



Re-conceiving the Patriotic Mission of Women: Sports and Civic Activism in Argentina, 1900-1946

“La mujer (...) debe hacer todo lo posible porque la vida sea mejor en el medio en que actúa (...) Que funde clubes sociales, científicos, literarios y deportivos. Que le ofrezca al hombre (...) la oportunidad de demostrar su valer, en el arte, en el esfuerzo atlético...”¹

Blanca Moreni

On November 23, 1941, Carola Lorenzini, a female aviator, died in a tragic airplane accident. That day, while trying to impress a cohort of female Uruguayan aviators, and in full view of hundreds of spectators who had gathered to see her acrobatics, Lorenzini attempted to do an inverse loop from which the small Focke Wulf airplane she piloted never recovered, plunging vertically to the ground and killing her instantly. Thousands of people attended her wake and eminent political and military figures, including President Roberto Ortiz, sent big flower wreaths.² The reaction to her death was certainly not disproportionate: Lorenzini was not just a well-known sportswoman, but she was also widely known for her civic contribution to the nation. As *El Gráfico* had highlighted in an article a year before her death, the aviator’s fame rested on her excellence in the performance of “patriotic missions”.³ Besides using nationally-crafted aircraft to break international altitude records and become the first woman to fly over the Rio de la Plata, Lorenzini also established close links to military aviation authorities, who supplied her with the airplanes she flew and entrusted her with special missions.⁴ In 1940, for instance, she flew to each of the nation’s provinces, uniting them by air for the first time and helping to map the first postal air routes. She also represented Argentina at numerous

¹ Blanca Moreni, “Un imperioso deber femenino: fundar clubs,” *El Hogar*, 12 August 1932 (“Woman ... must do all that’s possible to improve circumstances in her environment. She should found social, scientific, literary, and sporting clubs. She should offer man the opportunity to display her worth, in art and in sports”).

² *La Prensa*, 24 November, 1941. Also, “Carola Lorenzini, todavía sin sucesora, caía en Morón,” *Clarín*, 23 December 1971.

³ *El Gráfico*, 5 April, 1940.

⁴ Liliana Morelli, *Mujeres deportistas* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1990): see chapter on Carola Lorenzini.

international air “raids” or acrobatic displays. Her relationship to the Argentine air force and contribution to local aviation was later acknowledged with the issuing of a postal stamp bearing her image. In addition, several teaching institutions and street names throughout the country are named in her honour.

At a time when Argentine women were systematically denied full participation in the political sphere, Lorenzini – as well as many other women – resorted to alternative means to define and construct their civic and political agency. For most of the first half of the twentieth century women’s duties towards Argentine society were unequivocal: their *obra patriótica* or patriotic mission was to be limited to their “natural” capacity for reproduction, maternity, and child-rearing. Motherhood was the highest signifier of womanhood and it was through the exercise of this vital function that women merited and obtained respect.⁵ The arrival and spread of modern sporting practices provided women with a vehicle through which they could challenge this predestined biological mission and expand the functions they played in society. Sports became instruments through which women could construct and define a political agency that was disengaged from motherhood. Women did not practice sports because of their beneficial effects on health and fertility, but because sports allowed them the possibility of undertaking socially and politically relevant functions. In a few instances, like Lorenzini’s, their remarkable physical accomplishments catapulted them into the public eye and transformed them into iconic figures who had a social and political transcendence that was denied to most of their sex. Many of these extraordinary sportswomen also became female role models for other women, inspiring them to go beyond their predestined biological or maternal roles. More often, though, sports provided women with an indirect way of redefining their civic roles in society. A look into some of the self-governing associations and institutions that promoted sports in Argentina demonstrates how physical activity could act as a platform for civic action and engagement, providing women with the opportunity of exercising democratic values and increasing their influence within the larger community. Sports associations in general - and all-female sporting clubs in particular - became spaces where

⁵ Asunción Lavrín, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay 1890-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 7.

women could engage in multiple public tasks far beyond motherhood and the family home, allowing them to redefine their *obra patriótica* in a wider and more ample manner.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the opportunity to exert some kind of civic leadership in society was restricted to upper-class and well-connected women. The Sociedad de Beneficencia, or Beneficent Society, founded by Bernardino Rivadavia in 1823, was a charitable organization managed and controlled entirely by ladies from wealthy families. Over time it became a very powerful organization that provided important opportunities for female leadership. At the turn of the twentieth century Sociedad ladies were in charge of supervising and managing numerous educational and training institutions all across the nation.⁶ The Sociedad also administered and controlled all of the state's charitable organizations. Social assistance, charity, and public welfare were acceptable means through which women could demonstrate their commitment to larger political roles. The power women achieved through their work with the Sociedad was based on traditional notions of gender, sacrifice, and religiosity. Yet, as Karen Mead argues in her study of women's involvement with a charitable organization, the San Vicente De Paul society, these public activities did not just fulfill religious obligations but were also means of displaying civic engagement and contributing to "the greatness of the nation".⁷

As female educational opportunities improved in the nineteenth century, the written word became another way through which women could begin to exercise some civic activity. Magazines such as *La Camelia*, *La Aljaba*, and *La Alborada* were directed by women who, hidden under different pen names, articulated a clearly gendered vision of society, expressing political views, defending women's needs, and denouncing the limitations they faced in society.⁸ Well-educated women, such as Juana Manuela Gorriti and Juana Manso, were the precursors of the Argentine feminist movements. As prolific writers, they stressed the need of furthering female education as a way of

⁶ Marifran Carlson, *Feminismo! The Women's Movement in Argentina* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1988), pp. 47-56

⁷ Karen Mead, "Gender, Welfare, and the Catholic Church in Argentina, Conferencias de Señoras de San Vicente de Paul, 1890-1916," *The Americas* 58:1 (2001), p. 101.

