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**“I DO NOT THINK THE FEDERATION VALUES
WOMEN AS MUCH AS MEN”: GENDER
CONTEXT OF WOMEN’S RUGBY IN TURKEY**

**“NACIONALNA ŠPORTNA ZVEZA NE CENI
ŽENSK TOLIKO KOT MOŠKIH”: KONTEKST
SPOLA V RAGBIJU V TURČIJI**

ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine how the gender context is materialized at the national teams and federation level based on the experiences of elite Turkish female rugby players. The ethnographic research method was based on observation diaries and semi-structured interviews with 18 elite women rugby players who were invited to the Turkish National Women's 7s Rugby Team. The findings indicated a main theme and two sub-theme as “Conditions that need to be changed” and “Conditions that need to be maintained”. The first sub-theme consisted of obstacles caused by the under-representation and gender issues level, while the second indicates the importance of women staff in women's national teams and respect for private life choices. Playing rugby in Turkey is built on the gender roles determined by the society, reflected in the federations that are the main authority of sports environments. These reflections are reconstructed by the federation and transform into various practices that are reflected again in sports environments.

Keywords: Rugby, women athletes, gender equality, national rugby federation

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IZVLEČEK

Namen študije je bilo preučiti kontekstualizacijo spola in kako se le-ta uresničuje v reprezentancah profesionalne turške lige ragbija. Enografska raziskovalna metoda je temeljila na opazovalnih dnevnikih in polstrukturiranih intervjujih. V vzorec smo vključili 18 profesionalnih igralk ragbija. Ugotovitve so izpostavile glavno temo z dvema podtemama: (i) pogoji, ki jih je potrebno spremeniti in (ii) pogoji, ki jih je potrebno vzdrževati. Ugotovili smo, da je ragbi premalo zastopan ter da je v prinodnje potrebno več pozornosti posvetiti pomenu ženskega osebja v ženskih reprezentancah in spoštovanju zasebnih življenjskih odločitev. Igranje ragbija v Turčiji temelji na vlogah spolov, ki jih določi družba, kar se odraža v zvezah, ki so glavna avtoriteta športnih okolij. To se odseva v rekonstruiranih federacijah in preoblikovanju v različne prakse, ki se znova odražajo v športnih okoljih.

Ključne besede: ragbi, športnice, enakost spolov, nacionalna ragbi zveza

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INTRODUCTION

Although women's sports organizations have made progress in recent years, women's participation in some activities such as football, soccer, rugby, which have traditionally been perceived as a masculine and male sport, is still compelling (Magrath, Cleland & Anderson, 2020). Some certain activities in a sport considered as more or less compatible for females depending upon how appropriate women are with socially constructed female characteristics (Ashbolt, O'Flynn & Wright, 2018). Studies indicated that sports involving expression and gracefulness characteristics were more likely to be perceived as "feminine" sports (gymnastics, dance), whereas sports involving the use of force and heavy objects and physical contact as "masculine" (Plaza, Boiché, Brunel, & Ruchaud, 2017). Masculine and feminine characteristic differences in sports activities are the results of generally held images or stereotypes of genders in a society (Gill, 2007).

The socially constructed gender determines the status of females and males in society, with expected behaviors and roles (Martin, 2001). The roles assigned to genders are also determinant of behavior structures specific to various fields such as sport where women are sometimes labeled as being hard or soft (Mennesson, 2000). This stigmatization is not only limited to female athletes, as some sports are perceived as feminine or masculine in society, but participation in these activities might marginalize both males and females (Ashbolt, O'Flynn, & Wright, 2018). Krane et al. (2004) stated that the consideration of cultural influences that can potentially alter experiences is crucial to be able to comprehend the experiences of female athletes, as perceptions towards some sports could be specific to the culture of society and this sport. To illustrate, participation in sports activities dominantly practiced by males, such as football, rugby, and boxing, engenders obstacles for women, since hegemonic masculinity, which is arising from societal norms, promotes the dominant position of men, as society perceives these types of sports to be masculine (English, 2017). Krane (2001) also indicated that the varying degrees of constraint were caused by the traditional notions of femininity which are perceived as a negative factor for competitive sport, and the societal norms promote the dominant position of men in such gendered sports (Krane, 2001). This problem creates obstacles in the advancement of careers of females in sports industries worldwide, both in administrative positions (Adriaanse, 2017) and athletic career (Emir, Karacam, & Koca, 2015). To illustrate, Kaelberer (2019) indicated that soccer is one of the last male preserves in German society, however, the popularity of women's soccer is increasing with greater female participation in Germany, and women who practice this sport are faced with stigmatization.

