

# “Go and Wash up!”: Gender Violence in Female Refereeing and Its Media Coverage in Brazil and Spain

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Joaquín Marín-Montín<sup>1</sup> , and Paula Bianchi<sup>2</sup> 

## Abstract

Violence in sports has the greatest impact in the media, especially on television. In the case of refereeing, although there are studies that have specifically addressed violence, those performed on female referees have not had the same repercussions. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to analyse the media coverage of violence against female referees in Brazil and Spain. In parallel, its intention is to reflect the perceptions of female referees in this respect. The methodology employed combined case studies with critical discourse analysis, based on news items and focus groups with female referees. The results reveal that gender violence against female referees is the most widespread type of aggression. Moreover, they highlight the sensationalist nature of the TV coverage of the phenomenon through the incorporation of visual and audio resources. Lastly, the findings of this study show how the prominence that this type of violence has achieved in the media has ended up eclipsing the recognition of the work of female referees.

## Keywords

abuse, sports officials, the media, sports, women

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<sup>1</sup>Departamento de Comunicación Audiovisual y Publicidad, Universidad de Sevilla, Seville, Spain

<sup>2</sup>Departamento de Didáctica de la Educación Física, Plástica y Musical, Universidad de Cádiz, Cadiz, Spain

## Corresponding Author:

Joaquín Marín-Montín, Departamento de Comunicación Audiovisual y Publicidad, Facultad de Comunicación, Universidad de Sevilla, Av. Américo Vespucio s/n, Seville, 41092, Spain.

Email: [jmontin@us.es](mailto:jmontin@us.es)

One of the most frequent expressions of discrimination against women in sports are the aggressions that they suffer, generally in the form of gender violence. The aim of such aggressions is to discredit their professionalism, because it is a field characterised by a patriarchal tradition and stereotyped activities (Payeras et al., 2016). Likewise, violence against women in sports also affects female referees whose professionalism is more disputed and less recognised than that of their male counterparts (Castillo et al., 2019). The increasingly more spectacular nature of sports has given greater relevance to the work of referees, who now play a more active role in the smooth or unsmooth evolution of sporting events (Boschilia et al., 2008; Devis-Devis et al., 2021). Although research has explored issues concerning discrimination against women in sports and its relationship with the media, there are hardly any references to female refereeing. There is a need to examine this issue to determine how it is broached and whether its media coverage is adequate or too sensationalist, with the negative consequences that this can have for the professional careers of female referees, insofar as some of them may be tempted to throw in the towel. Thus, this study is based on the following research question: How do the media cover gender violence against female referees? The research objective is therefore to analyse the media coverage of gender violence in female refereeing in Brazil and Spain, in addition to reflecting the perceptions of different female referees.

## Impact of Gender Violence on Female Referees

Violence in sports refers to any behaviour that causes physical or psychological harm as a direct or indirect result of their practice (Jamieson & Orr, 2009). It can take the shape of harmful or potentially harmful acts that include the use of physical force or intimidation, abiding or not by the rules of the game, which threaten or violate human rights and civil liberties (Young, 2019). In the specific case of violence against women in sports, its causes are associated with a combination of different factors linked to stereotypes such as frailty and maternity, as well as to prejudices and myths that restrict their participation (Knijnik, 2014; Osborne, 2009). So, whenever a sportswoman breaks with that trend, she runs the risk of suffering from some type of violence (Smith & Bissell, 2014).

Although the participation of female referees in sports has increased in recent years (Schultz, 2018), their number is still lower than that of their male counterparts, while there are still sports in which the former do not take part (García, 2019). Although male referees are now commonplace in women's football, basketball and rugby matches, there is less likelihood of female referees participating in male leagues (Williams, 2014). Different studies indicate that female referees have to meet many requirements to pursue their careers, while having to demonstrate much more, merely for being women (Antunovic, 2014; Baldwin & Vallance, 2016; González et al., 2018). In football, in which there is often an anti-referee sentiment, when referees are women, they not only have to withstand that pressure, but also have to cope with sexist appraisals, like being questioned, even before they have had the chance to demonstrate

their worth (Forbes et al., 2015; Reid & Dallaire, 2020). In addition, female referees are the targets of other forms of less visible abuse, such as their underrepresentation in a sport based on a masculine model (Drury et al., 2022), the difficulties in developing and progressing in their careers (Webb, Gorczynski, et al., 2021) and the negative impact that all this can have on their mental health (Tingle et al., 2021).

Female referees come up against different obstacles, such as the lack of gender equality, in sports dominated by patriarchal structures (Goellner et al., 2013; Perreau-Niel & Erard, 2015; Reid & Dallaire, 2019; 2020). The presence of female referees or umpires in football, cricket and rugby matches is hindered by barriers such as online harassment, sexism and low wages (Webb, Rayner, et al., 2021). A study performed on the experiences of female referees in the Korean football league revealed factors prompting them to abandon their profession (Kim & Hong, 2016). One such factor is when female referees become mothers, owing to the difficulties in striking an adequate work-family balance (Forsyth et al., 2019). Other studies focusing on US basketball referees revealed other reasons: a lack of respect on the part of their male colleagues; the perception of inequality in their federations, which are supposed to offer them guidance on and off court; and having suffered gender abuse (Tingle et al., 2014).

