Brazilian Women in Paralympic Sports: Uncovering Historical Milestones in the Summer Paralympic Games

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The journey of Brazilian female Paralympians transcends mere statistical increases in women’s participation. Behind the modest athlete growth lies the reality of women who are doubly marginalized by the intersection of gender and disability in an arena tailored for able-bodied men. Our study aimed to catalyze critical discourses surrounding the historical trajectory of Paralympic women’s sports. Through a comprehensive documentary analysis based on the Brazilian Paralympic Committee’s official documents from 1976 to 2021, we sought to shed light on this complex scenario. Numerically, Brazil’s representation comprised 229 women who, predominantly, had physical impairments and engaged in individual sports. In addition to a sporting legacy deeply entrenched in physical rehabilitation with limited opportunities for team-based sports, we observed negative influences stemming from ableist and sexist narratives. A thorough investigation into Paralympic milestones revealed a multitude of social barriers and highlighted the significant impact of societal changes in reshaping athletic opportunities and challenging traditional stereotypes.

Keywords: women with disability, Parasport, social barriers, disability, gender

Globally, the emergence of sports for people with disability, initially conceived as a form of rehabilitation, can be traced back to the post-World War II era (Belgo, 2021; DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Legg, 2018). This transformative concept, which later
evolved into what we now recognize as Paralympic sports, was vigorously cham-
pioned in England by neurologist Ludwig Guttmann in the 1950s. As the director of
the National Spinal Injuries Unit at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Guttmann actively
promoted sports as a means of rehabilitation, emphasizing the profound physiological
and psychological benefits it offered participants (Brittain, 2016).

However, what became integral to patient care eventually forayed into competi-
tive sports. In 1944, an archery competition featuring six women and 14 men, all war
veterans, held within Stoke Mandeville Hospital, marked the inception of this
transition (Scruton, 1979). Over the years, this modest archery demonstration event
became the second-largest sporting extravaganza worldwide, second only to the
Olympic Games. This evolution was propelled by factors including the exchange of
ideas between patients and medical professionals, widespread scientific dissemination,
international academic congresses, media engagement, and frequent comparisons with
the Olympic Games, all of which collectively contributed to the establishment of
Paralympic sports (Brittain, 2016). The first edition of the Paralympic Games (PG),
initially tailored to wheelchair users, took place in Rome in 1960 (Legg, 2018).
Notably, among the 275 male and 53 female athletes representing 21 different
countries in that historic event, there were no Brazilians (Brittain, 2016).

The expansion of Paralympic sports in Brazil can primarily be credited to Robson
Sampaio de Almeida and Sérgio Serafim Del Grande. Both individuals, who had
disabilities and received rehabilitation services in the United States during the 1950s,
introduced wheelchair basketball to Brazil (Araujo, 2011). Their efforts extended to
the founding of two pivotal organizations: Robson established the “Clube do
Otimismo” in Rio de Janeiro, and Sérgio created the “Clube dos Paraplégicos” in
São Paulo, which significantly contributed to the dissemination of Paralympic sports
nationwide (Araujo, 2011). This initiative bore fruit in 1972 when Brazil participated
in the PG in Heidelberg, marking its debut with a team of 20 male athletes (Araujo,
2011; Parsons & Winclker, 2012). These pioneering steps laid the foundation for the
country’s subsequent growth and development of Paralympic sports.

Over time, Paralympic sports expanded to encompass a broader range of
locations, individuals, and types of impairments, evolving into a diverse spectrum
of competitive opportunities for people with disability. However, there remained a
noticeable disparity in the number of female Paralympic competitors and medalists
compared with their male counterparts (Santos et al., 2022). The first involvement of
Brazilian female Paralympic athletes took place at the Toronto 1976 PG, featuring
athletes such as Beatriz Siqueira in Para swimming and lawn bowls as well as Maria
Alvares, who competed in Para table tennis and Para athletics (Parsons & Winclker,
2012). As women gradually became part of the community of athletes and medal
achievers, their presence consistently lagged behind men’s.

Numerous studies have highlighted several barriers that hinder the progress of
women with disability in sports. Initially, the origins of Paralympic sports within a
rehabilitation context, primarily for male ex-combatants, reinforced male domi-
nance in the early stages of the sports scene (Hargreaves, 2000; Tonon, 2021). In
addition, the intersection of social categories, such as gender and disability,
resulted in a double vulnerability for women with disability, subjecting them to
social oppression stemming from these two aspects (Apelmo, 2016; Olenik et al.,
1995; Tonon, 2021). Confronted with a culture that discriminates against women
and a society that marginalizes people with disability, women with disability often
find themselves in a doubly marginalized position within a sports environment primarily shaped by and for able-bodied men (Rubio, 2021).

