

## Marta versus Neymar: the “war of the sexes” at the 2016 Olympic games in the narratives of sports journalism in Brazil

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### Abstract

When the men’s and women’s football teams participate simultaneously in the same or different competitions, it is common for Brazilian sports journalism to construct narratives based on the comparison between the performance of both teams. At the 2016 Olympic Games, this phenomenon set up a kind of ‘war of the sexes’ staged in the narratives of important newspapers in the country and even chanted in the stadium stands. The protagonists of this duel were the players Neymar and Marta, both number 10 of the Brazilian men’s and women’s teams, and both national and international idols. This article aims to analyse this ‘war of the sexes’. For this purpose, we chose the press coverage of the 2016 Games by the newspapers *O Globo* and *Folha de São Paulo*, two of the most traditional periodicals in Brazil and those with the largest national circulation.

**Keywords:** Sports journalism, 2016 Olympic Games, Marta, Neymar.

### 1. Introduction

This article aims to analyse sports press coverage of the women’s national football team participation in the 2016 Olympic Games, held in Rio de Janeiro. *O Globo* and *Folha de São Paulo* were the chosen newspapers, based on the fact that they are the two most widely read periodicals throughout Brazil<sup>1</sup>. These newspapers were used as sources for extraction and production of data. The newspapers were carefully read and the articles were analysed and interpreted based on sociological, anthropological and journalistic studies. We started from the simultaneous procedures of data collection and analysis, thus allowing for the construction of analytical codes

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<sup>1</sup> Information from Instituto Verificador de Comunicação (IVC).

and categories from the data and not from pre-established hypotheses (Charmaz, 2009). Following Strauss and Corbin (2008), we emphasise that we understand data as a series of varied materials such as “interviews, field notes [...] and other forms of written and illustrated materials [...] We isolate the data and work with photos, words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs and other segments of materials” (2008, p. 66). For this article, we resorted to the material produced by *Folha de São Paulo* and *O Globo*, from 04 to 21 August 2016, period in which the gold medal of the Olympic football was disputed. Methodologically oriented, we built the assumption that the coverage of the participation of the women’s and men’s football teams in the 2016 Games staged what we call a “war of the sexes”, implying the existence of a frequent discursive resource that compared the performances of the women’s and men’s football teams in the 2016 Games. At least until the 2019 World Cup, the Olympic Games were the moment – it could be said the only one, until then – in which the women’s national football team got plenty of media attention<sup>2</sup>. We interpret abundant media attention as the women’s national team having its games gaining repercussion, coverage by news media and analysed by the most relevant communication channels, as well as the possibility of having its games broadcasted by the main free-to-air television channel in Brazil<sup>3</sup>.

This study is basically interested in analysing the dramatization of what we call the ‘war of the sexes’, Marta versus Neymar, which occurred in the pages of *Folha de São Paulo* and *O Globo* in the 2016 Olympics media coverage. Firstly, the possibility of this media staging took place because the women’s team achieved visibility, basically, in a competition that is not exclusive to it, as is the case of the Olympic Games, a tournament in which men’s and women’s teams participate concomitantly. This fact allowed people to build the stories of the matches played by women and men national teams from the comparison between the two football performances during the Olympic Games. It is a discursive game in which women are more likely to lose than win. This is because the measure of sports excellence, in journalism, has men as a parameter (Moreira, 2013). No wonder Marta was called for a long time ‘Pelé in skirts’ (Costa & Helal, 2022).

It is noteworthy that in this mega-event that journalism turns its attention to other sports, going beyond men’s football, a modality that practically monopolises Brazilian’s sports coverage.<sup>4</sup> It is true that this privilege granted to football is explained, to a large extent, by the central place that this sport holds not only in the sporting trajectory of the country, but also by the role it played in the process of building a nation, a phenomenon that became robust in the 1930s (Souza, 2008). It is worth highlighting the importance acquired by the Brazilian men’s national team and its participation in World Cups, an event that was configured for Brazil in a cycle of national rituals in which the country tells significant stories about itself (Guedes, 2023). Roberto DaMatta (2006), in a classic text, defended that the Olympic Games would not raise the same interest as the World Cups and, therefore, would not have the same ritualistic role of creating meanings about Brazil.