From an amateur to a professional level, the work of female referees does not receive the same degree of recognition as that of their male colleagues (Castillo et al., 2019), there being differences such as promotion and wages. The professional development of female referees is not necessarily limited by their lack of ability, but rather by the structural barriers of society and sports (Forsyth et al., 2019; Passero et al., 2020). On the other hand, the fitness tests have occasionally become an obstacle, preventing many female referees from being promoted. With respect to football, in 2007 the FIFA established that the participation of female referees in male competitions would depend on them obtaining the same results as their male colleagues, otherwise they would only be allowed to participate in the women's category (Monteiro et al., 2020). Specifically, there are two tests: a speed test in which referees are required to run 40 m six times; and another that measures their high-intensity performance in 20 150 m sprints. Although the tests are similar, the average times required differ depending on the sex, thus being incoherent because the physical demands of the game are not the same in men's and women's football. These differences would be justified if female referees only refereed women's football matches (Cerqueira et al., 2011).

As to wages, a study of female referees demonstrated that they had to have second jobs, since they were unable to earn a living solely from refereeing (González et al., 2018). As female referees make progress in their careers, they sometimes have to strike a balance between their refereeing, a full-time job, family commitments, maternity, training sessions and matches on weekends and sometimes on weekdays. All this requires a strong commitment with scant compensation (Macmahon et al., 2015). As a matter of fact, many of them do not have professional contracts or workers' rights (Leruite et al., 2015). The difference in the wages earned by male and female referees is most evident in professional football. The female referees of the Liga Iberdrola (the first division women's league in Spain) earned nearly 95% less than their male colleagues in

the La Liga Santander (the first division men's league in Spain) (Gil, 2021). In the National Football League, the best paid referees earned between US\$2500 and US\$5000 per match, while their female colleagues were paid only US\$1500 (Lincoln, 2021).

Female referees and umpires also suffer from verbal and physical violence, plus harassment and sexual abuse. Similarly, consideration should be given to the negative effects that aggressions can have on the mental health of female referees. Tingle et al. (2021) note the consequences that they suffer when they are valued more for their physical appearance than for their refereeing skills, as well as when they are excluded from structural decision-making, thus provoking in them high levels of anxiety, a loss of self-esteem and fear. For Friman et al. (2004), one of potential dangers for referees and umpires is their sex, before adding that many verbal aggressions stem from the fact that women are not accepted as such. In another study, in which English female football referees participated, it was found that the insults that they received were similar to those aimed at their male colleagues, this being considered as part of the game (Forbes et al., 2015). However, the use of sexist language, in the shape of discriminatory insults and prejudices referring to traditional female roles, by fans to criticise the decisions of female referees reinforces the alleged male superiority (Reid & Dallaire, 2020; Santos et al., 2013). Female referees do not only have to cope with the insults habitually aimed at their collective, but also with the sexist behaviour of the spectators, especially in male competitions (Devis-Devis et al., 2021). As a result, the insults that players, coaches and spectators aim at female referees can have a negative effect on their mental health, leading to high levels of stress, frustration and depression (Webb, Gorczynski, et al., 2021).

As to physical violence, albeit present, it does not predominate in elite sports, while in the lower categories verbal abuse can lead to physical aggressions owing to the fact that female referees are more isolated (Reid & Dallaire, 2020; Webb, Rayner, et al., 2021). In addition to job discrimination, female referees are also subjected, albeit less visibly, to sexual harassment, which becomes more frequent, the higher the level of competition (Castillo et al., 2019). In many sports, during the decisive moments of matches female referees have admitted to being belittled, the insults aimed at them occasionally bordering on sexual harassment (Hietala & Archibald, 2021). As to sexual abuse in refereeing, although the media have covered some specific cases, it is a field in which little academic research has been conducted to date (Webb, Rayner, et al., 2021). Both harassment and sexual abuse can damage the mental health of female referees, often forcing them to abandon the profession owing to the lack of official support (Webb, Gorczynski, et al., 2021).

### *Media Coverage of Gendered Violence*

Female referees have to cope with news coverage replete with prejudices and discrimination, ranging from homosexual stereotypes to the eroticisation of the female body (Righeto & Reis, 2017). For instance, the Brazilian newspaper *Extra* published

several stories about female referees in a markedly sensationalist tone, with headlines such as ‘Pretty referee assistants enamour fans at stadiums. See the list of some of the beauties of the ball’ (2015). In its sports section, the Brazilian newspaper *Zero Hora* published the story entitled, ‘Get to know the sexiest Russian [female] referee in the world’ (2017).

Live TV and radio sports programmes, together with the new media, shape opinions that can include messages encouraging violent attitudes towards female referees (Jones & Edwards, 2013). In a study of the frequency of violence against referees in Sweden (Friman et al., 2004), the participants referred to the problem posed by the live coverage of football matches, since this sometimes starkly reveals whether or not referees have made wrong decisions, thus prompting fans to resort to violence. Violence at sporting events is a relevant aspect for the media (Betti, 2004), whose reporters and commentators foment a symbolic aggressiveness when they analyse the mistakes of referees (Righeto & Reis, 2017). In 2011, during the broadcasting of a Premier League match on Sky Sports, the former footballer Andy Gray and the journalist Richard Keys, believing that their microphones had been turned off, made a number of derogatory and sexist remarks about the performance of a referee assistant for not knowing how to apply the offside rule (Forbes et al., 2015; Jones & Edwards, 2013; Young, 2019). During a televised Brazil Cup match, the former footballer Jairzinho made sexist comments about the performance of the female referee assistant, claiming that she gave him a headache and that she should go and do the washing (Batista, 2020).

In relation to verbal abuse, the Spanish press offers a number of examples, with headlines like ‘Sexist insults in the grandstand’ and ‘No one shouts at a male referee telling him to “go and wash up”. But they tell us to do so’, appearing in *El País* (Valdés, 2019), and ‘A mother in the grandstand shouted at me, telling me to go and wash up because it was the only thing I was good for’, published in *El Periódico* (Iglesias, 2016). In the Brazilian press, for its part, condemnation of this phenomenon can be seen in news items such as ‘Aggression against a female referee: a man does not accept receiving orders from a woman’, posted on the portal R7 (Bresser, 2019), plus the column, ‘Female referee assaulted at a football match. There is a need for respect and to guarantee rights ...’, appearing on the portal UOL (Kampff, 2019). By the same token, social networking sites also have a media impact as regards violence against female referees. The Spanish edition of the portal 20 minutos posted the news item, ‘Sexist insults aimed at a female referee who received a ball in the face during the women’s Real Madrid-Athletic match’, which echoed the sexist remarks about the referee posted on Twitter (2020).