This oppression is exacerbated in Paralympic sports as disabled men reinforce the stereotype of masculinity through displays of strength, virility, and power (Culver et al., 2022; Hargreaves, 2000). These demonstrations of masculinity lead to increased visibility in the media (Weiller-Abels et al., 2021). Within this context, additional obstacles, such as the absence of sports initiation programs, limited community opportunities, emotional and psychological challenges (e.g., low self-esteem), lack of inspirational role models in the media, insufficient coaching specialization, and economic vulnerability, are just a few examples of the hurdles that disabled girls and women encounter when pursuing a career in Paralympic sports (Brittain, 2016; Grimes & French, 1987).

In light of these challenges, despite the progressive increase in Brazilian participants and accomplishments, as evidenced by their ranking seventh during the recent Tokyo 2020 PG (Brittain, 2016), the persistent barriers in the lives of women with disability compel us to reflect on their journeys in elite sports. Moreover, considering the diverse characteristics of these women in sports, including the types of impairments and predominant sports, it is crucial to understand why this is the case. Female Paralympic sports represent a realm of rights and empowerment for women with disability (Hardin, 2007), and yet, there has been limited research on this theme. Thus, this study had two main aims: first, to provide an in-depth analysis of the involvement of Brazilian female athletes in Paralympic sports across all the PG from 1976 to 2021, and second, to facilitate a critical discussion regarding the historical evolution of sports for people with disability and women’s participation in sports.

Methods

The study was developed through a documentary analysis (Marconi & Lakatos, 2002) based on data obtained from the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) website (https://www.paralympic.org/) and official documents from the Brazilian Paralympic Committee. The information was analyzed based on official call-ups of Brazilian delegations and general results spreadsheets published between 1976 and 2021. This period corresponds to the modern era of the PG (Legg, 2018) and the beginning of Brazilian female Paralympians’ participation. From these analyses, the following data were initially extracted: the number of female athletes, eligible impairments (e.g., physical impairment [PI], visual impairment [VI], and intellectual impairment [II]), sports/events conducted, and year of participation. Furthermore, the participants were grouped into “medalists” and “nonmedalists,” and the type of medal won was stratified into gold, silver, and bronze. The descriptive analysis of the data was conducted using absolute and relative values related to the number of Brazilian female athletes called up and medalists in each PG and the number of medals won by Brazil in these games. All data were tabulated using Microsoft Excel.

Results

Our data revealed that leading up to the Tokyo 2020 PG, the Brazilian delegation included 229 female athletes, among whom 31.87% secured medals in nine
different Paralympic sports (comprising one team sport and eight individual sports). Concerning eligible impairments, 64.38% of the medalists had PI, whereas 30.13% had VI, and 5.47% had II. It is noteworthy that 88.88% of these medals were achieved in individual sports (Table 1).

Furthermore, the most decorated female Paralympic athletes in Brazilian history were those with PI competing in individual sports. However, it is essential to highlight that when examining the data related to the athletes’ impairment and their medal achievements, an impressive 66.66% of women with II who participated in the PG earned medals. It is also notable that the percentage of female Paralympic medalists with VI (39.28%) and those with PI (28.14%) is relatively low.

Brazilian female Paralympians won 126 medals, including 30 gold (23.81%), 46 silver (36.51%), and 50 bronze (39.68%). Women with VI were responsible for the highest number of medals, with 15 gold, 23 silver, and 22 bronze, representing 50% \( (n = 63) \) of all female medals. Women with PI won 15 gold, 23 silver, and 22 bronze, accounting for 47.61% \( (n = 60) \) of female medals, and women with II won three bronze, representing 2.39%. Of all the medals obtained, 98.41% were in individual sports. The three most medal-winning sports were Para athletics with 58.73%, Para swimming with 20.63%, and judo with 11.11% (Table 2). It was also observed that five sports (e.g., Para swimming, judo, powerlifting, Para table tennis, and Para tae kwon do) out of the nine medal-winning sports increased the number of medals won compared with the last edition Rio 2016 PG. In particular, both genders achieved medal successes in Para tae kwon do, which debuted at the Tokyo 2020 PG.

Figure 1 illustrates the progression of Brazilian female Paralympic participation across all editions of the PG in terms of the following factors: the number of sports in which women competed, the number of sports in which medals were won, the number of female medalists, and the number of women in the Brazilian delegation. After the New York 1984 PG, women became consistently represented in sporting events, and their participation in the Brazilian delegation had grown particularly after the 2000s. The turn of the century also showed promise in addressing the prior inconsistency observed in the number of medal-winning sports and female medalists.

