BREAKING BARRIERS: LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN WOMEN AND OLYMPIC GOLD

QUEBRANDO BARREIRAS: MULHERES LATINO-AMERICANAS E CARIBENHAS E O OURO OLÍMPICO

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Abstract. Still scarce, scholarship on gender and sport with a focus on Latin America and the Caribbean as a region has underscored how historical factors, including colonial legacies, political dependency, and social inequalities, have shaped the development of competitive sport in the region. Within this context, women's access to elite sport and the Olympic Movement has followed historically uneven trajectories. This study aims to document and critically examine women's Olympic gold-medal achievements in Latin America and the Caribbean, considering historical inequalities and colonial legacies affecting women's participation in elite sport. A qualitative historical-sociological approach was adopted, combining documentary and interpretive analyses of official records from the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Data were collected from the IOC's Olympic Results and National Olympic Committees databases, covering 39 National Olympic Committees affiliated with the Pan American Sports Organization from the 1980 Summer Olympics to the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. The findings reveal the late emergence and limited frequency of Latin American and Caribbean women's successes at the Olympics. Although Maria Lenk, from Brazil, became the first Latin American woman to compete in the Olympic Games in 1932, it was only in 1980 that María Caridad Colón, from Cuba, won the region's first women's Olympic gold medal. Between 1980 and 2021, women from Latin America and the Caribbean won 44 gold medals, 31 of them in the twenty-first century. Achievements remain concentrated in a few countries, with Jamaica, Brazil and Cuba leading the region's tally. Latina women's excellence unfolded within a landscape shaped by colonial gender legacies, with successive implications for citizenship, rights, and access to sporting institutions across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Keywords: Women Athletes; Latin America and Caribbean; Olympic Games.

Resumo. Ainda escassos, os estudos sobre gênero e esporte com o recorte da América Latina e do Caribe têm destacado como fatores históricos, entre eles legados coloniais, dependência política e desigualdades sociais, moldaram o desenvolvimento do esporte competitivo na região. Nesse contexto, o acesso das mulheres ao esporte de elite e ao Movimento Olímpico seguiu trajetórias historicamente desiguais. Este estudo busca documentar e analisar criticamente as conquistas de medalhas de ouro olímpicas de mulheres latino-americanas e caribenhas, considerando desigualdades históricas e consequências coloniais que afetaram a participação das mulheres no esporte de elite da região. A pesquisa adotou uma abordagem histórico-sociológica qualitativa, com análise documental e interpretativa de registros oficiais do Comitê Olímpico Internacional e dados de 39 Comitês Olímpicos Nacionais afiliados à Organização Desportiva Pan-Americana, entre os Jogos de 1980 e Tóquio 2020. Os resultados mostram que, embora Maria Lenk, do Brasil, tenha sido a primeira mulher latino-americana a competir em 1932, apenas em 1980 María Caridad Colón, de Cuba, conquistou a primeira medalha de ouro feminina da região. Entre 1980 e 2021, mulheres latino-americanas e caribenhas ganharam 44 medalhas de ouro, 31 delas no século XXI. Muitas dessas atletas trazem heranças indígenas e afrodescendentes, e as conquistas permanecem concentradas em poucos países, com

Jamaica, Brasil e Cuba liderando o quadro regional. A excelência das mulheres latinas se afirma em um cenário marcado por legados coloniais de gênero e sucessivas implicações para cidadania, direitos e acesso às instituições esportivas.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres atletas; América Latina e Caribe; Jogos Olímpicos.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature on Latin American and Caribbean sports history has highlighted the profound influence of the region's historical formation on the development of competitive sports. The themes of colonization, imperialism, and the resulting cultural, political, and socioeconomic impacts are integral to the study of Latin American and Caribbean sports (Sotomayor, 2017).

Indeed, the global diffusion of modern sports occurred at the same time as the establishment of colonial empires and world markets. Arguably, sports literature from different parts of the world points out that the so-called common language of sports is a representation and a form of imperial deep-play (Dyreson, 2011; Arbena, 1995).

Whereas modern sports primarily originated in Europe, the substance and nature of an international physical culture emerged from a battleground between Europe and the United States of America. This underscores the influential roles both regions played in shaping the global sports landscape (Keys, 2006).