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<sup>2</sup> Due to space limits, we will not go deeper into questions relating to the difficult trajectory of women’s football in Brazil. This practice was prohibited from 1941 to 1979 and only in 1983 did the Brazilian Football Confederation institutionalize the practice. This prohibition generated – and still generates – many obstacles to the development of this sport at a professional level. On this issue, see Bonfim (2019) and Kessler, Costa, & Pisani (2022).

<sup>3</sup> In 2019, for the first time the games of the women’s national team in a World Cup were broadcasted by Rede Globo, the most important free-to-air television channel in Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> On this subject, see Souza, Capraro, & Jensen (2017).

In fact, they are two mega-events that, for many reasons, receive different treatments in Brazil<sup>5</sup>. However, the 2016 Olympic Games presented specificities that contributed to making it an important moment in which Brazilians also told stories about themselves in discourses linked to this mega-event. It is worth asking: what were the possible meanings of these stories, their main characters, and themes.

In media coverage, the aforementioned “war of the sexes” worked as a narrative resource that managed to emulate a competition, which amplified the possibility of conferring drama and emotion, elements so typical and valued by the narratives of sports journalism in Brazil (Oselame, 2012; Costa, 2020). In addition to these aspects, to fulfill the objective of this article, we must consider that the symbolic dispute between the main athletes of the Brazilian football teams also echoed in the stands of the stadiums and in social media, which was an important motivator for newspapers to focus on this theme. The “war of the sexes”, Neymar versus Marta, as already said, fed on the comparison between the performance of the men’s and women’s national football teams, but, also, brought to the scene struggles that go far beyond the football pitches. In part, this “war of the sexes” dialogued with another war, the cultural one, fuelled by right-wing extremism, represented by Bolsonarism<sup>6</sup>, based on a warlike worldview and the defence of the customs agenda contrary to various struggles of social movements in Brazil (Rocha, 2020). It is important to say that Neymar, who has never been voted the best player in the world by FIFA, earns significantly more than Marta, who has been named the best player in the world five times. Neymar appears on social media as a “playboy” with little regard for social causes, having campaigned twice for a far-right candidate. In contrast, Marta is a dedicated advocate for women’s football.

In this context, gender issues have become the target of intense attack by the far-right, which, to a large extent, is also a conservative reaction to the strengthening of a ‘feminist consciousness’, that is, the women’s own perception that they are part of a group that occupies a subordinated social position and that this condition is not natural to them, but socially and historically determined (Lerner, 2022). This feminist consciousness that leads to the collective claim of rights previously denied has been a remarkable phenomenon in Brazilian daily life and the sports have played a valuable role in disseminating ideas and encouraging women’s actions. Recently, there have been many questioning and protests directed at sexism in the national football environment, which reverberate in social media and are often supported by marketing actions of various Brazilian clubs (Bertoncello, 2022). At the organizational level, the former player Aline Peregrino stands out, who became the director of the modality in the São Paulo Football Federation, managing, during her administration, to develop a work of reinvigoration of the competitions and the teams. We can highlight the role of female fans who, by social media and in the stands, demand respect and security against harassment (Bandeira, 2019; Rodrigues, 2022). The same type of gesture can be seen in sports newsrooms in actions such as the video manifesto *Deixa Ela Trabalhar* [Let Her Work] an initiative that united, in 2018, 52 female sports journalists, including presenters, reporters, producers, and advisors (Meireles, 2022). We highlight the emergence of communication channels focused exclusively on news about women’s football, as

<sup>5</sup> In games of the men’s national team in World Cups, it is customary to decree an optional work day in Brazil, for example.