Among all the editions analyzed, Brazilian female Paralympians achieved their most remarkable performances between 1976 and 2016, culminating in the Tokyo 2020 PG. Despite a smaller Brazilian women’s delegation than prior editions, this milestone event witnessed the highest number of medalists \( (n = 40) \), including seven sports with medal successes and a remarkable medal count of 27 (comprising seven gold, seven silver, and 13 bronze).

In addition to the steadily increasing medal achievements by Brazilian female Paralympians, two points are worth highlighting. First, there was no consistency in

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Note. Cells with a dash correspond to editions with no Brazilian participants.

<sup>a</sup>Sport played in a mixed class, with one male and one female athlete medaling in a competition contested as a pair. The mixed event was considered Mixed Double Sculls TAmix2x; Mixed 4×50m Freestyle Relay -20 points; X-Mixed 4×100m Free Relay-S14; X-Mixed 4×50m Free - 20 Pts; X-Mixed 4×100m Free Relay-49 Pts; Pairs-BC3.

<sup>b</sup>Sport played in a mixed class, with two female athletes and one male.
Figure 1 — Brazilian female Paralympic participation across all editions of the PG. PG = Paralympic Games.
the abrupt increase in medals that occurred in the 1984 New York PG held in two locations (Stoke Mandeville and New York). Furthermore, we observed exponential growth since the turn of the century, except for the London 2012 PG (Figure 2).

**Discussion**

Brazil was represented by 229 female Paralympic athletes, most of whom had PI. These athletes primarily competed in individual sports, showcasing exceptional Para athletics, Para swimming, and judo performances. Furthermore, after the 2000s, there was an exponential increase in the presence of women in the Brazilian delegation and in the number of sports disciplines in which women competed. The standout was the Tokyo Paralympics 2020, which, despite its fewer sports disciplines and a smaller delegation, was where the Brazilian Paralympic women won the highest number of medals. Tokyo Paralympics 2020 also held the second-largest delegation with gender equality (37.07%), second only to the delegation for the London 2012 PG (37.91%).

Historically, athlete participation has been on the rise since 1972, driven by economic and scientific incentives that have allowed Brazil to develop both in terms of quantity (e.g., the number of participants) and quality (e.g., medals won; Santos et al., 2022). However, when discussing Paralympic athletes, it is essential to emphasize the diversity of people with disability and Paralympic sports that emerge from this athletic category (Legg, 2018). The numbers serve as evidence of the underrepresentation of women in sports, even in a scenario of exponential growth in quantity and quality in Paralympic sports. Faced with a sexist culture that privileges a specific type of gender and an ableist society that normalizes the able body, women with disability are socially oppressed (Culver et al., 2022), with consequences for their historical involvement in Paralympic sports. In terms of numbers, gender equality has never been achieved in Brazilian Paralympic history.

Nevertheless, it has been observed that women are gaining ground in the Paralympic sports scene, with some key points to highlight: (a) Brazilian women with PI represent the most significant number of participants and medalists; (b) individual sports competitions by Brazilian women with VI have yielded the highest number of participations and medal victories among Brazilian female athletes; and (c) Brazilian women have been progressively improving their sports performances, particularly after the turn of the century, with the Tokyo 2020 PG marking the pinnacle of this evolution.

It has been demonstrated in the literature that reaching elite sports for Para athletes depends on previous athletic development phases. Success in the stages of attraction, retention, competition, and talent identification/development that precede elite sports relies on providing opportunities, encouragement, accessibility, specialized training, and funding in Paralympic sports (Patatas et al., 2020). Therefore, we believe that Brazilian women with PI represented the largest number of competitors because opportunities for people with PI in the PG have a more extended history. According to the International Paralympic Committee classification code, among the 10 eligible impairments currently recognized for participation in Paralympic sports (e.g., hypertonia, athetosis, ataxia, muscle strength deficit, passive range of motion deficit, limb deficiency, short stature, lower limb length difference, VI, and II), eight are categorized as PI.
Figure 2 — Gold, silver, and bronze medals won by Brazilian athletes across the Paralympic Games.
In this regard, the steeper increase in the number of sports in which women competed in the PG after the 2000s, as well as their presence in the Brazilian delegation, is related not only to various political and financial incentives but also to transformations in the perceptions of impairment and disability that have been taking place in society. The Brazilian Paralympic Committee’s foundation in 1995, the Agnelo Piva Law¹ in 2001, and the Brazilian athlete scholarship program started in 2004 (Santos et al., 2022), as well as media investments in the 1996, 2000, and 2004 PG, including funding for Brazilian press travel, contributed to the visibility of Paralympic sports in Brazil (Marques et al., 2013). These actions have improved Paralympic sports in Brazil by providing financial resources, organizational support, athlete development programs, and increased visibility, which, in turn, have led to greater participation, success, and recognition of Paralympic athletes and their accomplishments in the country.