Despite the assertion of sports universality, it is noteworthy that international sports and its organizations were predominantly under the control of European men who were white, Christian, and belonged to the aristocratic or upper-middle class, and so it was with the Olympic Movement, its organization, and Games. Taking this context into account, the construction of a worldwide sports community has had implications of every kind for the integration of developing countries and territories into the global system, including race and gender ideologies (Maguire, Liston, & Falcous, 2018).

In particular, literature on gender ideologies and sports has continually examined and re-evaluated the position of women within the Olympic Movement. Different analyses around the world extend beyond women's mere participation, delving into the cultural significance that such involvement embodies (Miragaya, 2006; Elsey & Nadel, 2019; Giglio et al., 2018).

As Elsey and Nadel (2019) argue, sport in Latin America has historically functioned as a contested arena where projects of national identity, social hierarchy, and cultural belonging were negotiated. Within this context, women's participation in elite sport often emerged under unequal conditions, shaped by patriarchal institutions, limited public investment, and the enduring legacies of colonial social structures.

Indeed, it is important to address that there is no single or universal understanding of the phenomenon of women's integration into the Olympic Movement. In the twentieth century, women in Latin American and Caribbean countries and territories struggled for their recognition as subjects, citizens, and workers in a sporting scenario characterized by the ideals of eugenics and proper motherhood, with slow legislative advancements that forged conditions and challenges with particular timelines for feminist agendas. In fact, in the second half of the twentieth century, feminist movements in Latin American and Caribbean countries or territories experienced a different moment compared to those in Europe and the United States (Jarty & Batthyány, 2021).

Although women's struggle for sports participation is recognizably a global phenomenon, the lingering effects of colonialism, combined with the acquiescence of English-speaking culture and epistemology, have created a significant divide between the global North and South on what is known about sportswomen and their achievements in the Olympic Games (López de D'Amico et al., 2016). Given the intricate cultures of this expansive continent, this issue undeniably merits a more thorough examination.

There is extensive literature dealing with the expansion of the Olympic Movement in Latin America in the 1920s and 1930s when the Olympic Games spread throughout the region and achieved great popularity and global significance that distinguished them from the previous Games (Torres, 2006). However, when this broader regional Olympic expansion is examined through the lens of gender, important historical asymmetries emerge.

In fact, the 1930s were a milestone in the history of Latin American women at the Olympic Games because in the 1932 Los Angeles Games, Maria Lenk, from Brazil, was the first and only Latin American woman to take part in the Olympic Games. Lenk, a woman of German descent born and raised in Brazil, learned to swim on a doctor's recommendation, taught by her father in Rio Tietê, São Paulo. She joined the Brazilian Olympic team at the age of 17. She finished twentieth in the 100m freestyle, was disqualified in the 100m backstroke, and finished eleventh in the 200m breaststroke. Her results and career are considered inspirational. At the 1936 Berlin Games, she had a teammate, Piedade Coutinho. The two have been widely recognized in both Brazilian and international sports literature and by sports entities (Votre & Mourão, 2001).

It is important to emphasize that there are numerous Latin American and Caribbean researchers, academic organizations, and publications in Spanish or Portuguese dedicated to the study and promotion of physical education and sports for girls and women (Giglio et al., 2018). More recently, individual and collaborative publications are helping to overcome the language barrier to give Latin American sportswomen the wider audience they deserve (López de D'Amico et al., 2016).

This work is part of a major research that aims to comprehensively examine gender, sport, and colonial history in Latin America in the context of the Olympic Games. Against this background, the present study is guided by the following research question: what does the timing and late emergence of women's Olympic gold medal achievements in Latin America and the Caribbean reveal about postcolonial social and cultural constraints affecting women's participation in elite sport?

To address this question, the general objective of this study is to document and critically examine women's Olympic gold-medal achievements in Latin America and the Caribbean, considering historical inequalities and colonial legacies affecting women's participation in elite sport. Specifically, rather than comparing patterns of sports development or gender inequalities across regions, this study seeks to: (i) identify women athletes from Latin America and the Caribbean who won gold medals at the Summer Olympic Games between the 1980 Summer Olympics and the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics; (ii) document their countries of origin and the sporting events in which they competed; and (iii) situate women's Olympic gold medal achievements within the broader historical participation of Latin America and the Caribbean in the Olympic Movement. It is not this study's aim to compare sports development and gender gaps between Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe. However, it does reflect on broader societal and historical factors that have impacted Latin American and Caribbean women's sports experiences and achievements at the Olympic Games.