The media coverage of violence against female referees is sometimes sensationalist, blowing its impact out of proportion (Mocarzel et al., 2012). This can be observed in some newspapers publishing headlines like ‘An 18-year-old female referee is assaulted by the stepmother of a player’ (Moreno, 2016) and ‘This woman does not have the capacity to referee; well, women do not have the capacity to referee’ (Mora, 2016). But it is above all some TV newscasts that present the news in a sensationalist manner, highlighting the issue with graphic and visual elements, including striking, emotional

and eye-catching images (Benaissa, 2016), while frequently offering a similar type of coverage in the case of violence against female referees.

### *Studies in Brazil and Spain*

As to the aspects that affect gender violence against female referees in the settings analysed, the existing literature, in this respect, points to the following.

In the case of Brazil, it is important to take into account the high level of violence in football (Brandão et al, 2020), which also affects referees in the shape of verbal insults, intimidation and physical assaults (Monteiro et al., 2014). The difficulties that female referees have in refereeing matches in relevant competitions, versus doing so in friendlies or in matches played in more remote places, should also be underscored (Votre & Mourão, 2003). Moreover, other factors addressed in the literature include the ridiculing of the psychological violence to which some female referees are subjected because they are allegedly unprepared for the job, while their male colleagues are questioned a lot less (Monteiro et al., 2020; Nascimento & Nunes, 2014). As regards school sports, a study revealed the feeling of inferiority of female referees, as well as their inability to impose their authority or to act autonomously during matches (Bressan et al., 2019). Another issue analysed has to do with the inadequate media coverage of female refereeing in Brazilian football, focusing more on the physical appearance and behaviour of female referees than on sporting aspects (Goellner, 2005).

In the case of Spain, one of the few studies performed on the sexual harassment of football referees underscored sexist hostility as the most frequent aspect, with female referees receiving more than their fair share (Castillo et al., 2019). By the same token, in another study Sánchez et al. (2021) sought to validate a questionnaire adapted so as gauge sexual harassment in football refereeing in Spain, in which 51.4% of the respondents were female referees. On the other hand, González et al. (2018) have compared the track record of two international Spanish female referees on the basis of their life stories, revealing the greater effort that they have had to make to strike an adequate work-life balance. In the same vein, another study examined the violence experienced by four Spanish female football referees, placing the accent on the different types of sexist behaviour exhibited by spectators, which varies depending on their age (Devis-Devis et al., 2021). Lastly, despite their improved status in Spain, evidenced by their participation in important male and female football matches, refereeing is still mainly a male profession in which female referees continue to receive strong criticism and are the object of sexualisation (Valiente, 2022).

### **Methodology**

In view of the aforementioned literature, it can be claimed that scant academic attention has been paid to the media coverage of violence against female referees. Accordingly, this study examines how the Brazilian and Spanish media cover such violence (What do the media have to say about gender violence in female refereeing?) and what

characterises violence in those contexts (what are the similarities and difference in the way in which the issue is broached in Brazil and Spain?). Similarly, the intention is to become acquainted with the views that female referees hold on issues relating to violence in sports (how do they view the problem?) and on the role of the media (what is their perception of the news coverage in this respect?).

In order to answer these questions, this qualitative research employed a methodology combining multiple case studies with critical discourse analysis. The aim of the former was to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomena to which researchers have paid little attention to date (Yin, 2015), as well as to establish cross comparisons without modifying the meanings of each context (Kreusburg, 2010). As regards the latter, it allowed for interpreting the explicit and implicit intentions of the content (Fairclough, 2013), while contributing to broaden the frame of social equality (Van Dijk, 1999). To this end, two data collection tools were employed:

1. A selection of stories included (2018–2020) in the TV newscasts of TV Globo (Brazil) and Atresmedia Televisión (Spain), plus online content, addressing cases of violence against female referees. The choice of the media was justified by the fact that they had the highest audience ratings in Brazil and Spain, as well as having covered cases of gender violence against female referees in their newscasts. By registering and viewing the news stories, it was possible to identify four recurring aspects: testimonies and graphic, sound and visual elements.
2. Two focus groups in Brazil and Spain, in which seven female referees participated. That the female referees were participating, or had participated, at different levels in football competitions in Spain and five-side football competitions in Brazil was employed as a selection criterion. So as to guarantee confidentiality, each respondent was assigned a alphanumeric pseudonym. The focus groups were face-to-face, using the official language of each country. During the sessions, a selection of the news stories analysed was screened so as to contrast them with their own experiences in refereeing, relevant similarities being encountered between both. After audio recording the focus group interviews and literally transcribing them, the material obtained was classified according to four issues: violence against women in sports, violence against the female referees themselves, their media impact and other aspects.

## Results

### *The Media Coverage of Violence Against Female Referees in Brazil and Spain*

The first part of the analysis was performed on 29 news stories (see Table 1). Likewise, four news stories posted on the online portals belonging to the same news outlets were analysed, thus bringing the total to 33.