These discourses compare women's and men's sports and treat women's sport as different and inferior to men's (Kaelberer, 2019).

Women who practice contact sports indicating violent combats, such as rugby, are among these women who face struggles. Rugby is emphasized as a physically aggressive and violent sport referred to as "man's game" (Collins, 2009) however, rugby has gained popularity among women in recent years. Although traditional perceptions of femininity are passive, fragile, and disembodied, researchers who study female rugby contexts indicated that athletes participating in already existed rugby culture and reproduce norms of rugby by developing disciplined rugby bodies (Broad, 2001; Chase, 2006). Collins (2009) indicated that whether played by men or women, the game maintains all the characteristics associated with masculinity including violence. The combative characteristics of rugby can play a vital role in the development of identities among women (Gill, 2007; Joncheray, Level, & Richard, 2016). Moreover, women who practice rugby previously reported that they like the aggressive aspect of rugby, and sport provides them with increased self-confidence levels (Fields & Comstock, 2008). On the other hand, studies indicated that reproducing the norms of rugby might be associated with negative outputs for female athletes. For example, the masculinity associated characteristics of rugby engender female apologetic behavior, which is identified as any behavior to negotiate the negative stereotypes associated with their involvement in sports (Hardy, 2015). Moreover, Ezzell (2009) indicated that women rugby players encounter homophobic and sexist stigma from others while challenging the conventional notions of passive femininity. English (2017) emphasized that women adopt beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes presented by male-dominant mentality, rather than developing their own identity to feel suitable to the sport.

The categorization of sports as masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral caused is largely a social construction (Magrath, Cleland & Anderson, 2020). Even female rugby athletes facing gender stigmatized discourses in British, Canadian, and Australian cultures in which rugby organizations for females completed earlier than many other countries and rugby can be considered as a traditional sport (Hardy, 2015). However, there is a limited number of studies examining gender-related discourses that female athletes experience in patriarchal cultures in which rugby is yet developing. Turkey is a country that has only recently embraced rugby, and the league for women 7s rugby started officially in the 2016-2017 season. According to the latest data of the Turkish Rugby Federation (TRF), only 5.3% percent of athletes are female which accounted for only 150 athletes. There are also no U-18 women teams in TRF. Moreover, As Turkish society is patriarchal and there are clear gender role differences (Sakalli, 2001), the

socially constructed heterosexual masculinity occurs in different dimensions of society and as it is important in organized sports in Turkey (Atencio & Koca, 2011), it may, in turn, affect the behavior of females in a sports context. Therefore, examining the Turkish female rugby athlete's perception would enhance our comprehension of socially constructed gender in "masculine" oriented sport in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, inequality between gender roles was evident in the gender discriminative discourses which are also shaped by the behaviors of stakeholders and significant others. The national federations of rugby are also one of these stakeholders and important for shaping the social structure of the sport, especially at the national team level (Furse, 2021). Thus, acquiring this information from experienced national-level athletes in a Turkish rugby context where the sport is just developing, would also shed light on the responsibility and application of the national rugby federation on identity socialization and construction for both female athletes and sport which is considered as men's sport (Joncheray, Level, & Richard, 2016). From this point of view, this study aims to examine how the gender context is materialized at the national teams and federation level based on the experiences of elite Turkish female rugby players and to describe how this gendered context is experienced by female athletes.

METHODS

Research design

Ethnography focuses on a group sharing the same context and their common language, values, behaviors and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Wolcott (2016) emphasizes that ethnographies are not only research on culture but also a research design on the social behaviors of an identifiable group of people.

In this research, the case ethnography design was used. Within the scope of the research, the women's rugby national team was selected as a social group to be examined. The research context is the national team preparation camps organized between 05.02.2019 and 18.06.2019. Camps consisted of 18 female athletes, trainers and federation managers. The researcher, who was responsible for data collection in the research, took part in these camps as an athlete and became the stakeholder of the context.