⁸ Carlson, *Feminismo!* (1988), pp. 60-62.

increasing women's civic activity. By the end of the nineteenth century women made use of the written word to express a variety of larger political claims. The magazine *La Voz de la Mujer*, for instance, was an anarchist magazine edited entirely by women. Directed at men and women from the literate proletarian sectors, it displayed a strong political engagement with the international anarchist movement.⁹ It also provided a clearly gendered vision by addressing specifically female issues and denouncing the double exploitation of the female proletariat, identifying both the factory and the family home as sources of oppression.

The need for a larger collective political voice became apparent at the turn of the century when women began to create their own associations to debate and evaluate issues and problems that affected them as a group. The Consejo Nacional de Mujeres or National Women's Council was founded by a group of well-educated women who, influenced by the North American and British feminist movements, wanted to create a larger space for women in local society.¹⁰ The Argentine Association of University Women was also founded around the same time to address the needs of working women, particularly those of the first female university graduates¹¹. Clearly articulating a female civic involvement that went beyond charity and religious duties, these early groups demanded a greater equality between the sexes.

By 1910, the Argentine women's movement was well established. In May of that year, Argentina hosted what was called the First International Feminine Congress. The date of the Congress was carefully chosen to coincide with the celebration of the centennial. The Congress was a huge success: hundreds of participants attended, including women from Chile, Uruguay, Peru, Italy, and the U.S. Dozens of papers ranging from health and educational reform to civil rights and criminality were read, evaluated, and debated. Although many of its participants refused to use the word "feminism", focusing instead on terms such as women's rights or *cuestión femenina* or female issues, the objective of the

⁹ Maxine Molineux, "No God No Boss No Husband: Anarchist Feminism in 19th Century Argentina," in Elizabeth Dore, Maxine Molyneux (eds.), *Hidden histories of gender and the state in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Carlson, *Feminismo!* (1988), pp. 88-91.

¹¹ Carlson, *Feminismo!* (1988), p. 96.

Congress was clear. By claiming a clearly feminized space within the larger centennial celebrations, women demanded a greater participation within national politics. Ernestina López, who gave the inaugural speech, defined this civismas: “the intelligent and well-intentioned actions of women who, committed to their transcendental role in society, do not wish to live a life of selfish and sterile tranquility behind the four walls of their home and who, instead, attempt to have an influence beyond it.”¹²

Amongst the multiple presentations discussed during the Congress, two focused exclusively on women and sports. The first, entitled “Educación física femenina” (Female physical education) was given by Ana de Montalvo, a woman from the province of Santa Fe who also presented another paper on female civic rights. Arguing that a sedentary lifestyle contributed to gender inequality, de Montalvo defended the need for greater physical activity amongst girls and young women.¹³ Criticizing both family practices and institutional deficiencies, she justified the need for physical activity to counter the generalized ill-health and weakness amongst local women. De Montalvo offered concrete proposals that would demonstrate women’s “true patriotism” in the realm of sports. Demanding the need for more accessible physical education programmes for women, she proposed writing petitions to the Ministry of Public Instruction to make physical education compulsory at all female educational establishments and to enlist official support for the creation of public gymnasiums and parks where women could engage in more active sports and games. The second presentation was given by Agustina Maraval, who was a member of an all-female sporting institution called the Club Atalanta. Maraval argued that, besides these efforts, official energies needed to be directed towards supporting the creation of more female sports clubs. Her opening words, “Female physical education is indispensable to obtaining women’s moral

¹² Ernestina A. López, Discurso inaugural del Primer Congreso Femenino Internacional de la República Argentina, 18 May 1910. In Dora Barrancos (comp.), *Primer Congreso Femenino: Buenos Aires 1910: Historia, Actas y Trabajos* (Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, 2008), p.55.

¹³ Ana A. de Montalvo, “Educación física femenina,” in *Primer Congreso Femenino: Buenos Aires 1910* (2008), pp.115-119.

and social independence”¹⁴, clearly highlighted the links between physical activity and the articulation and expansion of women’s rights.

Until 1947, when women were granted formal political agency with the institution of female suffrage, participating in a self-governing institution was one of the few ways through which they could learn, exercise, and experience the democratic and civic behaviour that was formally denied them at the larger national level. The clubs and sports associations that were created after the turn of the century allowed women to further their independence by engaging in a variety of civic activities. Sporting associations were not just recreational venues; they served important social and political functions.¹⁵ Próspero Alemandri, an educator and politician in the 1920s and 1930s, highlighted that membership in a sporting association taught key moral principles, contributing not only to the growth of the individual, but also to the promotion of social progress.¹⁶ Blanca Moreni, a journalist in *El Hogar*, argued that this was particularly important for women because self-governing institutions gave them the possibility of improving their physical, spiritual, and intellectual capacity, generating a greater degree of civic commitment.¹⁷ As an article in the *Buenos Aires Herald* argued in 1920, the creation of female clubs was crucial to furthering women’s rights because their participation in these associations increased their self-respect while protecting and advancing their independence.¹⁸ The connection between self-governing associations and female civic involvement and agency was noted in the 1907-8 memoirs of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) of Buenos Aires, which emphasized that women turned to female organizations because they “need a culture where they can effectively exercise their power.”¹⁹ Clubs provided women with an exercise in democracy because they were a space where a formal electoral process, which was open to all members, allowed for the election of a board of directors as well as different specialized commissions.