**Table I.** Data on the Stories Analysed.

Id	Programme	Story	Channel	Date
SS1	Jugones	A 17-year-old female referee reports sexist remarks	6	17/01/2018
SS2	A3N Deportes	The 17-year-old female referee who had to suspend a match	A3	17/01/2018
SS3	A3N Deportes	Gender violence in football. A female referee victim in a juvenile match	A3	18/01/2018
SS4	Jugones	Sexist behaviour on the pitches	6	26/03/2018
SS5	Jugones	A man confronts a female referee during a children's match	6	14/05/2018
SS6	A3N Deportes	She stopped the match after receiving a sexist insult. They told her 'to go and wash up'	A3	03/07/2018
SS7	A3N Deportes	First trio of female referees in catalonia	A3	01/11/2018
SS8	LaSexta deportes	Deplorable insults aimed at three female referees in third division	6	02/11/2018
SS9	A3N Deportes	The CP san cristóbal withdraws the membership card from a person who shouted sexist insults at the three female referees and bans him from the stadium	A3	06/11/2018
SS10	A3N Deportes	Sexist insults at matches refereed by women	A3	06/11/2018
SS11	LaSexta deportes	Female referees react to sexist remarks	6	07/11/2018
SS12	A3N Deportes	Complaints because two women refereed	A3	07/11/2018
SS13	LaSexta deportes	The campaign launched by female referees to report physical violence and verbal abuse against women	6	23/11/2018
SS14	A3N Deportes	Sick of the threats, ándrea stops refereeing after 15 years	A3	17/12/2018
SS15	Jugones	She stops refereeing after 15 years	6	18/12/2018
SS16	A3N Deportes	Deplorable insults aimed at a female referee in palencia	A3	19/12/2018
SS17	A3N Deportes	The difficult path of female refereeing	A3	08/03/2019
SS18	Jugones	Laura bezares was insulted during a third-division match	6	28/10/2019
SS19		The police are investigating three men for sexist insults and for threatening a female referee	Lasexta.com	26/10/2019

*(continued)*



**Table I.** (continued)

Id	Programme	Story	Channel	Date
SS20		Terrible sexist insults aimed at a female referee in san lorenzo de el escorial	antena3.com	19/11/2019
BS1	Esporte espetacular	A female referee is assaulted by a player during an amateur football match in rio grande do sul	Globo	07/10/2018
BS2	Globo esporte RS	Here is the story of a woman who overcame her fear of violence to referee	Globo	07/12/2018
BS3		Following the aggression during an amateur football match, the female referee became the youngest to do so in the CBF	ge.globo.com	18/07/2018
BS4	Esporte espetacular	The student who attacked the female referee during a university match and may be arrested says that he regrets his actions	Globo	09/06/2019
BS5		The aggression against a female five-a-side football referee causes commotion and leads to calls for a prison sentence on social media	ge.globo.com	04/06/2019
BS6	Globo esporte PI	The female referee assaulted during a five-a-side football match talks about the case and her traumas	Globo	10/06/2019
BS7	PITV 1ª edição	The female referee talks about the aggression that she suffered during a five-a-side football match at the university of parnaíba	Globo	04/06/2019
BS8	Globo esporte RJ	After sending the player off during a five-a-side football match, the female referee was punched	Globo	04/06/2019
BS9	PITV 2ª edição	Protesters call for the student who punched the female referee during a five-a-side football match to be sent down	Globo	04/06/2019
BS10	Bom dia piauí	The report with the results of the aggression against the female referee of a five-a-side football match will be published on Thu	Globo	05/06/2019
BS11	Bom dia piauí	Prejudice forms part of the work routine of female referees	Globo	07/06/2019
BS12	Bom dia piauí	The university sends down the student who physically assaulted the female referee during a five-a-side football match	Globo	12/09/2019
BS13	Bom dia piauí	The case of the female referee physically assaulted during a five-a-side football match in parnaíba continues	Globo	04/06/2020

Notes. SS = Spanish news stories; BS = Brazilian news stories; A3N Deportes = Antena three Noticias Deportes; 6 = laSexta; A3 = Antena three.

**Table 2.** Testimonies.

Types	BSn	SSn	T	%
Statements of the female referees	8	18	26	78.7
Presidents of clubs and institutions	5	7	12	36.3
Representatives of the female referee collective	4	5	9	27.2
Families of female referees	1	4	5	15.1
Fans	2	2	4	12.1
Media professionals	2	1	3	9
Coaches	0	2	2	6

Notes. BSn = Brazilian news stories number; SSn = Spanish news stories number; T = Total over 33 news stories.

In light of the analysis of these stories, four elements can be distinguished—testimonies and graphic, visual and audio elements—which were the most representative with respect to the object of study. As to the testimonies, seven types were identified (see [Table 2](#)).

In relation to the statements of the female referees, 78.7% of the overall total refer to different types of violence. Those affected by it remarked on verbal abuse of a sexist nature, as in the case of a female referee who was taunted by a male player during an amateur match: ‘You shouldn’t be here. I’m sure you don’t even know how to wash up’ (BS1); and in that of a 15-year-old female referee who was insulted during a Colts match: ‘Football’s for boys, you dyke, go and play with dolls, girls don’t know how to play football’ (SS14).

Another aspect that cropped up repeatedly in the female referees’ accounts had to do with sexist prejudices, as a female referee of professional five-a-side football declared, ‘I hear things like in a decisive match, I had to be a man ....’ (BS11). Similarly, a colleague refereeing junior football matches stated, ‘Why is it because we’re women we can no longer referee or that football is only for one of the sexes?’ (SS3).

Furthermore, in their accounts they mentioned the physical aggressions that they had suffered during matches, as in the case in which two female referees were attacked by a five-a-side football player and an amateur football player, respectively:

‘He gave me such a beating that I collapsed on the pitch. He threw three punches at me. I managed to dodge the first, but not the other two’ (BS4); ‘When I showed him the yellow card, the player approached me and insulted me, before slapping my chest, treading heavily on my foot and pushing me’ (BS1).