This research is positioned at the intersection of sport sociology, Olympic Studies, and historical studies on women's participation in sport. Drawing on historical and sociological approaches to the Olympic Movement and women's sport in Latin America and the Caribbean, the study engages with postcolonial and decolonial perspectives as critical references for reflecting on the historical asymmetries and social constraints that have influenced women's access to elite sport. Rather than privileging a single interpretative tradition, this perspective contributes to a historically situated understanding of the broader social and institutional dynamics surrounding women's Olympic achievements.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical-sociological approach to examine women's Olympic achievements in Latin America and the Caribbean. Qualitative research in sport studies draws upon interdisciplinary perspectives that examine sport as a cultural and social phenomenon. As argued by Silk, Andrews, and Mason (2005, p. 1), qualitative sport studies involve "perspectives that critically examine the role, effects, and place of sport within society." This perspective requires the investigation of sport within its historical, cultural, and social contexts.

Regarding its nature, this study is characterized as documentary, descriptive, and analytical research. This work delves into data regarding Latin American women's Olympic achievements from 1980 to 2021. This temporal frame is predicated on the historical milestone that the first ever gold medal won by a Latin American woman was achieved in 1980.

Data were collected from official databases maintained by the International Olympic Committee, including the Olympic Results database and the National Olympic Committees database (International Olympic Committee, 2024). For the purposes of this study, Latin America and the Caribbean were conceptually understood within the institutional framework of the Pan American Sports Organization (PASO), which historically represents the Olympic Movement across the Americas and the Caribbean. Accordingly, the term "Latin America" refers to the region extending from the southern boundary of the United States to the southernmost point of South America, including the Caribbean. This concept is rooted in the religious, cultural, and linguistic commonalities that emerged from the geopolitical landscape of the nineteenth century (Mangan & DaCosta, 2011).

Operationalizing this framework, the study examined the 39 National Olympic Committees (NOCs) officially affiliated with PASO, excluding the United States and Canada. This criterion acknowledges that geopolitical and academic interpretations of Latin America may vary, while ensuring methodological consistency with the continental organization of sport in the region (Mangan & DaCosta, 2011; Santos, 2022).

From the *Olympic Results* database, data on women's gold medal performances at the Summer Olympic Games were collected, including athletes' names, countries represented, sporting disciplines, and Olympic editions. From the *National Olympic Committees* database, information regarding the official recognition and historical affiliation of Latin American and Caribbean National Olympic Committees was gathered.

Data were manually organized through the creation of individual cataloguing records for each National Olympic Committee (NOC) included in the study, using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. The extracted information was systematized according to Olympic edition, athlete, country, and sporting discipline, allowing the identification of the historical emergence of women's Olympic gold medal achievements in the region. For data analysis, a historical-documentary and interpretive analysis was conducted (Booth, 2005).

In addition, we consulted studies with specific focus on the Olympic Movement and on sport in Latin America and the Caribbean, using descriptors in English. The search terms included "Olympic Games," "gender," "Latin America," and "Caribbean," among others. To construct the analysis, we sought biographical accounts of the identified gold medalist athletes in journal articles, books, and book chapters. By combining biographical narratives with historiographical and sociological studies, the research sought to build a layered understanding of women's Olympic excellence as both sporting achievement and socio-political phenomenon.

3. ACKNOWLEDGING POST-COLONIAL HURDLES: LATIN AMERICA AND THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT

Colonial Latin America constructed gender through institutions of marriage, religion, sexuality, and family, embedding hierarchies that restricted women's autonomy and visibility. As Kuznesof (2008) demonstrate, marriage contracts required ecclesiastical or parental approval, sexuality was policed by religious and legal codes, and family structures reinforced male authority and female dependence. These practices were more than customs: they were mechanisms through which European colonizers imposed their worldview while displacing alternative forms of organization (Mignolo, 2001). Colonial beliefs about hierarchy, morality, and order became embedded in everyday life, producing long-lasting structures that continued to regulate women's bodies and public participation well beyond independence.