¹⁴ Agustina Maraval, “Proposiciones,” in *Primer Congreso Femenino: Buenos Aires 1910* (2008), pp. 119-120.

¹⁵ Próspero Alemandri, *Moral y deporte* (1937), p. 136.

¹⁶ Próspero Alemandri, *Moral y deporte* (1937), pp. 133-135.

¹⁷ Blanca Moreni, “Un imperioso deber femenino: fundar clubs,” *El Hogar*, 12 August 1932.

¹⁸ “Wanted- A Women’s Club,” *Herald Sporting and Social Supplement*, January 1920.

¹⁹ Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional: La historia de la Asociación Cristiana Femenina de Buenos Aires 1890-1940* (Buenos Aires: ALF, 1940), p. 27.

Members who did not have a formal leadership position could express their individual voices in the assemblies that were called to evaluate and discuss new projects, and they could also have a say in the allocation and distribution of tasks.²⁰

The all-female sporting Club Atalanta of the city of La Plata was the earliest of these all-female clubs. Founded in 1902 by Zaida Romero Brest, it was a “small association with big ideals and great aspirations” that aimed to fulfill “the highest aims of physical culture.”²¹ Although educator Enrique Romero Brest was probably involved in its founding – Zaida was certainly a relative – the club was a completely independent female-only organization. In 1910 its members rejected a fusion with the mixed-sex Association of Physical Education Professors, opting instead to become an independent entity, a step that allowed them greater autonomy.²² The beautifully bound annual report of the Club’s activities and financial situation in 1910 demonstrated the pride and satisfaction of its membership. The report stresses the importance and need for collective action by urging members to attend the two general assemblies that were held each year and by emphasizing how all the important decision-making processes were shared amongst them.²³ Financially, the club’s record was spotless, showing the conscientious use of well-invested club assets and demonstrating the financial savvy of its female treasurer and the board’s capacity to administer and control its own capital.²⁴ The club grew steadily in reputation and membership over its first few years of existence, becoming well known in the local sporting scene and winning important national sporting championships in the late 1920s.²⁵

The Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes “Ima Sumac” provides another example of how a successful self-governing female institution could promote women’s civic action and political agency. Founded by a group of porteño women in 1922, the Ima Sumac was a fully organized civic association

²⁰ Próspero Alemandri, *Moral y deporte* (Buenos Aires: Librería del Colegio, 1937), p. 136.

²¹ Zaida Romero Brest, *Memoria del Club Atalanta*, 28 April 1910, p.2.

²² Zaida Romero Brest, *Memoria del Club Atalanta*, 28 April 1910, p.5.

²³ Zaida Romero Brest, *Memoria del Club Atalanta*, 28 April 1910, p.5.

²⁴ Zaida Romero Brest, *Memoria del Club Atalanta*, 28 April 1910, n/n.

²⁵ See for instance, *Crítica*, 13 May 1925 and “Visitas y excursiones,” in *Boletín informativo del Club Deportivo Femenino Ima Sumac*, 1929.

that allowed women to experience and rehearse democratic values outside the realm of formal politics. Its constitution or *Estatuto* clearly shows how the club was conceived as a scaled-down version of an egalitarian civic enterprise. The election of the club's highest authorities, the board of directors, was undertaken through a secret ballot in which all club members were expected to participate. A formally nominated commission that oversaw the electoral process was also created in order to prevent fraud.²⁶ The basic rights and responsibilities of every member were clearly stipulated in this constitution.²⁷ Specific concerns could be raised either at the general assemblies, which were held a few times a year, or by calling for an extraordinary assembly. Members were expected to become involved in the general decision-making process, providing their opinions on issues ranging from the organization of its teams to the manner in which the financial surplus should be handled.²⁸ In 1929, the club achieved full recognition from the Argentine state, when it was granted the *personería jurídica* status, which made it a fully accountable legal and social entity. This occasion was a source of great pride to Ima Sumac members because it implied an official political recognition.²⁹

The organizational success of the Ima Sumac helped to deepen its members' political engagement with the larger community, demonstrating that "the Argentine woman was also able to carry out a constructive enterprise."³⁰ Members turned their attention to pressing community issues, advocating for effective solutions to concrete problems. Referring to these endeavours as "patriotic work"³¹, they wrote letters and campaigned for changes that would help to expand women's interest in sports and physical activity. For instance, club members penned a formal complaint to the local tram company regarding the infrequency of service, which prevented many women from reaching the municipal pool in Parque Avellaneda in the summer.³² They also campaigned

²⁶ Estatutos, Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes Ima Sumac (1927), p. 26.

²⁷ Estatutos, Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes Ima Sumac (1927), [pp. 10, 16.

²⁸ Estatutos, Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes Ima Sumac (1927), chapter 4.

²⁹ "Voces amigas," *Boletín informativo del Club Deportivo Femenino Ima Sumac*, 1929.

³⁰ "Un club femenino," *ANBA*, September 1932.

³¹ "Nuestro progreso," *Boletín informativo del Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes Ima Sumac*, 1929.