The second group of statements appearing in TV news stories, relating to episodes of violence, were made by presidents of clubs and institutions (36.3% of the overall total), in which they assumed their responsibility and showed their willingness to adopt measures for eradicating violence. This was the view of the coordinator of a basketball

team and the chancellor of a university, both responsible for institutions affected by aggressions against female referees:

‘I strongly repudiate the occasional attitude of one of our coaches, for it isn’t the image we want to offer’ (SS5); ‘Since the university was informed about the incident occurring in its facilities, the administrative procedures applying to situations of this type have been initiated’ (BS7).

Another group of statements appearing in the TV news stories were made by representatives of the female referee collective (27.2% of the overall total), in which they condemned aggressions against female referees, as well as holding themselves up as an example of courage in the face of adversity. In light of these aggressions, both the president of the Spanish Referees’ Association and the coordinator of refereeing of the Brazilian Football Confederation spoke out:

‘We want to condemn all kinds of violence, above all gender violence, and we all have to work hard to prevent this from happening to both men and women’ (SS10); ‘There’s a need to be more courageous when coping with all these prejudices and for more women who want to be referees’ (BS1).

Moving on, 15.1% of statements were made by the families of female referees, contributing to fill in the picture, while expressing how indignant they felt about the disagreeable experiences that they had been forced to go through, as stressed by a mother and a grandmother of those affected:

‘She told me that she approached the coach and told him this kid had just said he was going to kill her for not having blown her whistle when he was fouled ...’ (SS14); ‘When she’s out refereeing, I don’t go to sleep until she comes home’ (BS11).

On the other hand, in 12.1% of the material analysed there are testimonies of fans who were at the matches and offered their views on different incidents, as in the case of a female spectator who expressed her opinion in this respect: ‘There’re people who still don’t understand there’re also female referees’ (SS7); and a male university student who attended a match in which a player hit a female referee: ‘It all happened very quickly and nobody expected it, but we immediately went to help the victim’ (BS4).

The news stories analysed included the statements of media professionals (9% of the overall total) who were working in the places where the aggressions took place, such as that of a journalist covering such cases: ‘The fans weren’t bothered by the fact that the match was stopped. They understood the situation perfectly’ (SS6); and that of the sports commentator of a radio station broadcasting a match during which such an aggression occurred: ‘I never imagined he’d react in that way, first with physical violence and then with verbal abuse’ (BS2).

There were also statements made by coaches as eyewitnesses to the incidents (6% of the overall total), like those of two working at a junior football academy:

‘Rather nasty sexist remarks were heard from the grandstand, like “if you’re useless at refereeing, I can’t imagine you doing the washing up”’ (SS1). ‘There was a moment when the female referee awarded a penalty and the other coach got rather hot under the collar. He told her that if he wanted to enter the pitch, he was going to damn well do so. The match had to be suspended.’ (SS2).

The Brazilian news stories include two with another group of statements relating to sexual discrimination, made by an assailant who had hit a female referee, a lawyer defending an aggressor and a member of a women’s group of a locality where a female referee had been physically assaulted:

‘I told her that her place was at home, washing up ...’ (assailant, BS1); ‘He didn’t not hit her because she was a woman’ (lawyer of the assailant, BS4); ‘Regrettably, it wasn’t an isolated case, it’s routine for us ... I’m sure that many men would think twice ... because everybody’s watching’ (women’s group, BS2).

With respect to the graphic elements included in the TV news stories analysed, four types were identified (see [Table 3](#)), of which the use of captions stood out (63.6% of the overall total).

On the one hand, they served as headlines for the news, contextualising the information: ‘DEPLORABLE INSULTS AIMED AT TRIO OF FEMALE REFEREES IN THIRD DIVISION’ (SS8); ‘FEMALE REFEREE ASSAULTED BY STUDENT’ (BS7).

They also served to highlight certain key parts of the information in both the voice-over and the statements (51.5% of the overall total). ‘ACCORDING TO THE MATCH REPORT, HE APPROACHED HER THREATENINGLY WITH HIS ARMS RAISED’ (SS1); ‘12,873 WOMEN WERE ASSAULTED PER DAY IN BRAZIL DURING 2018’ (BS4).

**Table 3.** Graphics.

Types	BSn	SSn	T	%
Captions	10	11	21	63.6
Key parts	5	12	17	51.5
Captions with different graphic resources	4	10	14	42.4
Subtitled real sounds	2	9	11	33.3

Notes. BSn = Brazilian news stories number; SSn = Spanish news stories number; T = Total over 33 news stories.

For a greater dramatic effect, 42.4% of the news stories analysed presented the captions with different graphic resources: strong colours, occupying most of the screen, flashing in unison with the different voices or reappearing when insults were involved.

On the other hand, there were a number of captions used to subtitle real sounds recorded with other devices, such as mobile telephones, and by radio stations. They were news stories relating to the aggressions reproducing real insults and live accounts of them (33.3% of the overall total).

‘SENT OFF Cláudio, no. 5 ... Attempted aggression against the female referee! That’s nasty!’ (BS1); ‘Useless, cheeky moron ... ! I’m going to retire you! Where are you from, sweetie ... !’ (SS4). ‘Who’s shagging her in the team? Are you all shagging her? Go and wash up! Bitch! Male referee or female referee! You’re a laughing stock ...!’ (SS7)

Regarding the sound elements, the analysis revealed four types (see [Table 4](#)).