Participants

The criterion sampling method which is among the purposeful sampling types was used in the selection of participants for the research (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2018). The three criteria determined for participation in the research are as follows: (1) being an athlete in Turkey Women's 7s Rugby League, (2) being invited to Turkish Women's 7s Rugby National Team selection and preparation camp, and lastly (3) participating in research voluntarily. Based on these criteria, the study group comprised 18 elite women rugby players (aged 19 to 35 years) that had been invited to the selection camps for the Turkish National Women's 7s Rugby Team. The repetition of the answers was assessed for the data saturation, and it has been detected that responses were started to repeat after the 10th athlete. However, the data saturation was gradually achieved after 10 athletes in the interviews, all-volunteer athletes in the camp were interviewed and the whole sample was reached. The demographic information about the athletes participating in the research is given in Table 1 below. All names in the table have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Table 1. Demographic information about athletes.

Athlete	Age	Rugby Experience	Educational Status	Profession	City
Cansu	21	3 years	Undergraduate student	Geology engineer	Ankara
Feray	23	5 years	Undergraduate student	Physical education and sports teacher	Ankara
Figen	21	3 years	Undergraduate student	Electrical and electronics engineer	Ankara
Filiz	23	3 years	Undergraduate student	Physical education and sports teacher	Izmir
Funda	22	2 years	Bachelor's degree	Finance manager	Ankara
Halide	25	5 years	Bachelor's degree	Physical education and sports teacher	Konya
Hazal	22	2 years	Undergraduate student	Physical education and sports teacher	Ankara
Hilal	35	8 years	Undergraduate student	Physical education and sports teacher	Samsun
Huri	23	5 years	Undergraduate student	Physical education and sports teacher	Ankara
Irmak	19	1 year	Undergraduate student	Recreation and sports specialist	Bartın
Isil	25	7 years	Bachelor's degree	Sports manager	Samsun
Jale	21	4 years	Undergraduate student	Physical education and sports teacher	Eskisehir
Nalan	21	3 years	Undergraduate student	Sports trainer	Eskisehir
Naz	27	5 years	Bachelor's degree	Physical education and sports teacher	Eskisehir
Nil	26	10 years	Bachelor's degree	Physical education and sports teacher	Eskisehir
Orkide	29	6 years	Bachelor's degree	Physical education and sports teacher	Bilecik
Oya	25	3 years	Bachelor's degree	Physical education and sports teacher	Izmir
Pelin	24	3 years	Undergraduate student	Physical education and sports teacher	Istanbul

Data collection procedures

The research data were collected during the period of the Turkish Women's 7s Rugby Championships (05.02.2019/18.06.2019). The athletes who were called to the national team selection camps during the championships were contacted. At the beginning of the data collection process, participants were informed about the purpose and process of the research and their consent was obtained. The semi-structured interviews and observation diaries were conducted by the same researcher and at appropriate dates and settings for the participants. In the collection of research data, semi-structured individual interviews were done with the players congenial to the camp rules. The interviews were conducted during the resting periods of the players. Focus group discussions were not permitted by the federation managers in order to not reduce the resting periods of the players. The duration of the semi-structured interviews ranged from 15 to 30 minutes. During the research process, attention was paid to open and transparent communication with the participants, and each participant approved the semi-structured interview transcripts.

In all processes of qualitative research, the stance, self-reflexivity, and ethical values of the researcher affect the ethical dimension of the research (Patton, 2014). Within the scope of this research, the researcher's ethics were prioritized throughout the process. Permission for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee commissions of Eskisehir Technical University (Protocol no.: 10865) and the relevant authorities. Importance was given to the selection of participants voluntarily. All participants were informed about the purpose and process of the research, and identities were protected with the use of pseudonyms.