³² "Tranvía al balneario," *Boletín informativo del Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes Ima Sumac*, 1929.

for the improvement of women's changing rooms at the municipal beach in Vicente López. Club members worked closely with municipal and provincial authorities, informing them of the club's activities, and receiving their support and encouragement.³³ Their efforts were rewarded when Miguel Cantilo, the mayor of Buenos Aires in the late 1920s, provided them with a gymnasium where they could practice their activities indoors. Public authorities also invited Ima Sumac members to officially-sponsored events, such as when the club's president was invited to attend the opening of a summer camp for needy children in 1929.³⁴ In addition, the Club established a close relationship with some large corporations that had recently opened sporting clubs for its employees. The Banco Hipotecario Nacional, the Quilmes brewery, and the Compañía Italo-Argentina de Electricidad invited Ima Sumac members to visit their facilities.³⁵ Membership at the Ima Sumac provided women with much more than access to sports. The club became a space that remained "ideally feminine, essentially feminine" while encouraging women to exert "a true patriotic enterprise"³⁶.

The Young Woman's Christian Association of Buenos Aires (YWCA) was another self-governing female club that used physical activity to empower women in roles that went beyond motherhood and reproduction. It was founded in the late nineteenth century by a group of expatriate British women who believed in the need for an exclusively female-run and administered space in Buenos Aires. The foreign control and administration of the club declined over the years and by the 1930s most of its leadership was in Argentine hands.³⁷ The YWCA supported women's right to work for wages outside the home and as an institution it targeted and attracted female workers from the popular sectors of society. In contrast to most other clubs, and despite the fact that it was forced to move headquarters frequently because of financial difficulties, the

³³ See copies of official decrees in *Boletín informativo del Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes Ima Sumac*, 1929.

³⁴ See "Visitas y excursiones", *Boletín informativo del Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes Ima Sumac*, 1929.

³⁵ "Visitas y excursiones," *Boletín informativo del Club Argentino Femenino de Deportes Ima Sumac*, 1929.

³⁶ "Nuestra casa y campo de deportes," *ANBA*, June 1932.

³⁷ Memoria anual, *Boletín mensual de la Asociación Cristiana Femenina* (1932-1933).

YWCA was always located in the downtown core of the city in close proximity to the offices, banks, and stores that employed most of its members.³⁸

The physical education department of the YWCA was opened in 1919, with the explicit objective of empowering women through sports.³⁹ By “developing the entire personality, building health through correct exercise and body postures,” and informing the female community about the importance of physical activity through open talks and seminars, the department aimed to make physical education accessible to a wider population of women.⁴⁰ Its membership doubled in its first four years of existence, and continued to grow subsequently, reaching 399 in 1932.⁴¹ The department boasted that, since its inception, the great majority of its membership was Argentine-born.⁴² Gymnastics lessons were offered either very early in the morning, over the lunch hour, or in the evening to permit the attendance of employed women. The YWCA also offered hot showers and clean changing rooms to women who stopped by before or after work.⁴³ The club encouraged interaction between women by using sports to connect different groups of working women. For instance, YWCA members developed a close relationship with female employees of the Singer sewing factory. During the 1930s, they met regularly for tennis tournaments at the Singer Club’s facilities in the barrio of Flores. Female employees of the Club Unión Telefónica, which belonged to the telephone union, also participated in championships and tournaments organized by the YWCA.

The YWCA believed in empowering women by preparing them for positions of leadership both within the organization and in the world at large.⁴⁴ In 1921 classes in female leadership began to be offered at the club’s central offices, with the objective of promoting the organization of adolescent girls and

³⁸ Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional*, chapter 5.

³⁹ Patricia Anderson, “Deporte y civismo femenino en la Asociación Cristiana Femenina de Buenos Aires, 1890-1940”, in Pablo Scharagrodsky (comp), *Mujeres en movimiento: Deporte, cultura física y feminidades Argentina 1870-1980* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2016).

⁴⁰ Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional*, pp. 128-129.

⁴¹ Informe annual, *Boletín mensual de la Asociación Cristiana Femenina*, December 1932.

⁴² Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional*, p. 129.

⁴³ Departamento de educación física, *Boletín mensual de la Asociación Cristiana Femenina*, October 1932.

⁴⁴ Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional*, p. 122.

young adults.⁴⁵ Amongst the issues covered in the course, which ranged from adolescent psychology to institutional organization and programme definition, the agenda promoted the use of physical education as a specific instrument for the development of leadership qualities.⁴⁶ By 1924 the interest in the course was such that two well-known Argentine female educators were hired to coordinate the programme.⁴⁷ The leadership course was structured around a series of talks followed by general discussions, in which all the participants were expected to actively take part. By teaching women the necessary tools for leadership positions, the YWCA supported the notion that women could fill social roles beyond motherhood and reproduction. The creation of a productively engaged female community was its overarching institutional aim, as an unnamed secretary of the physical education department commented in 1928: “constructing lives, that is our task at the department.”⁴⁸ The YWCA has become one of the longest-lived female institutions in the country. On the occasion of its 107th anniversary, in 1997, the institution proudly commemorated the efforts of earlier members “because they, definitively, created the possibility that this Association continue in its tireless journey of providing women with the space they merit.”⁴⁹

Other female clubs left few records, perhaps because they were short-lived, but amongst the few traces they have left, it is clear that they were also sources of empowerment, creating spaces for female agency in a masculine world. The Club Ciclista Femenil, an all-female cycling club that formed in the late 1930s in the Villa Devoto neighbourhood of Buenos Aires, organized several championships and biking excursions for its members. It also promoted the use of higher handlebars in order to improve female posture while riding.⁵⁰ And, perhaps more important, it offered a course where members were taught to repair their own bikes. The Club Atlético Alfa was created in 1923 by Mercedes Nosti with the objective of replacing old-fashioned school games with

⁴⁵ Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional*, p. 114.