<sup>6</sup> We understand Bolsonarism as the far-right political phenomenon that emerged in Brazil with the gradual increase in popularity of Jair Bolsonaro that culminated in his election to the presidency of the Republic in 2018. On the phenomenon of Bolsonarism, see: Souza (2019); Rocha (2021).

is the case of ESPNW, from 2016, and the Brazilian portal *Dibradoras*, created in 2015 (Gonçalves, 2021; Fon, 2022). In the traditional television media, it is now noticeable a greater presence of women narrating, commenting, and acting as reporters in various football championships. Therefore, many of these changes derive from demands arising in Brazilian society. It would not be an exaggeration to state that a kind of “footballing feminism” – or even sporting feminism – has manifested itself in Brazil in the last 10 years, which means that football has been an important arena for debates, visibility, and promotion of actions linked to agendas on gender equity and its intersectional aspects, not restricted to sport, but that resonate in society as a whole. This article will initially focus on analysing the media discourse surrounding the participation of the Brazilian men’s and women’s football teams in the most important sporting event in the world, which, in 2016, had Brazil as its headquarters. This analysis will be guided by the Neymar x Marta dispute discursively forged by the sports press. Next, this work will seek to provide a short overview of the appropriation of the Brazilian team’s yellow-green jersey by the extreme right. Both before and during the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games a period of rise of the far-right extremism can be observed in Brazil (Damo, 2020)<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, the media narratives about the 2016 Olympic Games also offer an opportunity to reflect on a troubled political-ideological moment that Brazil went through. Given the relevance of this issue, we will briefly look at 2019 when the Women’s World Cup and the men’s Copa América were held simultaneously. In this context, the Neymar x Marta clash takes on new meanings, especially considering the fact that the former declared support for Jair Bolsonaro. Marta, although she did not express support for any candidate, maintained her image linked to progressive agendas by participating in advertising campaigns to combat violence against women and engaging in the fight for equal pay in football. In this scenario, the Brazilian men’s team was the target of several expressions of rejection while the women’s team, with Marta as the main character, was referenced as a possibility of maintaining and renewing emotional ties with the yellow-green jersey, an important symbol of national identity.

## 2. The “war of the sexes” Marta *versus* Neymar in the sports pages of *O Globo* and *Folha de São Paulo*

At the 2016 Olympic Games, the women’s national football team began its participation even before the opening of the event. In the coverage of the national team’s arrival in the city of Manaus, Amazonas, for the match against South Africa, the warm reception of the players at the airport was highlighted by the fans cheering: “Marta is better than Neymar” (Mansur, 2016)<sup>8</sup>. But it was in the men’s game of Brazil *versus* Iraq that comparisons between Marta and Neymar took on more consistency and reverberation. The name Marta was shouted in chorus by a large part of the audience present at the Mané Garrincha Stadium in Brasília, which the newspaper *O Globo* announced: “In the 0-0 against the Iraqis, (the men’s team) were booed first. Then the team was humiliated with shouts of ‘olé’, ‘Marta’, and a melancholic ending: shouts of ‘Iraq’ in Brasília”

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<sup>7</sup> On the rise of far-right extremism in Brazil, see: Pinheiro-Machado (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Football was the only sport that went beyond the borders of Rio de Janeiro, the host city of the event. The games of the Brazilian national teams also took place in the cities of Manaus, São Paulo, Salvador, Brasília, and Belo Horizonte.

(Mansur, 2016, p. 12). If on the one hand having her name called can be understood as a form of compliment to Marta, on the other we can also take this attitude as a type of provocation to Neymar, when the crowd insinuates that a woman should be playing in his place. It is difficult to know what the intention of the fans was, but *O Globo*, at least at first, decided to interpret that shout as one of the several examples of embarrassment or even humiliation undergone by the men's national team in that match.

The comparison between Marta and Neymar gained more momentum with the dissemination of the image of a child dressed in a yellow and green shirt of the men's national team in which Neymar's name appears crossed out and, in its place, Marta's handwritten name appears. The child in question was Bernardo Sampaio Silva, who was filmed by a Games volunteer while watching the judo competition at the Olympic Park in Rio de Janeiro. This episode was widely commented on, stimulating the movement on social media, which turned into an arena of disputes of groups that expressed themselves favorable and others opposed to the exaltation of Marta at the expense of Neymar<sup>9</sup>. Here it is important to mention that this duel dialogued with the turbulent political context of the time. We refer to the impeachment process of the then President Dilma Rousseff, who, during the Games, was removed from office, being replaced by her vice-president, Michel Temer<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the good results of the women's national team in the competition and the weak performances of the men's team marked the clash Marta *versus* Neymar, which, in the discourse of the sports media, was received in a varied and ambiguous way.