Data analysis

In the process of data analysis, thematic analysis approach was used, which allows to discover the connections of data with each other and reveal meaningful patterns (Terry et al., 2017). In the first stage of the process, all interviews were transcribed and typos were corrected. Later, the views and experiences of the athletes obtained from the interviews and observations were divided into the smallest meaningful information units. Afterward, the researcher diaries and the interview data were combined. In the resulting holistic data set, small meaningful units that were thought to be related to each other were gathered together to create categories. On the way from categories to themes, the inter-rater reliability proposed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2018) was taken as a basis for consensus among researchers. The research data were first coded separately by two authors who were experts in qualitative research analysis, and then the

authors came together to work on the compatibility of the codings. In determining the themes, the inter-rater reliability between coders was calculated as 92% and it was seen that this rate was among the recommended values (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2018).

Nvivo 12 software which is frequently used by qualitative researchers was used to manage the data more easily during the analysis and the researchers contributed to the analysis with a collaborative and inductive approach throughout the analysis process.

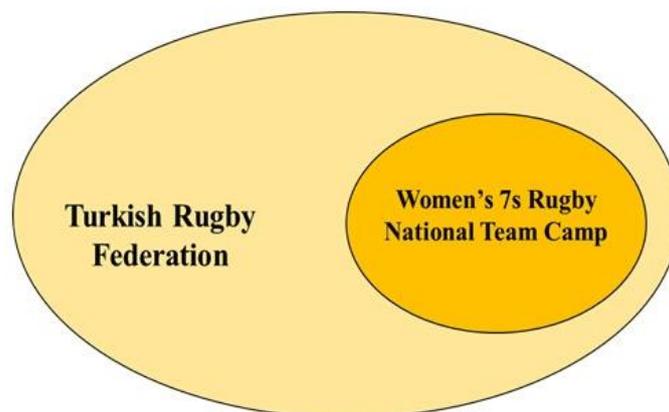
Credibility

To contribute to the credibility dimension of the research, expert opinions were included in the creation of the data collection tools and data analysis. The comprehensibility and credibility of the revealed themes were checked by an expert researcher who conducted qualitative research in the field of sports sciences. The researchers also took care to present the experiences of the participants in sports environments with rich descriptions of physical and social characteristics. At every stage of the research, attention was paid to avoid bias.

RESULTS

In this part of the research, we will present the data that we interpreted with an inductive approach, obtained from semi-structured interviews and observation diaries. First of all, in Figure 1 below, the position of the athlete group from which we have collected data within the research context is given with a visual.

Figure 1. Position of participants in the context.



As can be seen in Figure 1., our participant group is a privileged and special group that is included in the context of the federation, affected by the practices of the federation, and has the opportunity to experience these practices firsthand. Accordingly, the data obtained as a result

of the interviews and observation diaries were processed in line with the research purpose and formed in two sub-themes under the main theme of the gender context of the federation. The main and sub-themes are given in Figure 2. below.

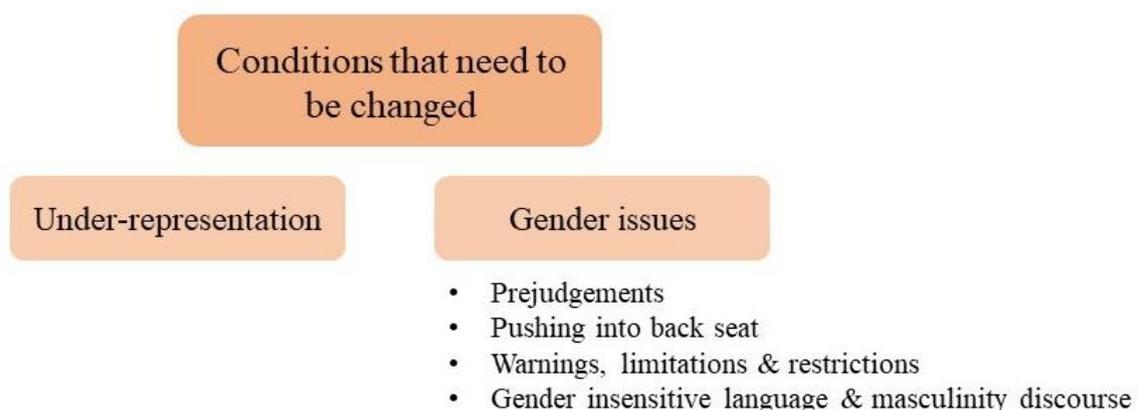
Figure 2. Main theme and sub-themes.