⁴⁶ Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional*, p. 175.

⁴⁸ Helen Hayes, *Con el triángulo azul meridional*, p. 119.

⁴⁹ Asociación Cristiana Femenina de Buenos Aires, “107 años de vida,” December 1997, mimeograph.

⁵⁰ Club Ciclista Femenil, *El Gráfico*, 26 August 1938.

an athletics programme at one of the leading public high schools of Buenos Aires.⁵¹ Clearing and preparing the school property themselves to make a sporting circuit suitable for athletic tournaments, the students initially found much resistance from school authorities and parents because, as Nosti said, “we have been educated for certain things, and between our wishes and ambitions stand the prejudices of parents and the jealousy of boyfriends”.⁵² Later that year *El Gráfico* showed its recognition of the Club and its role in the promotion of local athletics. It invited both Nosti and Arsenio Thamier, who was the city official in charge of developing a public sports policy in Buenos Aires, to jointly write a column on the situation of female athleticism in Argentina.⁵³ Although both agreed that athleticism amongst women had progressed, they also emphasized the need for a greater official commitment to female sports. In 1924 after winning several tournaments, the athletic excellence of the club members was once again lauded by *El Gráfico*.⁵⁴ Another all-female club, The Arrow Girls Club, was created in 1920 with the explicit aim of fostering the game of field hockey amongst women.⁵⁵ Placing an ad in the *Buenos Aires Herald*, it encouraged other women to join. By 1924, when the first female hockey championship was held, the success of their mission was evident. There were at least six different full adult female teams.⁵⁶ The sport was well established amongst women by 1935, when most of the bigger suburban clubs had several teams representing different categories of players.⁵⁷ Even though no longer extant, the Club’s earlier efforts made a crucial impact on modern society. Female hockey is nowadays the most respected and beloved female sport. Argentina’s hockey team, *Las Leonas*, won medals at the last three Olympics and were finalists in the Female World Cup in 2002 and 2010.

By the 1930s, the two most popular female team sports in Argentina were basketball and hockey. The popularity of both was made possible by the

⁵¹ Caddy, “La mujer argentina en los deportes, *El Gráfico*, September 1 1923.

⁵² Caddy, La mujer argentina en los deportes, *El Gráfico*, September 1 1923.

⁵³ Mercedes Nosti, “El atletismo: su implantación en nuestro ambiente,” *El Grafico*, 15 December 1923.

⁵⁴ “El sport femenino nacional progresa lentamente,” *El Grafico*, 25 October 1924.

⁵⁵ <https://sites.google.com/site/arrowshockey> (20-12-2012).

⁵⁶ Eric Weil, *Historia del Hockey* in [http://www.winisonline.com.ar/tea/info/M-/M-685.pdf\(4-5-2017\)](http://www.winisonline.com.ar/tea/info/M-/M-685.pdf(4-5-2017))

⁵⁷ See, for example, *Club Atlético San Isidro*, Memorias, 1934-35.

efforts of some of their early enthusiasts to organize their practice in a formal manner through the creation of an official federation. The Argentine Ladies Hockey Association and the Federación Femenina Argentina de Basketball demonstrated that efforts to organize and make official a particular sport increased its popularity and success amongst the public. The Argentine Ladies Hockey Association was founded in 1924 by members of six different club teams who wanted to participate more fully in competitive practices by organizing championships and instituting prizes and trophies for winning teams. By the early 1930s regular tournaments were held throughout the country and hockey was no longer the domain of women with British ancestry. Female hockey had also replaced male hockey in popularity, something that was later constructed as a veritable “usurpation of the game”.⁵⁸ By the 1940s Argentina had a national female hockey team that represented the country in international championships. In the case of basketball, the Federación Femenina, or Female Federation, was constituted in 1931 by members of eight different clubs, the Ima Sumac and the YWCA amongst them.⁵⁹ The rules of the Federación clearly demonstrate the importance that competitive practices had acquired amongst female players.⁶⁰ The organization of championships and tournaments, the instituting of long-running prizes, such as the Birba Cup, and the formal classification of sportswomen into different categories of play increased the visibility of basketball and helped to further its popularity.

The struggles around the rules for female basketball showed how contesting traditional notions of gender could become an important part of sportswomen’s civic efforts. Shortly after its creation, a rift occurred between two of its founding members over playing styles. The president of the Federación, Magdalena Lacoste de Luisi, disagreed with vice-president’s Lola B. de Villanueva’s suggestion that the intensity in playing styles were inappropriate for women. According to Luisi, “at no moment have the players

⁵⁸ *Club Atlético Rosario 1867-1967* (Rosario, 1967), “Hockey,” p.105.

⁵⁹ Consejo directivo profesional del basketbol femenino, *La Vanguardia*, 2 December 1931.