Fig 1. Bernardo Sampaio Silva with the name Marta written on the shirt of the Brazilian men's national team<sup>11</sup>.

In the edition of *O Globo* that was sold in the newsstands on the day of the Brazil vs Denmark match, the sports section of this newspaper asked the following question “Will Neymar become Marta? Secure the place or dive for good into the crisis”. (*O Globo*, 2016, p. 8). Again, the

<sup>9</sup> Menino troca nome de Neymar por Marta em camisa da seleção e viraliza | Blog Brasil Mundial FC | Globoesporte.com (<https://ge.globo.com/blogs/especial-blog/brasil-mundial-fc/post/crianca-troca-nome-de-neymar-por-marta-em-camisa-e-viraliza-ajude-nos-acha-lo.html>)

<sup>10</sup> On the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff see: Souza, Jessé. *A Radiografia do Golpe*. São Paulo: Leya, 2016.

<sup>11</sup>Source: (<https://ge.globo.com/blogs/especial-blog/brasil-mundial-fc/post/crianca-troca-nome-de-neymar-por-marta-em-camisa-e-viraliza-ajude-nos-acha-lo.html>)



comparison with Marta is drawn as something negative for Neymar, a fact that is evident when we continue to read the text and are faced with the following comment: “The phase is so bad that after two goalless draws against South Africa and Iraq, the Brazilian fans got sick of the national team. To the point that Neymar had to hear, in every game, that Marta, from the women’s team, should take shirt number 10” (O Globo, 2016, p. 8). The next day the same newspaper published an article about the preparation of the women’s national team for the match against Australia, in which the qualification for the semifinals of the Olympic competition would be at stake. However, in this report, the main concern shown by the newspaper was not with the female players, but with Neymar and the criticism of which he was being targeted, when being compared to Marta (O Globo, August 11, 2016). In this text, the request that would have been made by Marta for the fans to be more understanding with the men’s national team, especially its star player, Neymar, stands out.

*Folha de São Paulo* built less superficial narratives, seeking at times to understand the various issues raised by the constant comparisons between Marta and Neymar. In their approaches, the frequent mention of the affection of the fans with the women’s national team, especially Marta, is highlighted: “Fans consecrate Marta in a night of victory” (August 7, 2016). Later, the newspaper highlights the good audience present at the stadium and the fact that “from the stands, the shirt number 10 of the women’s national team heard that she plays more than the shirt number 10 of the men’s national team: ‘Marta is better than Neymar’” (Rizo, 2016, p. B8). Two days later, the newspaper highlights the affection for Marta shown by some fans and, in addition, denounces the financial abyss that separated the two teams, which would mirror the disparity in the structure of modalities in Brazil and the inequality of gender treatment in sports (Seto, 2016).

The concern with gender inequality in sports is also explicit in the approach of other modalities, such as the case of the article about the gold medallist in judo Rafaela Silva, who had been victim of racist attacks on the internet. In addition to this prejudice, attention is drawn to the fact that “Rafaela Silva also faced sexism. The gold-medallist in judo comments on the difficulties to advance in the sport” (Folha de São Paulo, August 10, 2016). In the same issue, the phenomenon called “Olympic feminism” by the same newspaper stands out (Folha de São Paulo, August 10, 2016), which would have been awakened by the success of women’s football, the gold medal of Rafaela Silva, and the gesture of Bernardo Sampaio Silva. This ‘Olympic feminism’, according to the *Folha de São Paulo*, was evident in the various manifestations – especially in social media – favorable to greater visibility and appreciation of women’s participation in the 2016 Games and by extension in sport (Folha de São Paulo, August 10, 2016).