There was music in 54.4% of the TV news stories, especially for a greater dramatic effect. Specifically, they were fragments which could first be heard in the background under the voice-over or ambient sound, before swelling dramatically. It was the kind of instrumental music conveying suspense, horror or sadness, and to a lesser extent optimism. On the other hand, the ambient sound of 30.3% of the TV news stories included the disapproving murmur of the fans reacting against the physical aggressions. In the case of the Brazilian TV news stories, the use of 15-second silences accompanied by captions showing figures relating to gender violence in Brazil was commonplace (BS4). With respect to the ambient sound of the TV news stories, verbal insults from the grandstand, mostly recorded with mobile devices, predominated (27.2% of the overall total). Additionally, 9% of the TV news stories employed a bleep censor so as to prevent the insults from being heard in full.

As regards the visual elements, six types were identified (see [Table 5](#)).

Concerning the type of images appearing in the TV news stories analysed, these included a large amount of video footage shot with mobile phones in the grandstand (36.4% of the overall total), recording sexist insults or videoing the physical aggressions per se. As to the assailants, 36.3% of the news stories analysed included images and some close-ups of them, while others showed photos of them during the

**Table 4.** Audio Elements.

Types	BSn	SSn	T	%
Music	6	12	18	54.4
Murmur of the fans reacting against the physical aggressions	4	6	10	30.3
Ambient sound of verbal insults from the grandstand	0	9	9	27.2
Bleep censor	0	3	3	9

Notes. BSn = Brazilian news stories number; SSn = Spanish news stories number; T = Total over 33 news stories.

**Table 5.** Visual Elements.

Types	BSn	SSn	T	%
Video footage shot with mobile phones	4	8	12	36.4
Images of assailants	8	4	12	36.3
Detailed close-ups of documents	2	8	10	30.3
Footage of messages condemning violence	4	5	9	27.2
Close-ups of female referees	2	2	4	12.1
Other archive images relating to aggressions against female referees	2	1	3	9

Notes. BSn = Brazilian news stories number; SSn = Spanish news stories number; T = Total over 33 news stories.

incidents. In those news stories, some in which the aggressors appeared stood out, with the slow motion footage of them, marked with a circle, occupying most of the screen. Likewise, one of the Brazilian news stories included a GIF image of the moment of the physical aggression. On the other hand, in 30.3% of them there were detailed close-ups of documents relating to the aggressions against the female referees. These were fragments of insults appearing in the match record underscored in green or yellow. There was also footage of official statements released by the clubs involved, condemning the acts of violence. To this first group of images should be added the complaints that the assaulted female referees had filed with the police. Similarly, 27.2% of the news stories included footage of messages condemning violence, particularly placards demanding gender equality. As to the coverage of the female referees, 12.1% of the TV news stories resorted to close-ups, especially focusing on their faces, eyes and hands holding their whistles. Likewise, the Brazilian news stories included detailed close-ups of the injuries suffered by a female referee and bloodstained clothing. On the other hand, the Spanish news stories did not show the faces of the female referees interviewed, while including demeaning low angle shots of them when referring to the aggressions that they had suffered. Lastly, the news pieces analysed included archive images relating to aggressions against female referees (9%).

On the basis of the elements identified in the news stories, the following considerations are worth mentioning. Verbal violence was the most frequent kind in the Spanish news stories analysed, while physical violence only appeared in the Brazilian ones (see [Table 6](#)).

On the other hand, it is important to distinguish between the sensationalist use of violence against female referees according to three elements: tautology, dramatisation and crime reporting. With respect to the first, the news stories analysed stood out for their repeated use of captions and real sound recordings of the aggressions. There were also repeated shots in the news stories themselves, as well as the use of the same images in several of them, above all in the Brazilian ones (see [Table 7](#)).

**Table 6.** Types of Violence.

Types	BSn	%	SSn	%
Verbal	4	30.7	19	95
Physical	12	92.3	0	0

Notes. BSn = Brazilian news stories number over 13; SSn = Spanish news stories number over 20.

**Table 7.** Sensationalist Use of Violence.

Types	BSn	%	SSn	%
Shots repeated	11	84.6	11	55
Same images	12	92.3	11	55

Notes. BSn = Brazilian news stories number over 13; SSn = Spanish news stories number over 20.

As to the dramatisation of violence, this was reflected in the news stories in the use of captions, music and close-ups. Lastly, in relation to crime reporting, most of the news stories analysed followed approaches far removed from the sports genre.

Another of the results of the analysis of the news stories has to do with the (in) visibility of female referees in the media, with only three of them reflecting their work: ‘First trio of female referees in Catalonia’ (SS7): ‘The difficult path of refereeing’ (SS17); and ‘After being assaulted in amateur football, the female referee has become the youngest to referee in the CBF’ (BS3), albeit representing only a part of the information more related to violence. After presenting the results of the analysis performed on the news pieces, the time has now come to discuss the opinions of female referees who have been the target of violence.

### *The Perceptions of the Female Referees of Gender Violence in Sports and Its Reflection in the Media*

In relation to the focus groups in which Spanish and Brazilian female referees participated (see [Tables 8](#) and [9](#)), insights into the perception of the problem were gained as regards four issues: violence against women in sports, violence against female referees and its media impact, plus other related aspects.

*Violence Against Women in Sports.* In relation to the first focus group question, they all concurred in that sexist insults were the most common type of abuse: ‘Go and wash up or clean’ (S2); ‘What’re you doing here, you bitch?’ Likewise, the participants in focus group S indicated that there was physical violence, but that the assailants thought twice before acting (S1 and S4). As to the sports most affected by violence against female referees, for the participants in focus group B, these were football and five-a-side football. In addition, S1 mentioned concealed violence in rhythmic gymnastics and

**Table 8.** Description of the Participants in Focus Group S.

Id	Age	Studies	Years of Experience	Sport
S1	25	Sports sciences undergraduate	6	Football
S2	23	Sociocultural and tourist entertainment undergraduate	4	Football
S3	21	Advertising and public relations undergraduate	7	Football
S4	26	Baccalaureate student	6	Football

Notes. S = Spanish female referee.