This colonial legacy directly shaped the contradictions of modern citizenship. Women obtained the right to vote in Ecuador in 1929, Brazil in 1932, Argentina in 1947, and Mexico in 1953, yet political citizenship did not guarantee bodily autonomy or equal access to sport. In Brazil, for example, although women were granted voting rights in 1932, the state later enacted Decree-Law No. 3.199 in 1941, which restricted women's participation in sports considered incompatible with their "female nature," reinforcing institutional control over women's bodies for decades. Similar contradictions marked the broader political landscape of the region, where authoritarian regimes shaped public life and citizenship during the second half of the twentieth century, including the military dictatorships in Brazil (1964–1985), Argentina (1976–1983), and Chile (1973–1990). These processes suggest that formal inclusion within modern republican institutions often coexisted with the persistence of colonial and patriarchal structures regulating women's mobility, visibility, and participation in public life.

These contradictions between formal political inclusion and the persistence of colonial and patriarchal restrictions also shaped the terrain in which modern sport institutions developed. To understand how these dynamics unfolded within organized sport, it is necessary to trace the institutional expansion of the Olympic Movement across Latin America and the Caribbean. The creation and recognition of National Olympic Committees, and later the establishment of continental organizations such as PASO, marked a new phase in which global sporting ideals intersected with regional histories of inequality and contested citizenship.

Established in the 1940s, PASO is a continental organization that has been instrumental in advocating for the interests of sports and Olympism across the Americas and the Caribbean. The IOC officially recognized PASO in 1948, and its very existence was structured with the involvement and directions of the IOC since the 1930s (Santos, 2015).

PASO celebrated the commencement of its first continental Games in Buenos Aires in 1951, assuming the role of promoting the Olympic Movement across the Americas, a mission it continues to uphold to this day (Santos, 2022). Yet PASO's creation represented only the institutional framework of continental sport, and within that framework women's participation was not simply debated but often curtailed, as evidenced by the limited opportunities offered to them in the 1951 Pan American Games (Santos, 2015). This reflected the broader trajectory of the Olympic Movement itself, where women had been admitted since Paris 1900 but confined to a narrow set of "appropriate" disciplines (Giglio et al., 2018). In this sense, the continental organization was born into a global sporting culture already marked by gendered exclusions, reproducing the paradox of institutional expansion alongside persistent limitations on women's participation.

The institutional development of PASO reflects broader historical paradoxes in Latin American sport, in which regional and national identities were constructed through the adoption, promotion, and performance of modern sporting practices largely shaped by European traditions and Olympic ideals (Arbena, 1995; Santos, 2022). In 2019, PASO

underwent a significant rebranding and is presently known as Pan Am Sports. Currently, it represents 41 National Olympic Committees.

Of the 39 NOCs investigated in this study, four of them were recognized by the IOC in the 1920s, which were Argentina, Haiti, Mexico, and Uruguay. In the 1930s, nine more NOCs from Latin America were recognized: Bermudas, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Jamaica, Peru, and Venezuela. In the 1940s, it was the time for the NOCs of Colombia, Guatemala, Guyana, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad and Tobago. Table 1 shows a representation of the recognition of the region's NOCs, and the corresponding cumulative number of institutions over the decades.

Table 1 – Representation of Latin American and Caribbean NOC's recognition by the IOC over decades.

Decade	Number of NOCs recognized	Cumulative NOCs
1920s	4	4
1930s	9	13
1940s	6	19
1950s	8	27
1960s	2	29
1970s	3	32
1980s	4	36
1990s	3	39

Source: Based on the IOC's National Olympic Committee's database

The creation and recognition of National Olympic committees functioned as instruments for disseminating Olympic values and strengthening the IOC's international legitimacy, especially in regions considered strategic for the universalization of the Movement. This dynamic was reinforced through visits and diplomatic missions carried out by important IOC figures, such as Avery Brundage and Henri de Baillet-Latour, whose travels to Latin America sought to stimulate local Olympic organizations and integrate new nations into the Olympic network (Torres, 2006). Thus, the expansion of recognized NOCs can also be interpreted as part of a broader IOC project of international projection, in which Olympic diplomacy operated as a mechanism of cultural influence, political rapprochement, and institutional consolidation across the continent (Santos, 2015).

As argued by Sykes (2021), sport mega-events and their governing institutions frequently reproduce forms of "roving colonialism," in which global sporting structures expand under narratives of universality and development while simultaneously reinforcing unequal geopolitical relations. Within this framework, the creation and recognition of National Olympic Committees in Latin America can also be understood as part of a broader process through which the IOC extended its institutional authority and symbolic power across peripheral regions.