Bernardo Sampaio Silva’s image illustrates the text where an interesting statement is quoted, in which the boy affirms that “Marta is the symbol of feminism in Brazil” and that “Marta deserves this shirt much more than Neymar” (Folha de São Paulo, August 10, 2016)<sup>12</sup>. It is also noteworthy the chronicle “*Protagonismo das Mulheres*” (Protagonism of women) by Edgar Alves, which highlights the fact that, since Beijing 2008, Brazil’s most relevant results in the Olympic Games have come from female athletes competing individually or collectively. According to the columnist, this successful history is recent and was made possible, to a large extent, by the participation of women “who have been growing in the national delegations at each Olympic

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<sup>12</sup> The video with Bernardo Sampaio Silva’s testimony can be accessed at: <https://noticias.bol.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/olimpiadas/2016/08/09/sai-ney-mar-entra-marta-menino-dono-de-camisa-e-fa-dos-fois-mas-pede-raca.htm>

event, standing out among the countries with the largest number of athletes of this gender” (Folha de São Paulo, August 13, 2016).

However, these approaches to women’s football do not mean that the men’s national team has taken a back seat in the coverage of *Folha de São Paulo*. Mentions of the shouts of “Marta” that appear among the fans at the men’s national team games are also treated with negative connotations, as occurs, for example, when the sports page reports “with shouts of Marta, Brazil ties again” (Folha de São Paulo, August 8, 2016). Later, the article states that: ‘In the middle of the game, the fans protested with irony asking for the entrance of Marta, ace of the women’s national team’ (Folha de São Paulo, August 8, 2016). Nevertheless, in the case of *Folha*, it is noteworthy that the comparison “Marta better than Neymar” is also highlighted when made by the fans present at the matches of the women’s national team, which gives a positive meaning to the gesture of the public: “Fans consecrate Marta in a night of victory for Brazil. In the 5-1 victory over the team of Sweden, in the Engenhão Stadium, the audience shouts that the athlete is better than Neymar” (Folha de São Paulo, August 7, 2016).

One of the strong motivations for the sports press to invest in the Marta *versus* Neymar duel was supported by symmetrically opposed campaigns, in the first phase of the competition. While the women’s team played good games and won, the men’s team disappointed by hardly making through the first stage and by showing a poor technical performance. However, the trajectory of both teams changes. The men’s team picked up a pace of ascent by reaching the final against Germany, winning the gold medal for the first time in history. The women’s team remained in the competition after a match led to a penalty shootout decision, however, they were eliminated by Sweden in the semifinals of the competition<sup>13</sup>. After this result, in the newspaper *O Globo*, in fact, the women’s team was mentioned again, only because of another defeat, this time to Canada and the consequent loss of the bronze medal: “Bronze runs away and Brazilian players appeal for support” (*O Globo*, *Bronze escapa e jogadoras*, 2016, p. 9). And if the attention paid to the men’s team was already greater – even in the defeats – with the consecutive victories, the gazes were turned back to them, especially focused on Neymar, and thus monopolising the Games coverage. Both the figure of Marta and the women’s team fell into an oblivion. And once again the result on the pitches is configured as a fundamental factor for the construction of narratives around the men’s national team (COSTA, 2020). If before *O Globo* even used an alarmist tone when it stated, “Football on the brink of a tragedy” (August 8, 2016), when the first victory of the men’s team came, the discourse gained exacerbated tones: “From zero to the ball” (August 11, 2016)<sup>14</sup>. These superlative headlines continue until the team earned the gold medal, which was greeted as follows: “King of diamonds. Against Germany, with penalties decision and art by Neymar. Thus Brazil ended the curse that lasted 64 years without the Olympic title” (August 21, 2016).

At *Folha de São Paulo*, the elimination of the women’s national team by Sweden was reported highlighting the presence of 70,000 people at the Maracanã stadium who had braved a hot day in Rio de Janeiro to watch the match (Mariante, 2016). When losing the bronze medal, the newspaper proposes an analysis of the future of the women’s national football team based on the hypothesis that “The new generation of the women’s national team proves that it deserves trust”

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<sup>13</sup> Brazil x Australia 0:0 (7:6, Penalties), Brazil x Sweden 0:0 (3:4, Penalties), Brazil x Canada 1:2, fourth place for Brazil.

<sup>14</sup> The headline ‘Football on the brink of tragedy’ refers to Brazil 0 vs Iraq 0; whereas “From zero to the ball” refers to Brazil 4 vs Denmark 0.