**Table 9.** Description of the Participants in Focus Group B.

Id	Age	Studies	Years of Experience	Sport
B1	41	Physical education and teaching graduate	4	Five-a-side football volleyball basketball
B2	24	Architecture undergraduate	2	Five-a-side football volleyball
B3	24	Physical education graduate	2	Five-a-side football

Notes. B = Brazilian female referee.

synchronised swimming. They also referred to discrimination in sports merely for being women: ‘You arrive at the pitch and they think you’re just someone’s companion’ (S2); ‘When a woman makes the same mistake as a man, she’s much more criticised’ (B2). As to against whom the aggressions were aimed, the majority of the participants in focus group S pointed mainly to female players and coaches, while for their counterparts in focus group B female referees were the main target.

### *Gender Violence Against Female Referees*

So as to pose the second question to both groups, a selection of news stories making up the sample analysed were screened for the participants in both groups, in order to determine whether or not they had experienced similar situations. For all of them, insults were the most frequent: ‘You should be washing up’ (S1); ‘That I was a bitch and that I shouldn’t be there, that until I didn’t cry and go home, he wouldn’t stop insulting me’ (S3); ‘What are you doing on the pitch? Go and do the washing, go and wash clothes’ (B2). Similarly, S4 mentioned that she had suffered an episode of physical violence, after having been verbally abused. For her part, B3 noted that she had been threatened by a coach after making a mistake. On the other hand, S1 and B1 indicated



that they had stopped play in order to prevent further insults from being aimed at them. By the same token, the participants in focus group S mentioned that they had included situations of violence in their match reports, although they admitted that they were difficult to demonstrate without documentary proof. S1 and S2 added that the penalties imposed on clubs were ridiculous, but had greater repercussions when the images of violence were made public, thus affecting their prestige. As to legal repercussions, S4 noted that she had reported a player for gender violence, but, despite the fact that there were images of the aggression, the player in question declared that it was all a farce during his trial.

As to whether or not the violent situations experienced by the participants had influenced their decision to continue refereeing, four of them in both groups observed that this was indeed the case: 'I want to stop now, I don't want to continue because it's demoralising, do I really need this in my life? I end up more stressed than happy' (B2); 'You have to stop and think a bit and weigh up the pros and cons, and you have to like it a lot to continue' (S3). However, some of the participants also deployed arguments in favour of their work: 'I continue because I like it. I've already forgotten what happened on Saturday and Sunday' (S1); '... it's something I like doing, it's a field in which I've always wanted to work. I feel happy working in this, there's only that bit of stress, but I continue because I like it' (B1).

*The Media Coverage of Gender Violence Against Female Referees.* The third focus group question referred to the media coverage of gender violence against female referees. All the participants in focus group S observed that the media were giving more coverage to aggressions against female referees, but focused on negative aspects: 'It's more about morbid curiosity. That is, the equality issue's all the rage at the moment, for which reason it's now convenient to air it' (S2); 'I ended up refusing to give interviews, because they ring you to ask you to recount all the bad things that have happened to you ...' (S3). In the case of television, these same participants placed the accent on the sensationalism and repercussions of appearing publicly, since it could influence their careers. The participants in focus group B underscored how the media treated the work of female referees with contempt, focusing on non-sporting aspects: 'The referee assistant's well turned out ... look, she's got a tattoo and what a tattoo! Why don't they talk about the work of female referees, as they do about that of male ones? When a woman's involved, the commentators focus on her physical attributes' (B1).

*Other Aspects.* The last focus group question addressed other aspects. On the one hand, to the question of whether the media contributed to eradicate violence against female referees, the participants in focus group S considered that they did indeed: 'It changes the awareness of clubs, that is, it's appearing a lot on TV' (S1); 'Owing to the fact that it's their image that concerns them most ... that's when they think that we'll be able to do something about it' (S2).

They also claimed that it could prejudice them 'because the only stories that ultimately appear ... are those in which we're physically and verbally abused' (S3). For

her part, B1 asserted that ‘what the media say about female referees prejudices them because they always give them negative coverage’.

On the other hand, the aggressions against female referees diminished with the presence of TV cameras, as S1 noted: ‘When the fans who usually come to see matches aren’t accustomed to seeing cameras, they feel inhibited, above all, those close by.’ Additionally, S3 noted that the serious cases were those that were filmed with mobile devices, but the problem lay in who filmed them and whether what was filmed favoured the person in question. The female referee observed that ‘the problem depends on who films them with their mobile devices and whether this favours them’ (S3). On the other hand, B2 also commented on her feelings of vulnerability when people disagreeing with her decisions threatened to film her. Lastly, as to recommendations for an adequate media coverage of incidents of this type, the participants indicated that ‘we shouldn’t always be victims, we should also be the heroes of the story or heroines’ (S1); ‘They should professionalise female refereeing ‘To offer that image ... to see stories about how female referees train, how they reach the international categories, how they end up refereeing a world cup final’ (S3). B1 believed that it was positive that the media offered live TV broadcasts of female football competitions with female referees. Three aspects stood out among the considerations of the members of the two focus groups. Firstly, all the participants placed the accent on verbal abuse, the insult ‘go and wash up’ being the most frequent. With respect to physical violence, only the members of Group S admitted that it existed, one of whom even claiming to have suffered from it. Lastly, as to the recognition of female referees in the media, the members of both groups were of the mind that their activity should be professionalised, in order that the media should reflect an adequate image of female referees and highlight their achievements.