Nevertheless, the absence or delayed formalization of National Olympic Committees did not necessarily prevent Latin American athletes from participating in the Olympic Games. In the inaugural edition of the modern Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896, Luis Subercaseaux, a diplomat and athlete, is recognized by the Chilean National Olympic Committee as the first Latin American athlete to have ever competed. Later, only five Latin American countries had sent athletes to the Olympics up until the 1920 Antwerp Games, which marked the beginning of the Olympic Movement's expansion in Latin America (de Franceschi Neto-Wacker & Wacker, 2010).

Literature indicates that in 1900, Ramon Fonst, a Cuban fencer who had resided in France for an extended period, secured the first Olympic medal for Latin America. He won epée events in Paris 1900. However, because he received his sports education in France and lived there, organizers treated him as a local (Torres, 2002). Decades passed before a Latin American

woman reached the pinnacle of Olympic success. Not until the XXII Olympiad in Moscow in 1980 was an Olympic gold medal awarded to a woman from the region, a breakthrough that will be explored in the next section.

The factors influencing Olympic success are often tied to the level of investment and priority that nations and regions can allocate to sports development and sports policies. According to the World Bank, all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are considered developing countries (World Bank, 2023). Also, this is one of the most unequal regions of the world. Indeed, research indicates a clear link between a nation's economic prosperity, as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, and its population size, with both elements contributing to heightened levels of participation and achievement in the Summer Olympics (Johnson & Ayfer, 2000). Also, there is evidence of a positive correlation between a country's Olympic medal tally and its Human Development Index (HDI), suggesting that broader socio-economic development correlates with sporting excellence (Som, 2023).

Rathke and Woitek (2008) demonstrated that GDP consistently exerts a positive influence on Olympic outcomes, while the effect of population varies depending on a country's wealth and demographic size. Their findings highlight that differences in financial support, training systems, organization, and cultural factors explain why nations diverge widely in their distance to the frontier of Olympic success.

Particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, the historical legacies of colonialism, extractivism, racial hierarchies, and uneven state formation continue to position many postcolonial societies within systems of dependence characterized by external technical control, asymmetrical access to resources, and internationally imposed standards of development and governance, including global indicators such as the Human Development Index (HDI). In this context, development itself cannot be understood as politically neutral, but rather as shaped by historical and structural inequalities that continue to influence access to education, health, infrastructure, and sporting opportunities across the region (McDaniel, 2023).

As Olympic sport became increasingly professionalized throughout the second half of the twentieth century, international competitiveness came to depend not only on talent, but also on long-term access to coaching systems, sport science, international competition, specialized infrastructure, and sustained public or private investment. From a gender perspective, these asymmetries were compounded by the coloniality of gender, which disproportionately affected women, as they were historically marginalized in property ownership, wealth distribution, and decision-making domains (Staley, 2025).

These dynamics created a double bind: while nations struggled with uneven modernization, women faced additional barriers rooted in gender hierarchies and colonial legacies. Recent scholarship has reinforced this argument by highlighting the epistemic silences in sport management and economics research. A scoping review of four leading journals found that most studies on women focus on administrative roles or fandom, with little attention to the operational, financial, and commercial aspects of women's sport (Staley, 2025).

As we may not trivialize structural inequalities and their impact on Olympic Success, it is important not to simplify the various effects of colonial history in Latin America and the Caribbean's sporting development and the paradoxes of searching for national, regional, and hemispheric identity while defining political and economic goals based on standards, values and institutions of the global centre's capitalist or socialist systems. At the same time, when dealing with sports diffusion, these processes should not be viewed merely as cultural impositions but also as phenomena of cultural appropriation (Arbena, 2007).

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the colonial matrix of power resulted in leaving Latin American and Caribbean countries and territories impoverished, both economically and technologically dependent. This is encapsulated in Eduardo Galeano's

seminal work through the metaphor of ‘open veins,’ to refer to the profound and lasting effects of colonialism on Latin American and Caribbean countries and territories (Galeano, 2010). The colonial civilizing masculinized project left hurdles in the development landscapes of Latin America and the Caribbean. These challenges have impacted women differently based on gender, ethnicity, and origin, resulting in multiple struggles for rights such as formal education, health care, and, arguably, access to sports (Mollett, 2017).