⁶⁰ “Reglamentos de la sección femenina: Finalidad, constitución y gobierno,” *Basket*, 20 November 1931.

acted in such a manner as to de-naturalize this female sport".⁶¹ Villanueva had accused the players of engaging in rough and violent play, but Luisi defended them stating that their behaviour was appropriate, justifying it on the basis of their enthusiasm and zeal for the sport. Because of this, Villanueva resigned from the Federation. A decade later, efforts to differentiate between male and female playing styles emerged renewed. Influenced by what was occurring in female basketball in the U.S. Orestes Volpe, a male physical education professor at the YMCA from Uruguay, attempted to arouse support for the modification of local rules to make basketball more gender appropriate.⁶² His suggestions, that included the prohibition of female body contact, the creation of clearly demarcated spaces around the athletes and shortening the time of the game, aimed at preventing "star players" from emerging amongst women. Volpe's attempts to take over and to define "female duties" around the game and his efforts to define what he called "the real female basketball" game" were not effective.⁶³ The Federación rejected these changes, continuing to be a female-oriented association that exists to this day.⁶⁴

The largest physical training institution in Argentina, the Instituto Nacional de Educación Física or INEF, became another space through women could formulate and define new and larger responsibilities towards society. Although the curriculum was heavily based on the physiological, social, and moral imperative of reproduction and maternity,⁶⁵ the INEF graduates re-conceived their duties to society in a much broader manner. The speeches given by female students on graduation underscore the zeal and enthusiasm of their patriotic mission. Eloisa Amor, a student in 1914, highlighted the importance of the graduate's struggle, emphasizing their "strong determination that will help to face obstacles."⁶⁶ A few years later, Delia Suarez saw the graduates as becoming "standard-bearers" who would help to construct a

⁶¹ Magdalena G. de Lacoste de Luisi, "Carte de la Presidenta de la Fed. Femenina de Basket," ANBA, 11 Novembre 1932.

⁶² Orestes Volpe, "Para que la mujer pueda jugar al basket-ball," *Viva cien años*, 16 April 1941.

⁶³ Orestes Volpe, "Por qué el basket para mujeres ha de ser distinto," *Viva cien años*, 7 May 1941 and "El verdadero basketball femenino," *Viva cien años*, 21 May 1941.

⁶⁴ Asociación Femenina Metropolitana de Basketball, in <http://www.afmb.org.ar/> (20-12-12)

⁶⁵ Pablo Scharagrodsky, "El padre de la educación física argentina: fabricando una política corporal generalizada 1901-1938," *Perspectiva* 22, July-December 2004.

⁶⁶ Discurso de la Señorita Eloísa Amor, INEF, Colación de grados, 1914.

strong patria.⁶⁷ The mission of the INEF's graduates was linked to greater social purposes because they would go on to become teachers and professors who would impart their knowledge, sowing "vigour, energy, happiness, self-confidence, health, and beauty" in society.⁶⁸ As María Luisa Parodi repeatedly highlighted in her speech, their role as "true educators" implied many social and communal responsibilities.⁶⁹ Prudencia Minhondo stated that the students' intimate knowledge of this "scientific system of physical culture" made them doubly responsible: towards schoolchildren who, thanks to their access to physical education, would develop strong "moral sentiments and intellectual fortitude", and towards other teachers and educators who, lacking proper training, needed the guidance that only recent graduates could provide.⁷⁰

Female students saw the INEF as training them, not in the art of improved motherhood, but as preparing them instead for the modern workplace by providing them with skills that allowed them to fill a crucial role within society. The development of healthy bodies and pure spirits in children, the fostering of solidarity and collective action amongst adults, and the encouragement of the love of exercise were articulated as their main responsibilities towards the community. Their duties as women were not circumscribed by domesticity, maternity, and reproduction; they were directed instead to a wider public. Women who studied at the INEF clearly had a social responsibility that transcended motherhood. Osama del Real, a 1912 graduate, explained it poetically: "Joining all of our energies and aptitudes we can erect the edifice of popular physical culture; we are all architects of destiny. Let each one of us lay our stone and its walls will be higher and more solid."⁷¹

Closely linked to the INEF, other sporting organizations created by Romero Brest also furthered women's engagement in roles that went beyond motherhood and reproduction. Two of the most influential were The Sociedad Amigos de la Educación Física (Society of Friends of Physical Education, or

⁶⁷ Discurso de la Srta. Delia M. Suarez en nombre de sus compañeras al recibir sus diplomas, INEF, Colación de grados, 1931.

⁶⁸ Discurso de la Señorita Eloísa Amor, INEF, Colación de grados, 1914.

⁶⁹ Discurso de la Profesora Egresada, Srta. María Luisa Parodi, en nombre de sus compañeras, *Revista de la Educación Física*, 15 November 1924.

⁷⁰ Colaciones Julio 1931, in Romero Brest, *Conferencias didácticas* (n/d), pp. 116-117.

⁷¹ Osama del Real, *Egresados 1912*, INEF pamphlet.

SAEF), which was active between 1919 and the late 1920s, and the Asociación de Deportes Racionales (Association of Rational Sports, or ADR), created in 1922 and still extant. Although officially headed by Romero Brest, women were actively involved in the founding, organization, and day-to-day running of both associations. For instance, out of 160 founding members or *socios fundadores* of the SAEF, 57 were women, many of them INEF graduates.⁷² Women also held important directive positions in both associations. Even though a male president headed the SAEF, the two vice-presidential positions were always and necessarily filled by both a man and woman.⁷³ In addition, women occupied vital positions on the board of directors of the SAEF. In 1920, for instance, out of seventeen board positions, women secured five places: that of secretary, treasurer, and *vocales*, which were active counselling and organizational positions.⁷⁴ By 1926 this ratio had increased and eight positions out of twenty-one were filled by women.⁷⁵ A list of the ADR's board members in 1936 also shows that women occupied central positions on the sports and physical education committees.⁷⁶ This representation at the directive level was unique to these institutions; most sporting associations of the time only allocated a fundraising position to women and many even prevented women from obtaining full membership privileges until the 1930s. It is interesting to note that many women in both institutions were married, identifiable by the use of the prefix "de" before their surnames. Also, there seem to be no married couples on the members and board lists provided by the institutions. This seems to suggest that these women were independently committed to the organization despite the fact that they were married and might have already started their own families.

