

Gender Equity in Colombia

Interview with Beatriz Vélez

25 March 2003 | Dr. **Beatriz Vélez** graciously provided an e-mail interview with *Global Game*, expanding on the excerpt from *Hemisphere: A Magazine of the Americas* in issue 3. Vélez led a three-year university study, "La escenificación del género en el fútbol, hermenéutica de la feminidad y la masculinidad en Colombia" (The staging of gender in soccer: Hermeneutics of masculinity and femininity in Colombia), into the intensely masculine world of *fútbol*. Thanks to **Buddy Hughes** for the translation from Spanish.

Spanish version

GG: What personal experiences have you had with *fútbol* in Colombia, either as a player or supporter? Did any of these experiences lead you to conduct research into the relationship between gender and *fútbol*?

BV: My personal experience relates basically to my childhood days and early youth. Like every middle-class Colombian girl, I had to prepare myself to be a woman, helping my mother with household chores when there was not enough money to hire a maid. My only brother was not required to help out around the house, but was encouraged to go out and play football with his friends. Often he would come home with his clothes and football cleats full of mud, and it did not seem to bother him to leave a trail of dirt and grime across the floor which I had cleaned. This infuriated me, and I asked myself why he had the right to mess up what I had worked so hard to clean, and why he and his friends never ceased to tell a thousand and one times the same old stories about their games and the goals they scored.

In my position as a university professor, women's studies became contagious for me, and I began to study the meaning of sexual identity and the way the society defines the potential or capability of the human body, e.g., women as fit to produce children, men fit to be athletes or soldiers. | [back to top](#)

GG: You write in the fall 2002 issue of *Hemisphere: A Magazine of the Americas* that "field research in Medellín in 1999 turned up . . . girls who were beaten, mocked or insulted just for playing soccer." What was the social situation of these girls? Did they continue in their efforts to play *fútbol*? If so, what was their motivation to keep playing?

BV: During 1997–1998 or thereabouts, a program was developed to reduce the level of violence among young people in the city of Medellín, Colombia. The program was called "Football for Peace" and used football as its mode of operation. Among other objectives, it sought to train young people how to negotiate their conflicts, and dealt with decision making and the establishment of rules for interaction. Taking into consideration the role and importance of women in the community, symbolically at least as mothers, it was deemed necessary to invite females to participate. One of the principles was the mixing of sexes on the teams; another was that the first goal in the game had to be made by a girl; and there were some others.

The persons I interviewed, who were responsible for the program, confessed that after a girl had scored the first goal, the boys would say, "Now we are going to play real football," and thereafter the girls on the team

would hardly ever get to kick the ball. On many occasions, the fathers would run onto the field and hit or mistreat the girls, and prohibit them from continuing with the program in spite of the fact that the program had the support of the mayor of the city.

Other studies carried out by my sociology students (both women and men) at the [University of Antioquia](#) where I work, also denounced those actions as insidious violence. The same was true in the interviews I conducted during the empirical research about the game, of the advantages and disadvantages for women and men who play football. Despite all of this, the women are still determined to continue playing football. The integrity of many women has made it possible for more and more girls to become interested in football, and there are now several football schools for girls. Perhaps because of the work of the feminists, relations between the sexes are also changing in the Colombian urban sectors. | [back to top](#)

GG: You mention the Uruguayan author **Eduardo Galeano** in an article in *Alma Mater*. He writes about the soccer ball as a feminine object—"la pelota es femenina . . ."—which you interpret as another way that *fútbol* operates as an agent of the masculine. In your view, do South American men such as Galeano think this way unconsciously, or is there a deliberate strategy to exclude?

BV: The ball or football seems to have a symbolic feminine value by being the object for which various men from different teams dispute over, because one cannot overlook the fact that football—like sports in general—is an activity which operates under the agency of the masculine identity, the same as weapons. Football permits a man to demonstrate, in front of other men, his virility, endurance, strength, and capacity to develop physical powers which lay dormant, through a regime of training which blends together enhanced bodily hormones—testosterone in particular, but also sweat and blood. For that reason, men—particularly South American men, but not only so (let us remember the work of **Eric Dunning** about English football players)—whether consciously or not, want to preserve football for themselves.

In Colombia this is very pathetic since some men even reached the point of telling me that women lack "the balls" to play football, that they lacked something, and that something is corporal and refers to the potency of the masculine sex. There are also men who are not sufficient for the sport, according to some. | [back to top](#)

GG: What is the importance for broader society of women being able to play *fútbol* in Colombia and elsewhere in South America?

BV: In my judgment it would make society more equitable, less sexist, more democratic, and would put an end to much suffering for women who play football. It is evident that the Colombian girls who emigrate for example to the USA—where the idea that soccer is masculine doesn't exist since soccer has not been as popular for men as American football or baseball—feel better about themselves when they play soccer. I have interviewed some who confessed to me that they feel proud to play soccer in the cultural milieu of the USA, which is different from that of Colombia, and they openly express their pride, whereas in Colombia they hide their interest in football by lying or keeping silent. | [back to top](#)

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