## Discussion

On the basis of the research question of how the media covered gender violence against female referees, the aim of this study was to analyse specific cases in Brazil and Spain, through a selection of news stories and focus groups. The results show that the cases of violence appearing in the news stories analysed mostly corresponded to its most visible expressions, seeking impact and sensationalism, as observed by [Mocarzel et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Benaissa \(2016\)](#). However, other less visible forms of aggression, such as the lack of recognition for the work of female referees, were not treated as key issues in the news stories. So, the media give priority to a more superficial approach to the problem with an eye to engaging larger audiences, without reflecting the structural barriers existing in female refereeing, this kind of coverage being similar in the contexts analysed in Brazil and Spain. On the other hand, as to Brazil one of the specific aspects of the results has to do with the comments made by journalists on the physical appearance of female referees, which coincides with the conclusion reached by [Goellner \(2005\)](#) when noting how the Brazilian media treat female referees as if they were sexual objects.

Verbal abuse was the most striking aspect in both the news stories analysed and the experiences of the female referees participating in the focus groups, concurring with

Friman et al. (2004) when observing that these attitudes are the result of denying women roles of authority. In this connection, sexist insults were the most frequent form of violence identified in the news stories and the testimonies of the female referees participating in the focus groups. Such aggressions reflect a markedly sexist language that implies an alleged male superiority, as asserted by Reid and Dallaire (2020) and Santos et al. (2013). Likewise, as to the Spanish news stories analysed it warrants noting how the repeated reproduction of recorded insults and the use of striking captions placed the emphasis on sensationalism. This disproportionate repetition of verbal abuse ends up placing the spotlight on the aggressors, which is unsuitable for approaching the problem from a more critical perspective. As observed by Mocarzel et al. (2012), this state of affairs has led the media to contribute to an overexposure of violence with their sensationalist coverage of it, with the intention of engaging larger audiences. On the other hand, as Castillo et al. (2019) observe, the sexist element of the verbal abuse and intimidation to which female referees are subject, highlighted in the results, reveals a certain hostility towards them.

As to the physical aggressions against female referees, these only appeared in the Brazilian news stories and were the most predominant form of violence. As observed by Silveira et al. (2019) and Votre and Mourão (2003), these aggressions are mainly against female referees in amateur competitions in remote places. It is precisely the cases analysed in the Brazilian news pieces that confirm the observation made by these authors, since the aggressions occurred in places far removed from the country's main cities. The media thus convert physical violence into a way of engaging audiences by appealing to their morbid curiosity, since they can include shocking images and a dramatic narrative, managing to victimise the assaulted female referees even more. Similarly, it is important to consider the huge popularity of football and the chauvinist nature of society as factors characteristic of Brazil, all of which contributes to favour episodes of violence against female referees. As Brandão et al., (2020) note, Brazilian football is characterised by violence, the physical kind predominating and the verbal kind being a matter of course.

One of the effects of the aggressions suffered by female referees has to do with their mental health. In the news stories analysed, this was mentioned above all in the testimonies of the victims in which they expressed their fears and anxiety, both of which, according to Tingle et al. (2021), are side effects of these experiences of violence. Likewise, the members of the focus groups expressed their frustration with their refereeing in light of the aggressions that they had experienced, which coincides with the observations of Webb, Gorczynski, et al. (2021) regarding negative feelings that trigger violence. Furthermore, the accumulation of negative experiences is yet another reason for abandoning refereeing, thus adding another factor to those singled out by Tingle et al. (2014). This situation is reflected by the fact that, in the focus groups, four of the seven participants were thinking about abandoning refereeing. It is precisely these situations, in which female referees are pushed to the limit, that are exploited by the media so as to sensationalise the news (Benaissa, 2016; Mocarzel et al., 2012), as was observed in those news stories analysed that included additional resources, such as

the use of dramatic music, the testimonies of the families of those assaulted and close-ups.

On the other hand, the Brazilian news stories stood out for their more personal treatment of female referees, insofar as they included everyday scenes and images of their family environment, while the Spanish ones were briefer and focused on repeating the most shocking aspects of the aggressions. In both cases, the idea that the news stories seemed to convey was that they had more to do with infotainment than with a serious social problem, as is gender violence against female referees. In this regard, the participants in the focus groups stressed the sensationalist tone of TV news about violence against them. In view of these considerations, it can be claimed that the approach of the Brazilian and Spanish news stories to this issue was inadequate, with greater importance being given to sensationalism than to the human drama.

## **Conclusion**

The greater participation of women in sports refereeing has yet to be reflected adequately in the media, insofar as they tend to appear in the news particularly when there are negative incidents, especially those relating to violence. While the media do not give more visibility to the positive aspects of female refereeing, stressing its achievements, like, for example, the greater number of women involved in this activity and their presence in the main sports competitions, it will continue to be chiefly associated with adversities.

While the media continue to treat the aggressions suffered by female referees in an anecdotal fashion as sports news, without recognising them as instances of gender violence, it will be difficult to raise awareness about this problem. Furthermore, it is not enough to transfer news stories of this type from one section to another, for their sensationalist coverage should be eliminated altogether.

The limitations encountered while conducting this research include the fact that, for the focus groups, it was hard to find female referees, since few women devote their time to this activity in Brazil or Spain. Additionally, some of them preferred not to discuss gender violence for fear that it might have negative consequences for their refereeing careers. Lastly, as to Brazil the sheer size of the country made it even harder to approach this collective.

With this study, our intention has been to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, which could be further explored in future studies that take into account the views of professionals and that analyse other contexts. All considered, future studies should continue with this line of research so as to monitor the media presence of gender violence against female referees, with a view to determining advances and setbacks in this respect. By the same token, it is necessary to collaborate with media professionals for the purpose of implementing specific educational initiatives with all the stakeholders in refereeing and academic researchers so as to offer an adequate coverage of gender violence in sports.

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## ORCID iDs

Joaquin Marin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7869-4469>

Paula Bianchi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0532-8879>

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