(Seto, 2016, p. B6). The article focused on the need to maintain the investment – although acknowledging it as low – and the structure offered for training for the women’s national team, in preparation for upcoming Olympic Games. The men’s team, in turn, continued to be addressed in news in both newspapers even after the Olympics ended. This was not only because the team won the gold, but because the men’s team is always addressed in news, whether losing or winning<sup>15</sup>. The media attention given to women provoked a short-lived ‘disorder’, since the conquest of the men’s national team reinstated the predominant order in football and that concerns the privilege of masculinity as the basis from which the national footballing identity is built (Wood, 2018).

The triggering of the comparison between Marta and Neymar is a complex phenomenon that points to the valorisation of the female athlete, especially when it is said that “Marta is better than Neymar”, but also points to the use of her name as a way to provoke and offend Neymar, which is evinced in the pieces of news by *O Globo*. In any case, the insistence of much of the Brazilian sports media on building Marta’s image based on constant comparison with the performance of men is quite questionable (Lines, 2010). It is also noteworthy that the player, although much mentioned, was not a frequent presence in the photographs that accompanied the media coverage analysed here. The opposite occurred with Neymar, omnipresent both in the written text and in the photos that sought to translate the feelings of pain, concern, and joy that usually set the tone for the emotional speeches that usually surround the approaches of the sports facts linked to the men’s national team.

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<sup>15</sup> The Brazilian national team is often the target of much attention from the sports media, even when it loses. On this matter, see: Costa (2020).





Fig 2. Day after the gold medal was won by the men's national football team. First page of the Rio 2016 section, *Folha de São Paulo* (August 21, 2016).



Fig 3. Day after the gold medal was won by the men's national football team. First page of the Rio 2016 section, *O Globo* (August 21, 2016).

### 3. Beyond press coverage: “Neymar x Marta”

The holding of the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil is the result of an effort undertaken since the 1990s when the country began to make the candidacy to become the headquarters of mega-events an explicit public policy goal, which implied the joint commitment of the three spheres of power: Municipal, State, and Federal (Mascarenhas, 2010). The years of preparation and realization of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Games accompany a period of rise of the extreme right, in Brazil, which had a relevant moment in the “*Jornadas de Junho*” (June demonstrations). “*Jornadas de Junho*” is how a set of demonstrations that brought millions of people to the streets of major Brazilian cities was called. Initially, the agenda of the protests focused on reducing the price of public transport, with the presence of several social segments. However, the progressive demands were gradually losing strength as local governments met the demands for a reduction in the price of bus tickets. Against the background of the demonstrations were the contradictions represented by the high degree of demands of FIFA and the IOC for Brazil to host the Confederations Cup<sup>16</sup>, the World Cup, and the Olympic Games, mega sports events that demanded billionaire expenses from a country that was in the process of economic ascent and international prestige, but that still kept the historical structures maintainers of inequality little changed (Reis, 2021). Nevertheless, as the marches took more people to the streets, new and diffuse demands were emerging, acquiring “a green and yellow hue, with moralizing discourses, sometimes averse and sometimes aggressive regarding traditional political institutions”, all added to an exaltation of patriotism “as a rule identified with conservative tendencies” (Damo, 2013, p. 17). The yellow and green of the Brazilian national team shirt predominated as the clothing most used by these types of protesters (Figure 4). In 2015, these same colours took over some streets of the country that were the scene of acts in favour of the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, which happened in 2016<sup>17</sup>. One of the most important national symbols, which is the yellow and green shirt of the national team, went through a process of appropriation by the right and, later, by the Brazilian extreme right that would lead to the election of Jair Bolsonaro, in 2018 (Guedes & Silva, 2019).

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<sup>16</sup> Many “June journeys” demonstrations took place during the 2013 Confederations Cup. On this matter, see: Guedes (2013).

<sup>17</sup> It is important to remember that Dilma Rousseff had been booed with profanity by the majority of the public present at Maracanã, during the opening of the World Cup in 2014. It is worth noting that the World Cup led to a process of gentrification of stadiums in Brazil, a phenomenon analyzed by Gilmar Mascarenhas (2014).



