

Women in a Urban Zone Experience Against Covid

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The two-year follow-up as participating observer at the Urban Zone training group and WhatsApp related platform, took place in Roseto degli Abruzzi—a small seaside town in Abruzzi, Italy, during the pandemic crisis for Covid-19. This experience has been a way to keep training despite the pandemic confinement, but it has also become a kind of self-help and therapeutic group. The conditions for its implementation are linked to the impossibility of any indoor sports and also the fact that the online lessons were not very successful. Urban Zone is an outdoor activity that can be carried out in the urban context, whose peculiarity is the opening of the gyms training to the urban or natural outdoor space, through wireless headphones (so people could respect the 2-meter social distancing implied in the prevention measures for Covid-19) in which the music and the trainer instruction can be heard.

Keywords: women, sport, social inclusion, gender inequality

Introduction

The two-year Urban Zone experience, is a follow-up study as participating observer at a sport training group and WhatsApp related platform, that took place in Roseto degli Abruzzi—a small seaside town in Abruzzi Region, Italy, during the pandemic crisis for Covid-19. This contribution has, in fact, been presented at the International Mid-Conference of the European Sociological Association on sport and social responsibility in times of crisis¹.

The pandemic emergency has been a high breaking moment in health, economy and most of all in social life. Concerning sport activity, it has been impossible to practice any collective indoor activity, with negative consequences on the physical and psychological health of people. So the sport trainer Mafalda Suppa studied how in the United States, sport trainers practiced an activity called Urban Zone, since it is an outdoor activity that can be carried out in the urban context, and also found that the online lessons were not very successful (internet connection problems, poor motivation, difficulties in having a proper space for training at home, etc.).

The peculiarity of this experience is the opening of the gyms training to the urban or natural outdoor space, through wireless headphones (so people could respect the 2-meter social distancing, implied in the prevention measures for Covid-19) in which the music and the trainer instruction can be heard.

In this perspective, Urban Zone has represented a good way to react at a crisis period, to take back urban and natural spaces, live them and give them a new meaning, all accompanied by the role played by music and the presence of other people in the same condition. Music in particular has a good impact in motivating people

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in doing sport activity, and gives them the possibility to express things that are not possible to express by words, at a rhythm synchronized with each other in a pleasant and distracted atmosphere, to be shared with other people.

Methodology

Sports sociology studies on gender have origin in America in the field of racial minorities by scholars such as Connell (1987) and McPherson (1975), as well as those done in the Eastern Countries² and nowadays by the works of Miragaya (2006).

The methodology used is a qualitative one, as the participatory observation, primarily used in the Chicago School by Louis Wirth's work *The Ghetto* (1928) and William Foote Whyte, in *Street Corner Society* (1943).

Aware of the risk implied in a qualitative methodology, data have been crossed with general data on the Italian situation.

The study was developed over 3 days of lessons per week during 2 years, with women in the 35-55 age group, almost all of whom mothers, at times of the day when they could leave their children with someone else.

After observation and conversations with these women, field notes were elaborated and very heterogeneous motivations for participation emerged.

Outcomes

For these women this experience has represented a way to go out of their houses for a while, to train, listen to music, sing, dance and sometimes also to talk a little and share with other women a similar situation. In this sense, training was a way to relieve the stress of home confinement. It has represented a way to keep training despite the pandemic confinement, meanwhile it has become a kind self-help and therapeutic group (in particular the WhatsApp related group has become a place in which fears and information can be shared) because it gave too many women the possibility to live through a difficult condition.

As a matter of fact all health programs underline the importance of sport and regular physical activity to maintain and promote health but things did not develop in this perspective during the Covid-19 emergency, so it was very important evidence that some women all together found a way to react at the home confinement.

Urban Zone experience started with a group of few women during the summer and slowly grew up to be a big group (up to 80/100 women), to make more necessary training rounds.

It went on even during autumn and winter, the cold, rainy and bad weather days, as well as the day of Christmas's afternoon to salute each other, to recover a sort of conviviality typical of celebrating days.

This Urban Zone group still exists, but there is less affluence during the Covid-19 lockdown, as a sign of the fact that when people can go back to a kind of 'normal' social life, they do not feel anymore that high necessity of sport and healthy lifestyle, so as to participate at such kind of experiences.

Discussion

In certain perspective one could say that it was not necessary to practice sport during the Covid-19 emergence, but—assuring safety condition—one can agree that the confinement due to the pandemic crisis with all its limitations has even represented an opportunity to rethink the all living conditions of people and, in the

² International Review of Sport Sociology, Warsaw, 1970.

present case, the use of open spaces: gardens, paths, parks, beaches; all places in nature have become spaces for sport and freedom.

There is also a kind of misunderstanding in the opinion that physical activity is not that important, in particular in the Italian school system. Therefore, everything is oriented at the frontal lesson in the classroom, although it has been widely demonstrated that nothing is as contrary to human nature, rather than keeping children immobile at school desks for 4-5 hours, ordering them to think. Moreover, it is important to underline that the brain's ability to concentrate does not go beyond 45 consecutive minutes, a limit that is taken into consideration in universities but not in primary school, where instead it would be more important.

Children feel the impulse that pushes them to motion powerfully, and only distraction can save them from the winepress and make them resist the inexorable life of discipline that tries to squeeze their brains. All animals play: this is an instinctive fact useful for selection. (Piccoli, 1972, p. 29)

The most recent OECD data about public schools in Europe show how a pedagogical approach to teaching based on the active participation of students, as well as on cooperation, gives better learning and a higher level of adaptability and success in teaching, even for not professional training. In line with this perspective, one must underline how practicing sports facilitates a more organic and complete psycho-physical development: greater stature, static and dynamic lung volume, healthy weight, less emotion, prevention of cardiopathic diseases, greater mental health, academic performance and better personal hygiene. All of those things become more important in a crisis period, as the Covid-19 emergency, because they promote a healthier lifestyle and general state of well-being, so that the individuals can increase their abilities to cope and react to stress.

In sport: "The pleasure that accompanies a free affirmation of physical strength or ability, restores to the hunched man and the man seated, his natural demeanor and breathing" (Magnane, 1964, p. 90). Private life and free time are increasingly areas in which emotions are expressed. An emotion claims space, but is often removed from social spheres. Free time and sport are instead moments of pause and suspension of ordinary life to rethink oneself in the world and to regain possession of slow rhythms and spaces also managing and steering the changes in the social and cultural landscapes.

Conclusions

Such evidences are more important in the case of women, as the two-year Urban Zone training group has shown, because in the evolution of sports, women have always had little time for it—while in this case, time could be managed all together, decreasing social inequality.

Women have always been penalized and relegated to minority positions, developing a particularly lack of visibility and recognition, evident if we observe how disproportionate space media gives to women compared to men in sport, as well as the ways in which they present men focusing on their enterprises as heroes and women focusing on their physical appearance. The history of women in sport is in fact, also the history of gender discrimination but things, despite claim of equality and fairness, are slowly changing.

Important steps in promoting the female role are done by the British Sport Council and the European Union, so in some cases, the fact of being part of International Organization is a guarantee for arriving at better conditions for all athletes, even facing to the great progress that women have done in sport and in introducing human vulnerability as a field of consideration and new rules for everybody.

So, face to the tendencies of global, liquid societies it emerges how sport can be important, even more if practiced together with other people, to reconstruct meaning in individual and associated social life.

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