In fact, the coloniality of gender reveals how women were not only marginalized symbolically but also economically, excluded from property, wealth, and decision-making domains. This economic devastation and dependency, deeply rooted in colonial histories, continue to limit opportunities for women to pursue elite sport (Mollett, 2017).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The constitution of the modern world was deeply linked to the colonial exploitation of Latin America, and the imposition of universalized notions of gender, civilization, and citizenship. Within this context, the incorporation of Latin American women into Olympism throughout the twentieth century occurred unevenly.

Therefore, rather than presenting a linear narrative of sporting progress, this article offers the first consolidated mapping of Latin American women Olympic gold medalists by systematically bringing together their names, nationalities, sporting disciplines, and Olympic achievements into a single analytical archive. In doing so, the study not only contributes to the historiography of women’s participation in Olympism in the region, but also makes visible broader patterns of recognition, exclusion, and historical representation embedded within sporting institutions and Olympic memory.

4.1 Golden Trailblazers: Latin American Women’s Achievements in the Olympics

Despite institutional consolidation, reaching the Olympic podium has remained a rare feat for athletes from Latin America and the Caribbean (Tegel, 2016). After examining medal data from the 39 National Olympic Committees affiliated with Pan Am Sports, we were able to determine several countries and territories from the region that have never won any Olympic medal up to Tokyo 2020 Games. They are Antigua e Barbuda, Aruba, Belize, Bolivia, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Saint Kitts and Nevis. Saint Lucia obtained its first Olympic Medal in Paris 2024.

From 1896 to 2016, Latin America and the Caribbean won 4.51% of the total medals in the Olympic Summer Games. The fact is that before Tokyo 2020, countries and territories from Latin America and the Caribbean had an average of 28 medals at the Summer Olympics (men’s and women’s). After Tokyo, Brazil and Cuba, together, totaled 385 Olympic medals. These numbers are modest when contrasted with countries such as France (751 medals), Germany (655), the United Kingdom (916), and the United States (2,629) (Salgado, 2024).

María Caridad Colón Ruenes holds the distinction of being the first Latin American woman to win a gold medal at the Olympic Games. She was born on March 25, 1958, in Baracoa, Cuba, and she is recognized as a woman of both black and indigenous heritage (Ramos et al., 2020). She won the women's javelin in Moscow 1980 and established a new Olympic record at that time.

Beyond her great achievement, María has served on several important commissions, as noted in her official IOC biography. She was the chairperson of the Cuban Olympic Committee’s Women and Sport Commission, served as a member of the World Athletics Women’s Committee, and also of the PanAm Women and Sport Commission. In addition to her sports career, María is also an academic. She worked as a professor and holds a master’s degree in Physical Culture Sciences. In 2009, she was honored by the IOC Women and Sport

Awards, in recognition of her contributions to enhancing the involvement of women and girls in sports internationally (International Olympic Committee, n.d.).

While María's life and sporting achievements have been mentioned in a couple of academic papers, there appears to be a lack of scholarly work specifically focused on her (Ramos et al., 2020). We could not find any academic biographical analysis of her in either English or Spanish within internationally accessible databases. In 2020, María became a member of the IOC and has served the Commissions of Olympic Education and Culture, as well as Olympic Heritage (International Olympic Committee, n.d.).

The list of Latin America and the Caribbean countries or territories boasting women Olympic gold medalists is rather limited and has risen in this century. **Table 2** identifies the first gold medalist women of each Latin American or Caribbean country or territory.

Table 2 – First gold medals from Latin American and Caribbean women per country or territory.

Country	Year	First gold Medalist and sport
Cuba	1980 Moscow	María Caridad Colón Ruenes (Athletics Javelin)
Brazil	1996 Atlanta	Jacqueline Silva and Sandra Pires (Beach Volleyball)
Costa Rica	1996 Atlanta	Claudia Poll Ahrens (Swimming 200m freestyle)
Jamaica	1996 Atlanta	Deon Marie Hemmings McCatty (400m hurdles)
Bahamas	2000 Sydney	Pauline Davis-Thompson (Athletics 200m)
Colombia	2000 Sydney	María Isabel Urrutia ** (75kg weightlifting)
Mexico	2000 Sydney	Soraya Jiménez Mendivi (58kg weightlifting)
Argentine	2016 Rio de Janeiro	Paula Belén Pareto (Judo)
Puerto Rico	2016 Rio de Janeiro	Mónica Puig (Tennis) **
Bermudas	2020 Tokyo	Flora Duffy **(Triathlon)
Venezuela	2020 Tokyo	Yulimar Rojas (Athletics Triple Jump)
Ecuador	2020 Tokyo	Neisi Patricia Dajomes Barrera (Weightlifting)