Sub-theme 1: Conditions that need to be changed

Based on the collected data, the aspects that the TRF needs to be changed and improved in the context of gender will be described in the first sub-theme. The first sub-theme and topics related to this theme are given below in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Conditions that need to be changed.



As can be seen in Figure 3, based on the experiences of women athletes in the context of TRF, it was emphasized that there is a need for change and improvement in mainly two topics.

The under-representation situation, which is the subject of the first topic, describes the number of women managers and executives in the highest administrative processes within the TRF. According to the examinations made on the official website of the TRF, it has been observed

that only one member of the total 15 members on the management board is a woman (http-1). In addition to this, when the list of the province delegates was examined, it was found that only 4 of the 25 provincial delegates were women (http-1). Alongside the documents examined, some women athletes expressed their views that the number of women executives and managers in the federation was insufficient. Interview data of the Athlete Funda, who gave an opinion on this issue, is as follows:

“As far as I saw when our federation officials came to the national team camps, we have only one female board member, except that they are all men. We would like to increase the number of women executives in our federation and to see more women managers who will represent us.”

In addition to the under-representation situation of women in the TRF, the second topic examined in the first theme is the gender issues. One of these difficulties is prejudices against women athletes, as can be seen in Figure 3. The interview data of the athlete Hilal, who personally experienced prejudices against women athletes within the federation, including the president, is presented below.

“It was the first year I was elected to the national team, and I remember our federation president telling me that he doesn't believe women can play rugby. Later, it was said that their belief in us gradually grows as the women's team gains success. However, I do not understand why we are treated with this prejudice, we have already proven to everyone how successfully we can do this sport since day one.”

In addition to prejudices, some athletes underlined that women teams were not given as much value and importance as man teams within the federation. The experiences of the Athlete Filiz as examples of this situation are as follows:

“I don't think the federation values women as much as men. Whether it is league matches, championships, or material support, women's teams lack much compared to men. I think the federation is doing wrong by giving less importance and value to women's teams.”

The interview data of the Athlete Jale, who stated that the games of women's teams in the championships are seen as insignificant and in second place by the federation, can be presented as another example in this regard.

“All matches of women's teams in tournaments are played in one day. We are sometimes forced to play two games a day to gain time for men's matches, regardless of whether we will be tired or have difficulty as athletes.”

Moreover, it was mentioned in the interviews that there are some warnings, limitations, and restrictions towards women athletes in the national team camps, tournaments and organizations held within the federation. Athlete Nil stated that unlike the men's team, the women's team is constantly exposed to warnings about their behaviors and interactions with other individuals during the national team camp.

“In the national team camp, no warnings or comments were made about the relationships of a man athlete with his friends or coaches, but warnings could be given to the behaviors or interactions of woman athletes, especially with their friends or trainers of the opposite sex. I do not find such an intervenor situation true at all.”

Alongside these warnings, some athletes stated that certain limitations and restrictions about clothing, make-up, and jewelry were specifically imposed on women athletes during the national team camp. On this subject, the interview data of Athlete Cansu who expressed her statements are as follows:

“There are some things like they want us to lose our feminine side completely, and they tell us this. For example, we were told that make-up and jewelry stuff are strictly prohibited during the camp. We have experienced such disturbing situations and events that reduced our motivation.”

Additively, the views of three different women athletes, who shared their experiences on some limitations and restrictions in national team camps are given below.

“While men had the liberty to choose their outfit, certain restrictions were imposed on women not to wear revealing dresses. We were asked to be more cautious about the clothes we wore at the camp.” (Athlete Nil)

“It was conveyed that we should not wear clothes such as shorts or strappy blouses especially during the visits of top officials of the state.” (Athlete Funda)

“For example, when we started the camp, we were banned by telling us that make-up and jewelry would not be suitable and right for a rugby player. Especially, we should not wear shorts and strappy blouses, it becomes a problem when we do.” (Athlete Nalan)

Finally, the situation experienced and emphasized by women athletes in the title of gender issues is gender insensitive language and masculinity discourse. As an example of gender insensitive language, Athlete Funda stated that in rugby sport, the federation emphasizes "women" in particular, except where gender should be specified. Athlete Funda's interview data is as follows:

“For example, if it is just called rugby, we need to understand that it is a men's game because they use emphasis on women in particular for rugby played by women. Rugby played by women is not perceived as normal rugby, they need to emphasize the woman by saying "women's rugby". Unfortunately, I can say that this is the mentality of those in the federation.”