Both the ADR and the SAEF opened up spaces that allowed for their members' larger civic commitment. Women used their membership in these two organizations to achieve a number of objectives beyond their own personal physical development and reproductive fitness. The main purpose of the SAEF

⁷² Sociedad amigos de la educación física, *Estatutos*, "Nómina de los socios activos fundadores," (1925), pp. 15-16.

⁷³ Sociedad amigos de la educación física, *Estatutos*, "De la junta directiva," (1925), pp. 9-10.

⁷⁴ For a list of members of the first board of directors in the Sociedad amigos de la educación física, see *Memoria correspondiente al 9º ejercicio (1928-29)*.

⁷⁵ *Revista de la educación física*, June 1926, pp. 140-141.

⁷⁶ *Deportes Racionales*, October 1936, n/n.

was to provide a forum for INEF graduates to discuss and evaluate how to further their work with children and youth. Its members took part in what they defined as a patriotic mission, by lobbying at both the national and the provincial levels for greater regulation of the physical education profession.⁷⁷ ADR members also pressured the government for an educational reform to change the manner in which physical education and sports were taught in public schools. Harshly critical of the professionalization of and increasing violence in sports, ADR members advocated for a “rational” use of leisure time and espoused the need for recreation programmes accessible to all segments of society. Women were active and vocal participants in the ADR. At a conference organized at the School for Social Studies in Buenos Aires, ADR member and physical education instructor Mercedes Torres was assigned a keynote speaking position. She used the opportunity to denounce the current political administration by criticizing President Ortiz for being ignorant and neglectful in his policy towards sports.⁷⁸ Both the ADR and the SAEF published their own journals in which they included articles penned by members, reproduced letters sent to government officials, and transcribed talks offered to the general public. Women were involved in the publication of journals, acting not only as editors but writing and researching articles as well.⁷⁹ In addition to these intellectual roles, women filled practical roles that required an active engagement with and knowledge of the larger community. For instance, they organized and directed sporting events in the wider community, bringing together teams from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds.⁸⁰ By using their membership in these associations women demonstrated their commitment to extend their social and political influence on Argentine society.

During the first four decades of the century a small number of international tournaments and competitions provided a few sportswomen with the opportunity to publicly embody and perform their civic loyalty by officially

⁷⁷ Sociedad amigos de la educación física, *Estatutos* (1925), pp. 5-6.

⁷⁸ Mercedes Torres, “Proyección Social de la Educación física,” *Deportes Racionales*, October 1938, pp. 4-7.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, María Lucio, “La Educación Física entre nosotras,” *Deportes Racionales* March 1932, and Mercedes Torres, “Feminismo o Femenidad en Educación Física?” *Deportes Racionales*, September 1937.

⁸⁰ “Actividades deportivas,” *Deportes Racionales*, July 1932, p. 32.

representing the nation. As a journalist wrote in the 1930s, international sports events allowed the display of nationalism because they were a chance to show the patria as triumphant and victorious, without the bloodshed and tears of war.⁸¹ Although the number of women who participated in international events remained small during the first half of the century, they figured prominently in the media of the time. Interviews and reviews of their performances reveal pride and admiration for their achievements, and many of these women were pictured on the front cover of *El Gráfico*, which was (and still is) one of the greatest honours granted to sportsmen and women. Jeanette Campbell, for instance, became an admired and well-loved sports figure after winning the silver medal in the 1936 Olympics. Frequently believed to be Australian because of her excellent command of the English language, the local press proudly reported that Campbell went out of her way to establish and defend her Argentine nationality to the international press.⁸² Participating in large-scale championships allowed women to express their nationalism and pride, making these visible to a wide audience. And sportswomen used this opportunity to eloquently argue, as in the case of Julieta de Ezcurra, a competitive tennis player in the 1920s, that they too could “valiantly defend the colours of the patria”.⁸³ As Próspero Alemandri noted, nationalism and sports went hand in hand because a sporting triumph represented a visible “manifestation of progress or superiority”⁸⁴ of the nation.

The most important international championship, besides the Olympics, was the South American Athletic Championship, started in 1919 and continuing today, but only open to women from 1939. Early female athletes, such as Mercedes Nosti and Hortensia Rodriguez, together with *El Gráfico*, had actively pushed for the inclusion of women in these championships, yet this took over a decade to finally materialize. In 1931, already with many local awards and record-breakings behind her, athlete Olga Tassi criticized the lack of international competitions for women, pointing out that Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil had a number of well-trained female athletes who were willing to

⁸¹ L. Campos Alcúa, “El deporte, Aspectos internacionales,” *ANBA*, April 1932.

⁸² *La Nación*, 20 September 1936.

⁸³ *El Gráfico*, 10 November 1923.

⁸⁴ Próspero Alemandri, *Moral y Deporte* (1937), p.20.

participate.⁸⁵ In 1939 this was finally made possible at the South American Athletic Championship in Lima. A group of seven Argentine women competed, with Olga Tassi – who was thirty-nine years old by then - as sub-captain of the team. All returned with medals, effectively demonstrating that they were the “highest expression of sports in our milieu”⁸⁶ The Argentine male delegation, in contrast, though much larger and with a more varied option of contests, did not do as well as the female one. Five out of the seven gold medals awarded to Argentina were earned by the female athletes, meriting the praise that the athletes had “conducted themselves with the self-affirmation and self-possession of those who aim to serve the nation”⁸⁷ The Argentine female teams continued to serve the nation by excelling at all of the South American championships throughout the 1940s.