Fig 4. Demonstrators in favor of the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff protest with shirts of the Brazilian national team (Source: Nacho Doce – Reuters)<sup>18</sup>.

Concomitant to its kidnapping by the extreme right, represented by the political-ideological radicalization of Bolsonarism, the shirt of the Brazilian national football team becomes the target of rejection by part of the population. In this sense, the process of “decline of the country in football boots” pointed out by Ronaldo Helal and Antonio Jorge Soares (2003) gains another chapter. It is a fact that the proclaimed “country in football boots” concerned football practiced by men, especially by the men’s national team in World Cups. The women’s team was not part of the football and nation equation that marks the history of this sport in Brazil, as mentioned. It took time for the women of the national team to have their own uniform. From 1988 to 2011, the uniforms worn by the female players followed the same model used for the men’s national team, with only a few adjustments. In 2015, Nike even designed a uniform just for them, the shirt 2, in blue<sup>19</sup>, which was used at the World Cup in Canada. However, the model was not marketed. In the 2016 Olympic Games, there was a strong movement on social media of fans who complained about the fact that they could not buy the uniform with the name of Marta, the most important female player in the history of Brazilian football. Meanwhile, shirts with the inscription Neymar were easily found<sup>20</sup>.

The national team shirt is central in the dispute “Neymar x Marta”, central theme of sports journalism coverage analysed here. As shown here, an emblematic moment of this clash was represented by the image of a green and yellow shirt, of the men’s national team, with the name Neymar crossed out in pen, with Marta’s name handwritten by the fan Bernardo Sampaio Silva. We can say that this gesture was one of the legacies of the 2016 Olympic Games. In 2019, the elimination of the national team from the World Cup was reported on the front page of the newspaper *O Globo* with the headline “In defeat, Marta’s victorious message” (June 24, 2019). The image that accompanies this sentence is that of a woman photographed on her back, watching a television that broadcasted an interview given by the player Marta at the end of the Brazil vs. France game (Figure 5). Said woman was wearing a yellow and green shirt with the

<sup>18</sup> Available from: [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/06/16/deportes/1529108134\\_704637.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/06/16/deportes/1529108134_704637.html)

<sup>19</sup> The main uniform of the Brazilian national team is the yellow and green shirt, the second uniform is the blue one.

<sup>20</sup> Source: <https://www.conmebol.com/pt-br/noticias-pt-br-2/todos-querem-ter-camiseta-10-de-marta-no-brasil/>



name Marta. In the same World Cup, *Folha de São Paulo* had previously resorted to similar tactics to report on the women's national team's win over Australia. The aforementioned newspaper published the image of two women at a bar table, photographed while looking at a screen where they watched the game in question. One of the women wore a yellow and green shirt of the national team stylised with Marta's name, Neymar's crossed out, and below the words "Not them" (Figure 6).

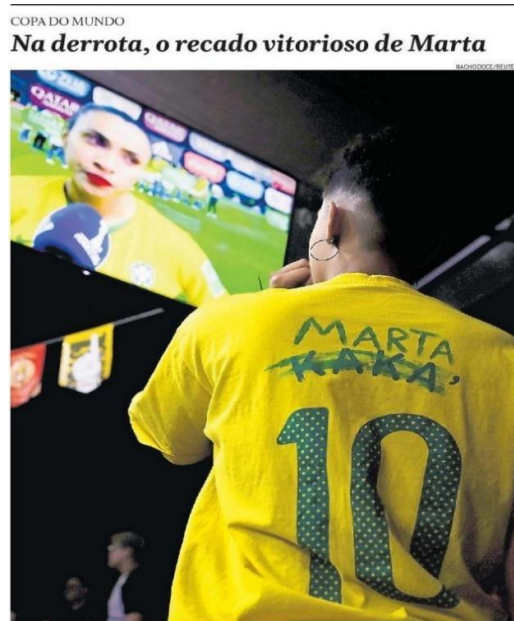


Fig 5. Cover of the newspaper *O Globo* published on June 24, 2019 (Source: Acervo Digital Jornal O Globo).



Fig 6. Main cover of *Folha de São Paulo*, edition of June 14, 2019.