However, it is essential to emphasize the contribution of social movements that allowed questioning and re-evaluating the understanding of gender and disability since the 1970s, but particularly after the 2000s, with the rise of feminist disability theory in Brazil (Corrêa, 2001; Diniz, 2007; Mello, 2014). One of the main contributions of this new theoretical perspective was the strengthening of the social model of disability understanding, emphasizing that there are structural and attitudinal barriers that restrict individuals with various physical, sensory, and intellectual characteristics in social life (Thomas, 2006). Women with disability were central to the expansion of this understanding as they inserted their subjective experiences with their bodies and care, reshaping notions related to the compulsory pursuit of independence and transforming the ideas of “normal” and “normative female” bodies (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

In addition to the positive changes in the Brazilian Paralympic sports system already highlighted in the literature (Santos et al., 2022), we believe that restructuring the social imagination of what it means to be a disabled woman in sports has led to significant changes in the branching of opportunities for women in different sports. Cidade and Ferreira (2002) highlighted various actions during this period that boosted the involvement of these women in sports. Among them, the authors pointed to the Brighton Conference of 1994 as one of the most relevant because it was the first international conference on women and sports that brought together national and international politicians and leaders. The event led to the creation of various principles for improving women’s participation and advancement in sports, including women with disability.

Furthermore, from the late 1980s to the 2000s, various studies emerged, emphasizing the double vulnerability of disabled girls and women in sports and that entering and ascending in sports is complex in terms of encouragement, funding, and sexist and normative assumptions. However, female athletes can be protagonists of their sports stories (Olenik et al., 1995); the understanding of the body plays a central role in entering and maintaining sports practices (Blinde & McCallister, 1999); feminist perspectives can contribute to the re-evaluation of disability and gender, even in dialogue with other social categories (DePauw, 1997; Sherrill, 1993); and physical education professionals are among those responsible for breaking down social barriers (Grimes & French, 1987).

Indeed, after this period, many disabled girls and women engaged in elite sports and excelled in various disciplines, as our study has shown. What deserves careful
analysis at this point, however, is the prevalence of female Paralympians and medalists in individual Paralympic sports. The three Brazilian female Paralympians with the most gold medals in the PG all compete in individual sports (e.g., Para athletics and Para swimming) and have VI. They are Adria Rocha Santos (born in Santa Catarina, southern region), who won 13 Paralympic medals, including four gold, eight silver, and one bronze in athletics; Terezinha Aparecida Guilhermina de Castro (born in Minas Gerais, southeastern region), who won eight Paralympic medals, including three gold, two silver, and three bronze in athletics; and Maria Carolina Gomes Santiago (born in Recife, Pernambuco), who secured five Paralympic medals, including three gold, one silver, and one bronze in swimming.

We believe that this prevalence could be related to two main factors. First, individual sports, such as Para swimming and Para athletics, have more events than team sports, so the chance of winning a medal is higher. Para athletics, for example, include track and road events that vary by distance (e.g., sprints, middle distance, long distance, and marathon), jumping events, and field events (e.g., throws, jumps, and high jump). In Para swimming, the events are divided by strokes (freestyle, backstroke, butterfly, breaststroke, and medley) and distances ranging from 50 to 400 m. This diversity of competition opportunities enhances the possibility of winning medals.

Second, considering the limited participation of women with disability in sports, opportunities for team sports are less frequent. This lack of opportunities is even more evident when analyzing girls and women with VI, who are excluded from team sports from childhood (Haegele et al., 2018).

Therefore, women tend to focus more on individual sports or mixed teams because these are usually the only available opportunities. Although mixed-ability sports can be a path for athletes interested in team sports, Apelmo (2016) emphasized that the mixed context can position women with disability at risk of physical and verbal harassment, exclusion within the group, and stigmatization and marginalization in the face of sexist language.