Afterward, if we look at the masculinity discourse, we can say that more than one woman athlete stated that they were exposed to masculine discourses from their coaches during the national team camp. The experiences of three different women athletes regarding masculine discourses are given below.

“In training, we were often told to be tough like men, not princesses.” (Athlete Huri)

“Our coaches often warned us not to push-ups or stand like a girl, to be tough like a man.”
(Athlete Feray)

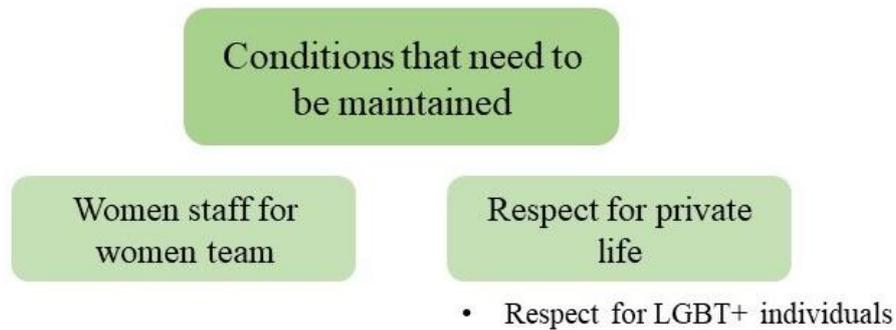
“When tackling in training, they were often telling us to do it harder like a man, not like a girl. These expressions were disturbing.” (Athlete Filiz),

Following the situations that need to be changed and improved in the federation, the conditions that need to be preserved and maintained are mentioned in the next section.

Sub-theme 2: Conditions Need to Preserve and Maintain

Based on the collected data, the aspects that the TRF needs preserve and maintain in the context of gender will be described in the second sub-theme. The second sub-theme and subtitles related to this sub-theme are given below in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Conditions Need to Preserve and Maintain.



As can be seen in Figure 4, based on the experiences of women athletes in the context of TRF, it was emphasized that there is a need for preservation and maintainability in mainly two topics.

Firstly, women athletes stated that the number of women coaches, assistant coaches, masseurs, and conditioners in their technical teams was the main positive experience in the national team camps. Interview data on this subject based on the observations of Athlete Hilal are as follows:

“I mean, they prefer women for technical staff such as coaches, masseurs or conditioners to our national team camps, as far as I understand this is not an official rule, but they prefer women to these duties and I find this positive also approves it for the representation of women on the rugby pitch.”

In addition to Hilal's statements, the data on the official website of the TRF was also examined and it was seen that the technical staff of the women's national team was composed of women professionals ([http-2](#)).

Another issue appreciated by women athletes in the federation is respect for private life and individuals with different sexual orientations. The explanations of Athlete Hazal and Halide regarding their experiences on this issue are given below.

“I can say that people's private lives are generally not intervened too much in the federation.”
(Athlete Hazal)

“We have friends with different sexual orientations and identities in this sport, and these situations are not too strange. Nobody excludes anyone in this sport and federation. I did not see this so much in rugby.” (Athlete Halide)

The findings obtained from the document analysis and interview data given above are interpreted in the discussion section.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how the gender context is materialized at the national team and federation levels and to describe how this gendered context is experienced by elite Turkish female rugby athletes in yet developing rugby context. The general perception of female identity and inequality between gender roles was evident in the gender discriminative discourses which are also transferred to the behaviors of stakeholders and significant others. English (2017) emphasized that hegemonic masculinity plays a central role in sport, because of the excessive emphasis on winning, and it marginalizes men and women who do not possess specific traits. This probably causes the stigmatization of women who practice physically aggressive sports such as rugby (Gill, 2007). This stigmatization might result from crossing boundaries predetermined by society, and appears as the rules, norms, and discourses in and from various social agents in the Turkish woman rugby context. In the context of Turkish rugby, playing rugby at the elite level is built on the gender roles determined by the society, reflected in the sporting environments and especially the federations that are the main authority of sports environments. These reflections are reconstructed at federation levels and transform into various actions and practices that are reflected in sports environments. These cyclical reflections reshape the situation in the camp and affect behaviors of women, especially in sports that require physical contact such as rugby and cause them to perceive and experience the gender context differently from male athletes. On the other hand, the findings of the current study indicated that the TRF also includes positive practices that are desired to be carried out, along with the points that need to be changed and improved in terms of gender actions according to the views and experiences of female players.