Who are they that you say no to? Certainly, Neymar who, in addition to a troubled relationship with the Brazilian fans, at the time had been denounced by the model Najila Trindade, who

accused him of sexual assault<sup>21</sup>. No was being said to Jair Bolsonaro – target of several protests by women who raised the flag of Not Him<sup>22</sup> – and his supporters, among whom, many football players. In addition, 'Not Them' can be a negative reference to the men's national team itself that at the time participated in the American Cup of football<sup>23</sup>.

We can read the crossed-out name of Neymar and the inscription of Marta as a way of signalling the need to renew the meanings of the yellow and green shirt that, as we have seen, had been "kidnapped" by the extreme right with its frequent attack on women and other minorities. And in this process, women's football, or more specifically, the Brazilian women's national football team, plays a relevant role in rescuing the green and yellow colours that symbolise Brazil through football. The lack of equity between men and women is not exclusive to football, being noticeable in Brazilian society as a whole. Part of the war of the sexes "Neymar x Marta" to a large extent reflects a moment of a kind of "footballing feminism" – or even sporting – that has manifested itself, in Brazil, in the last 10 years, which means saying that football has been an important arena of debates, visibility, and promotion of actions linked to agendas related to gender equity and its intersectional aspects.

#### 4. Conclusion

At the time of writing this article, we are on the verge of holding a new edition of the Olympic Games, at which time the women's and men's national teams participate in the same event of global reach. We saw how this concomitance enabled the discursive staging of a 'war of the sexes', a phenomenon that marked the coverage of Brazilian football in the 2016 Games. This phenomenon was present in the stands of the matches of the football teams in this competition. However, in recent years, several changes have taken place, many of which are related to the strengthening of women's football in Brazil. Marta ended her career in the national team, being praised by the sports press. Neymar continues his history in the national team in a somewhat troubled way, suffering from injuries that have marked his trajectory in important competitions<sup>24</sup>. Neymar continued to collect controversies in his public life, becoming an almost inseparable mixture of sports idol and celebrity whose fame does not necessarily feed on his achievements on the football pitches (Andrews, 2015).

Moreover, it is necessary to mention the wear and tear that the Brazilian men's national team has gone through with the fans, no longer being univocally interpreted as one of the symbols of Brazilianness. This attrition is explained by factors such as the scandals in which CBF (Brazilian Football Confederation) leaders were involved linked to corruption and allegations of harassment of female employees. Added to these events is the association between the yellow and green shirt

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<sup>21</sup> In July 2019, the São Paulo police closed the case due to lack of proof of crime.

<sup>22</sup> '#EleNão' (Not Him) was a demonstration in repudiation of then-presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro. The movement began on social media and spread to Brazilian cities in September 2018. The campaign was a women's rally.

<sup>23</sup> In 2019, Brazil hosted the American Cup of men's football. This is the main men's football competition between national teams in South America and is organised by the South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL).

<sup>24</sup> In 2014, Neymar was injured in the quarterfinals with a back injury. In 2018, he was injured in February, and played in the World Cup without being fully physically healthy, as he returned to play only in May, a month before the tournament. In 2019, he missed the American Cup title with an ankle injury. In 2022, he was injured in the debut of the World Cup, returned in the eighth finals, scoring from a penalty against Korea.



of the Brazilian men’s national team and Bolsonaroism, provoking rejection of one of the most important symbols of national identity. The women’s national team, by contrast, is in a fruitful moment regarding the symbolic investments it has been gaining. The women’s national team, in this sense, can carry with it the potential to enable a renewed relationship between Brazil and its national symbols, via football. There remains the challenge of not counting on Marta, the player who had a fundamental role in maintaining media interest in the women’s national team, even without winning an important title. However, it is an opportunity to broaden and diversify the reach of the media spotlight and the audience in the direction of other players.

The media’s manipulative tactics (mainly O Globo newspaper) are unfair and disrespectful to women athletes and women in general. They exploited female players, invoking Marta’s name to “motivate” male athletes by provoking Neymar and his peers. This humiliation, primarily targeting men, ultimately becomes a violent affront to women – once again. Such comparisons are deeply irritating, entirely harmful to women, and completely unacceptable.

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