The lack of participants to form women’s teams requires further investigation, considering that the sense of belonging in sports is often built not only through contact with disabled peers but also through identification with people who share the same gender (Apelmo, 2016). This provides a shared and reciprocal experience within the collective environment (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001). Furthermore, considering that the sport environment is marked by gender differences (e.g., gendered) and reproduces these differences (gendering; Goellner, 2021), the representation of a sport as “masculine” or “feminine” can contribute to inhibiting or directing women toward its practice. For example, team sports are often characterized as “male” sports (Plaza et al., 2017), which can distance women with disability who want to approach a femininity stereotype that has been denied to the disabled body (Blinde & McCallister, 1999). Conversely, this sport, typified as masculine, can strengthen itself as a field of challenge and contribute to women demonstrating their strength in competition against men (Apelmo, 2016, 2019).

Our final point of discussion centers on the achievements of Brazilian female Paralympians, particularly the number of medals won at the Tokyo 2020 PG. In this context, these women often contend with the discourse of “overcoming,” a narrative that primarily frames their success in sports as a triumph over their disability, recognized as their individual tragedy (Hargreaves, 2000; Silva &
However, before delving into this analysis, it is crucial to state that highlighting the concept of “overcoming” in this study serves as an act of rectification aimed at accurately representing women with disability in sports. The prevalence of the medical model in sports and the resulting lack of sensitivity to human diversity perpetuate the belief that deviations from normative standards must be surmounted, normalized, or modified (Mello & Nuernberg, 2012). Consequently, these athletes are often portrayed as excelling in their respective sports despite their impairments (Weiller-Abels et al., 2021).

Hence, within the context of this study, the term “overcoming” is intended to be understood as a product of athletic achievement and triumph over attitudinal and structural barriers that hinder the full development of girls and women in sports rather than the notion of success in sport as a result of overcoming their disability. In terms of performance, the Brazilian Paralympic Committee devised a strategic plan in 2017 shortly after achieving an eighth-place ranking in the Rio 2016 PG. This plan was implemented to ensure Brazil’s consistent position among the top-10 countries with the highest medal counts. Its effectiveness became evident as Brazil ascended to seventh place in the Tokyo 2020 PG, with an increase in both overall gold medals (from 14 in Rio 2016 to 22 in Tokyo 2020) and gold medals in the women’s class (from three in Rio 2016 to seven in Tokyo 2020). To address the aspect of overcoming barriers, the primary focus in working with these girls and women should be on “overcoming personal and social obstacles, fostering self-esteem and self-confidence, ensuring equal access to physical activities, competitions, training, and leadership positions, and promoting a cultural and systemic shift in the world of sports” (Cidade & Ferreira, 2002, p. 31).

Indeed, Brazil is a Paralympic powerhouse, with the central figures of this narrative being both men and women with diverse kinds of impairments and distinct sporting journeys. Nevertheless, beneath the numbers lies a complex Paralympic phenomenon that requires deeper investigation and scrutiny. Thus, this study provides insights into potential research avenues for further understanding this multifaceted realm.

A significant area warranting more investigation is the persistently low turnover of female Paralympians within the high-performance sphere. This trend results in the same women maintaining their top rankings for extended periods. Moreover, in addition to the evident barriers that obstruct participation in Paralympic sports, financial instability and postcareer planning can impede exclusive dedication, compelling women with disability in sports to manage dual careers (Krahenbühl et al., 2022).

Furthermore, future research should expand its focus on the Paralympic landscape concerning girls and women with II. This emphasis is critical for two reasons. First, only three Paralympic sports (Para athletics, Para swimming, and Para table tennis) are open to athletes with this specific type of impairment. Second, participation in alternative avenues, such as the Special Olympics, may inadvertently limit these athletes’ involvement in PG. Finally, it is imperative to delve deeper into the intersectionality of gender and disability with other societal categories, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age. The amalgamation of these factors can substantially influence the experiences and opportunities of women with disability in sports.
In conclusion, the participation of Brazilian Paralympic women in the PG has witnessed significant growth over the years, with women with PI constituting the largest group of participants and medalists. Although more work is required to achieve gender equality in Paralympic sports, the progress made so far is commendable. The success of Brazilian Paralympic women, particularly in individual sports, such as Para athletics and Para swimming, underscores their unwavering dedication and exceptional talent. Nonetheless, further research and advocacy are required to confront the persistent barriers faced by women with disability in sports and to promote more extensive inclusion and opportunities for all.

Notes

1. The Agnelo Piva Law, enacted in 2001, allocated a portion of funds generated from state lotteries to support sports development in Brazil. This law provided crucial financial resources that could be channeled into Paralympic sports programs, helping to improve athlete training, infrastructure, and competition opportunities.

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