The most striking of these situations needing amendment is the under-representation of the federation by female managers. Considering the historical process of under-representation of women in national or international sports federations and organizations, it can be said that this under-representation situation is parallel to the historical process of the Olympics. In their research Mwisukha & Rintaugu (2013), emphasized that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had deliberately excluded women from administrative positions for more than a century. In addition to this Mirian et al. (2018), states that national and international sports federations and organizations are still struggling with the 20% female manager quota at administrative levels. Similar to the IOC and other international sports federations in Malaysia (Mirian et al., 2018), Kenya (Njororai et al., 2003) and United States (Kihl et al., 2016) are struggling for women under-representation situations for many years. Pape (2020) states that the underlying

factors relating to the under-representation of women in federations and administrative areas of sport can better be understood with the framework of patriarchy. In the early studies of the literature, at the most general level patriarchy has been used to refer to male domination and to the power relationships by which men dominate women (Millett, 2016). Hence, patriarchy is referring to an ideology that promotes a male-hegemonic worldview (Njororai et al., 2003). From this angle, when Turkey's sociological context has a patriarchal structure, it will not be surprising to see that female rugby athletes reported under-representation problems in a rugby sport which is yet developing and perceived as male-oriented in a patriarchal society.

In addition to the patriarchal structure, another approach that explains the under-representation of women in the context of sports is the pipeline theory. The pipeline theory explains the under-representation of women in male-dominated sports fields by the small number or absence of women preparing to enter these areas (Mariani, 2008). Gender roles and duties attributed to women may also constitute an obstacle to entering these fields. Considering the socio-cultural context of Turkey, Öztürk & Koca (2020) reported that the domination of men in senior management positions in the Turkish sports context is not surprising. Despite the increasing participation of women in sports activities in Turkey, Koca & Hacisoftaoglu (2011) emphasized the insufficient number of licensed athletes and coaches. According to the pipeline theory, it can be said that this situation constitutes an obstacle to the training and representation of women who will take part in senior management processes in sports such as federations. Compared to many European countries, Turkey has lower rates in athletes and coaches (Pfister, 2011), and also there is not any policy or program to improve their career development and opportunities of women in sports federations (Öztürk & Koca, 2020) which may decrease the gap between these inequalities.

Another situation that needs to be changed and improved within the TRF is a set of negative attitudes, behaviors, and discourses that are metaphorical as "gender issue" and applied to female athletes. Female athletes struggle to survive successfully in many disciplines dominated by men such as boxing, bodybuilding, ice hockey, and soccer (Pfister, 2010). It can be said that these male-dominated sports, including rugby, cause more negative situations in women's struggle for existence than feminine sports (Plaza, Boiché, Brunel, & Ruchaud, 2017). In the national team organizations within the TRF, female athletes struggle with prejudices, pushing into the back seat, warnings, restrictions and limitations, masculinity, and gender-insensitive language discourse. Despite the increase of women's participation in such male sports, strong hegemonic masculinity continues in all areas of competitive sports (Sotiriadou & de Haan,

2019). As rugby is perceived as a male sport, female rugby players do not conform to the female stereotype in Turkish society, and they encounter barriers related to the way they play rugby in their federation and interference in their private life choices in their social environment. Turkish society is considered to be patriarchal and there are clear gender role differences (Sakallı, 2001). As women are in a subordinate and dependent position in a traditional Turkish family (Karakitapoglu & Imamoglu, 2002), members of society and consequently TRF might struggle to accept physically strong and independent women as athletes. Due to this reason, there may be restrictions in respect of make-up, clothing, or hair-style decisions in the national team camp or tournaments on only female athletes. Interference in the choices of female rugby players in organizational and socio-cultural contexts and their feelings about gender inequality in the socio-cultural context might be explained by the gender roles in Turkish culture.