Besides athletics, swimming, golf, and tennis also provided some women with the opportunity represent their country internationally. International recognition placed sporting women in the limelight, generating patriotic pride amongst the population, who saw them as symbols of national identity, strength, and progress. In the 1930s, Felisa Piédrola, from Punta Alta in southern Buenos Aires province, was lauded for being “one of the most solid (tennis) players of Argentina and South America”.⁸⁸ In the case of swimming championships, it is interesting to note that female swimmers often outdid their male counterparts at international events. In 1937, *El Gráfico* reported that men’s performance was “mediocre” while women’s was excellent in comparison.⁸⁹ Women like Margarita Talamona, Ursula Frick, and Elena Tuculet won important international awards throughout the 1930s further reinforcing a sense of pride and support for women’s achievements. In 1939 Leonor Schwarz, a backstroke champion, stated that despite her young age, she had the “responsibility” of representing the nation in the tournament in Guayaquil, Ecuador assuring the reader that she would not disappoint and let this “lineage” down.⁹⁰ The language used to

⁸⁵ *El Gráfico*, 24 January 1931.

⁸⁶ “El equipo argentino de atletismo,” *TRAINING*, May 1939.

⁸⁷ Raul Solari, “Nuestras atletas en el primer campeonato femenino de atletismo en Lima,” *TRA*, August 1939.

⁸⁸ “Felisa Piedrola, triple campeona,” *TRAINING*, August 1939.

⁸⁹ *El Gráfico*, 27 February 1937.

⁹⁰ “Leonor M. Schwarz: una espaldista del porvenir,” *TRAINING*, May 1939.

describe their successes was full of laudatory and triumphant terminology. Leonilda Giusti, for instance, “conquered” the national title and “crowned” herself as one of the top examples of female tennis in the 1930s.⁹¹ Female golf players also began to organize and participate in international matches in the 1920s. These early tournaments had no official name yet, but their informal appellation of “*argentinas* vs foreigners” clearly demonstrated the importance of representing the country through sports. International prestige allowed some sportswomen to exert an important degree of agency. For example, in the 1930s, the country’s best female golf player, Maggie Nicholson, who had won the national title sixteen times, was able to change the rules for female golf by increasing the number of holes played in a single championship and by abolishing regulations that suspended tournaments in case of rain.⁹²

When a sportswoman demonstrated her extraordinary accomplishments to a wide audience, she frequently became a role model and inspirational icon for other women. In the 1920s, athlete Mercedes Nosti explained her motivation to overcome obstacles and create an all-female club by referring to the “fighting spirit” and “obstinacy” of Lilian Harrison, the swimmer.⁹³ Lilian Harrison, in turn, was motivated to swim across the river by the success of Anita Gutbrod, another early Argentine record-breaking swimmer. The triumph of Gutbrod triggered the desire for emulation, as her words demonstrate: “I would have desisted, perhaps, from undertaking important swimming “raids” if Miss Gutbrod had not triumphed in her swimming”.⁹⁴ Jeanette Campbell’s daughter, Inés Pepper, followed her mother and represented Argentina in swimming at the Olympics in Tokyo in 1964. In an interview, Julieta de Ezcurra, Argentina’s lawn tennis champion in the early 1920s, named several local and foreign female tennis players as her inspirational icons.⁹⁵ International figures such as Helen Jacobs, Helen Wills Moody, and Chilean Ana Lizana, who was the first Latin American to achieve first place in the world tennis ranking, also influenced local sportswomen to excel. The strong serves of the two Helens, for instance, were

⁹¹ *El Gráfico*, 21 November 1936.

⁹² Felix Frascara, “Nuestras grandes figuras femeninas,” *El Gráfico*, 8 February 1936.

⁹³ “La mujer argentina en los deportes,” *El Gráfico*, 1 September 1923.

⁹⁴ “Como se inició en la natación Lilian G. Harrison, vencedora del Río de la Plata,” *El Gráfico*, 5 January 1924.

⁹⁵ “Nuestras mujeres de sport,” *El Gráfico*, 10 November 1923.

adopted by local players, contributing to the improvement and excitement of tennis matches.⁹⁶

Female participation in sporting activities provided women with a platform from which they could negotiate a new engagement with society. The civic skills they learned and the new responsibilities they assumed by becoming part of these organizations helped to construct women as legitimate political actors. Instead of merely conforming to the mainstream discourse that justified female sports only in terms of their effect on women's fertility, women found that by turning to the sporting life they were able to increase their presence and influence in the community. Occasionally, such as in the case of Lorenzini, their extraordinary physical accomplishments catapulted them into the public consciousness and granted them the right to play roles that were not normally adjudicated to women. More often, though, their sheer perseverance and willingness to be part of what they consistently defined as an *obra patriótica* led them to organize and confront the status quo, and demand social recognition. Instead of merely producing better and fitter mothers, deportismo helped to generate an awareness of the limitations that affected women's lives, establishing a special place from where women could begin to develop their skills and agency, creating new social spaces for their gender, and ultimately redefining the manner in which they contributed to the nation.

⁹⁶ "La evolución del tennis femenino," *El Gráfico*, 24 February 1939.