuit Center has the participation of 89 women who have been competing or are actively involved in the championships promoted by the League. This collective effort demonstrates the LBXF's commitment to transforming the landscape of women's chess in Brazil, promoting equal opportunities and appraising women players.

Events center

Compose of 14 volunteers, the LBXF Events Center plays a central role in coordinating the League's activities, whose work in conjunction with the Social Media and Communications Center and the Tournament Circuit Center. This group is responsible for leading the organization of events, ensuring that all planned stages are executed in an integrated and efficient manner.

Among the main activities of this group, there is the selection of the annual honoree for the tournament circuit, which includes carrying out researches of the winner's career and publishing her biography. The group also draws up the competition regulations, creates and manages the registration forms, defines the awards and establishes strategic partnerships with a volunteer group. They give special classes to all participants as part of the circuit's awards and organizes extension courses in basic chess training.

Open communication center

The LBXF Open Center currently have 159 members, it's an inclusive space for everyone who values and promotes the development of women's chess. Although it is predominantly made up of women, it also welcomes men, albeit in smaller numbers. It understands that an important part of changing the national women's national scenario also includes educating men and integrating with them in a social gathering matter, thus extending its space to men.

The main objective of this group is to tell the League's activities and promote connections between members, allowing open and fluid communication. The group functions as a meeting point for the exchange of chess-related information, ranging from local and regional events to specific activities which involve the participants locality specifications. By providing this collaborative and inclusive environment, the Open Communication Center strengthens community engagement and increases the visibility of women chess players, consolidating it as a practice that transcends barriers such as age, geography and gender.

Future prospects - the success of the next moves doesn't just depend on one of us

The LBXF is an independent movement formed by people who recognize each other and come together for the development of women's chess. The purpose is promoting the practice and appreciation of chess in all its forms on the Brazilian scene as raising values as inclusion, diversity and women's leading roles in the sport. In regard to its future intentions, it aims to: a) expand the number of volunteers engaged in the League and fostering new leadership; b) strengthen and diversifying the actions of the centers composing them; c) extending its national impact, achieving an even greater reach and consolidating its recognition in the country and in the world; d) provide a welcoming space for women suffering any form of violence in chess, whether them being overt or covert; e) build bridges to the international space, promoting exchanges with leagues, players and organizations in other countries to enrich the practices of women playing chess and establishing Brazil and the League as a global reference.

These purposes are in line with the collective "Commission for Women's Chess (WOM)", an institution associated with FIDE, which encourages girls and women to play chess, providing better conditions for them and creating a strong community²⁷. Noticeably, both societies are concerned with the cultural, social and economic inequalities suffered by this public, as well with initiatives minimizing the asymmetry between men and women in matters like the difference offered in terms of prizes in tournaments, the disparity between the number of participants in events, the discrepancy between the representation in official titles awarded at all levels, and among other aspects and indicators which it is possible to verify the discrimination in this sport, still predominantly shaped for men.

However, the participatory democratic and horizontal commitment to transform chess into a more inclusive, diverse and welcoming space, promoting women leading in all dimensions of this sport is challenging. In terms of obstacles faced by LBXF, among them are the difficulty in keeping all of its centers operational, the inactivity of some of its members, the impasse in decision-making and generational issues, the contingencies of time and effort suffered by its active volunteers, the slowness in applying the criteria for entry and permanence of members in the groups, the small amount of financial inflow, the absence of leaders who are representative of its respective groups, and other points that hinders its full operation. These are, therefore, relevant limitations to be overcome by the next working groups in the coming years. It is also important to point out that many of these barriers are due to the fact women have maternal responsibilities, they have very little future prospects achieving profit, and

reconciling home chores with children and work is not easy, alongside other aspects that interfere with the daily life of women^{27,42}.

In summary

This study, which objectively wrote a lived report of experiences related to the conception, development and perspective from the point of view of LBXF members is the first academic manuscript strictly related to this collective. It is a pioneer in critically portraying the *modus operandi* related to the way it works. It is also original in approaching the community from the perspective of its own members, a factor that provides greater specificity and detail based on the lives of its participants.

With regard to the way it is organized, it is noted that the vast majority of the League's activity is carried out online, either synchronously or asynchronously. The positive aspects of this way of operating include the possibility of bringing together a large number of people from different parts of the country in one place, the ease of handling a high volume of data, e.g. the group deals as a routine basis, and the potential for higher reaches thanks to digital vectors in a society as adept at social networks as we see today. However, acting predominantly in this way has negative aspects. Possible lack of identification between the women chess audience and this entity that seeks to represent them, and similar problem can occur in the tenuous link between its participants and the institution. In this sense, actions such as the face-to-face finals in online circuits and supporting the "South American Chess Meeting" are rare opportunities for its members to meet, at the same time it can fill these gaps.

The working groups which are the mostly active are the "Tournament Circuit Center" and the "Research and Academic Studies Center". This can be seen in the uninterrupted occurrence of competitions and the various scientific products produced by its researchers. This scope ensures that the community is engaged in the most common way of dealing with this sport, i.e. by playing chess as well as being attentive to the academic reflections which strongly relate theory to the practice of chess. By seeing them as complements, what the League produces scientifically feeds back internally, generating a flow of continuous improvement and development. Those things are intertwined with the knowledge of the life's reality and its main issues as being a woman chess player in Brazil.

A key point to note is that the League, as an independent movement, has no links with the body that governs chess at national level namely the Brazilian Chess Confederation (CBX). This raises questions as to why there isn't any relation, as there is in FIDE, a commission dedicated to the promotion and development of Brazilian women's chess. What would the movement gain and lose from such an insertion? How would its members have

positioned themselves in the political game that surrounds them? What glimpses of worldwide recognition could such an action bring to women's chess? These and other questions are pertinent and should be pursued in order to strengthen the collective and increase its visibility both in Brazil and worldwide.

In short, continuously increasing the encouragement of a culture that makes the Brazilian women's chess community friendly, respectful and a safe space has been one of the League's main goal. By these actions that seek to serve a diversity of audiences within this spectrum, this recent entity has won over more and more women fans from a counter-culture stance to the hegemonic actions that favor everything that refers to men in this sport. If, for the time being, Brazilian chess is still dominated by men, it is only through their endurance that this sovereignty will be challenged.

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