The research analysis demonstrated that female rugby players face barriers in their federation and social environment in Turkey. Recent research has consistently highlighted how gender inequality goes uncontested in sport (Fink, 2016), so the prevalence of barriers towards women in sports federations is not unexpected. Even though Australia has a massive organizational rugby culture for both males and females, Taylor, O'Connor, and Hanlon, (2020) indicated that some female players still report abject negative assumptions, discourses, behaviors, and attitudes based on gender. The current study findings indicated that the barriers and challenges suffered by the women rugby players were related to the way TRF perceives women's play rugby. Similarly, Oliveira, Altmann & Marques (2019) interviewed female rugby players in the Brazilian National Team and concluded that barriers and challenges towards women players were mainly related to the use of the body and the lack of prestige. As a result of this, it has been reported that women athletes' body satisfaction decreases in their social environment, and their perceptions of their bodies change because of the demand to conform to socially expected and accepted norms of physical attractiveness (Russell, 2004).

Another side of the data collected in the research depicts other situations that female athletes expect TRF to maintain and preserve. Regarding the findings on this subject, it would not be wrong to state that TRF preferred women professionals in constituting the technical staff of the Turkish National Women's 7s Rugby. At this point, it is noteworthy that while the selection of female staff for the technical staff draws a positive picture, the women staff in question are only and especially for the women's team, and female personnel are not assigned to the men's teams.

Another feature of TRF, which is found positive by female athletes in the research findings, is the respect for private life, especially for LGBT individuals. As it is known, sports federations are multi-layered, multi-cultured, and complex systems by nature (Chelladurai, 2009). Within these complex, multicultural, and multi-layered systems, diversity and inclusion are one of the most important issues for managers and organizational processes (Cunningham, 2012). Sports federations, generally located in the middle of the spectrum extending from the society to the athlete himself, act as a bridge between the athlete and the society, and at the same time feed on these two phenomena. Sports federations in the middle of the largest frame (society) and the smallest frame (individual) and combining these two structures; According to Cunningham, (2012), it has the power to influence the experiences of individuals and especially minority groups in the context of sports through factors such as "leader behavior", "organizational culture" and "group support" in organizational processes. Leader behaviors can affect organization members' respect for diversity and private life positively or negatively in a sports context, and "organizational culture" is important in showing understanding and respect for diversity and private life, especially marginal groups (Cunningham, 2012). Finally, research shows that in organizations where the majority of individuals have respect for marginalized groups, diversity, and the private lives of individuals, the level of understanding and respect gradually increases by group members' interactions in sport context (Cunningham, 2012). Within the scope of this research, based on the experiences of women athletes, it can be interpreted that the organizational culture fosters respect for LGBTQ + individuals and private life. At this point, examining the relationship between the influential factors with diversity and respect for private life in TRF, a deeper understanding of the rugby industry in Turkey can help develop.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to examine how the gender context is materialized at the national teams and federation level based on the experiences of elite Turkish female rugby players and to describe how this gendered context is experienced by female athletes. The result of this study suggests what should be maintained in a newly developed female rugby context as well as what should be changed. Accordingly, authorities should be careful in their actions and discourses in the decision-making process, as female athletes reported that the feeling of "thrusting back" of male rugby at the federation level is one of the main barriers to create a supportive environment for females. Moreover, gendered discourses should be put away from the conversations in the

federation and national team levels, and educational programs for federation officials and staff in the national team might reduce the problems related to discourses.

On the other hand, maintaining the number of female staff for female athletes is important for elite-level female athletes as it might be a good source of psychological and social support. Besides the education, increasing the number of female staff and officials might decrease the gendered courses or decrease the gendered courses within the authority areas of federations such as national team camps. Lastly, respecting athletes' private life and their personal decision such as gender orientation is important for creating a supportive environment for elite-level female athletes in a newly developed sports context, apart from the general perception of society about those private and personal decisions. This may also require some educational process for both authorities in the sports federations and national teams.

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