Source: Based on the IOC's Olympic Results database

****** First-ever Olympic Gold of the country

The experiences of women in post-colonial Latin America and the Caribbean were modeled after hierarchies based on gender, race, and class in which their position in society certainly imposed structural limitations to basic rights, including their access to sports (Mollett, 2017). Among the gold medalists identified in **Table 2**, there are several women of black and Indigenous heritage. Despite the complexities of racial identities and identification in such a vast region with varying census systems, the representation of black women is crucial for discussing sports as potential catalysts for social transformation and inclusion (Hernández, 2021).

Although there are many different roles of women in Latin American and the Caribbean societies, they do share similar effects of colonialization and slavery, which left historical structures of oppression, as explained by Brazilian feminist intellectual Lélia Gonzalez. Gonzalez conceptualized and theorized the idea of "Amefrica Ladina", to mobilize the formation of transnational feminist solidarities that account for the specificities of Latin America, acknowledging the massive presence of African and Indigenous people (Gonzales, 2020).

Brazilian women won their first medals at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, four Olympic Games later than María's achievement. Jacqueline Silva and Sandra Pires won a gold medal in beach volleyball's debut in the Olympic program. According to Giglio et al. (2018), the 1990s marked an important turning point in the emancipation of women athletes within the Olympic Movement, although gender inequalities continue to persist through institutional structures and media representation.

Notably, it took until 2008 for Maurren Magi to clinch Brazil's first women's individual sports gold medal. Such achievements came significantly later compared to Brazil's first gold

Olympic medal, which was won during the nation's inaugural participation in the 1920 Games in shooting. In the last two decades, Brazilian Olympic women have received academic attention in different publications, with considerable sources based on archival material, media, and interviews (Rubio et al., 2016).

Women athletes in Brazil conquered space in different social scenarios as they resisted and confronted people and policies toward democratization, and it was no different in the sports context. A law that lasted from the 1940s to the 1980s prohibited women from engaging in sports practices such as soccer and combat sports, or other sports considered "incompatible with their nature" (Salvini & Marchi Júnior, 2016). In April 1940, two women were arrested for practicing soccer in Minas Gerais. Their names are Arletina and Enedina, and they are a symbol of women's struggle for rights as simple as enjoying sports activities in public spaces (Almeida & Almeida, 2020).

In Latin America, data from 2017 shows that more than 80% of adolescent girls are physically inactive. In Costa Rica, a study showed that young girls reported feeling anxious around the prospect of being shamed and sexually objectified during exercises (Monge-Rojas et al., 2017). In this scenario, Costa Rican Claudia Poll's gold medal from 1996 remains the only gold medal the country has won to date. She was 17 years old at the time. Her sister, Silvia Poll, won a silver medal in the 1988 Seul Games.

They were both of German descent and, together, they are responsible for two of Costa Rica's four Olympic medals. The literature surrounding the two sisters suggests that their victories were primarily the result of their personal efforts, rather than state participation. National press narratives about Claudia's victory have faced criticism, highlighting her selfsubordination to the patriarchal relationship she had with her coach, to whom she dedicated her effort and athletic triumph (Urbina Gaitán, 2018). In the 2000 Sydney Games, Claudia won two bronze medals.

At the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, Bahamian sprinter Pauline Davis Thompson was the first Latin American woman to win two Olympic golds in a single edition of the Olympic Games. First, individually, and then with her 4 x 100m relay team: Savatheda Fynes, Chandra Sturrup, Debbie Ferguson, and Eldece Clarke-Lewis. Bahamian women had done well in previous Olympic Games, winning medals since 1984. No specific academic literature on their accomplishments was found either in English or Spanish.

María Isabel Urrutía, from Colombia, and Soraya Jiménez Mendivi, from Mexico, also made history for their respective countries in weightlifting in the 2000 Games. Urrutía became the first Olympic gold medalist of Colombia. A journal paper accounted for her accomplishments and investigated her training preparation for the 2000 Games (Herrera Corzo, 2003). As for Soraya, we were able to identify that she is mentioned in a book titled "Mujeres en la creación de México," by Clara Meierovich, that honor women important to the country's national identity (Meierovich, 2001).

The years 2016 and 2021 marked significant milestones as they continually introduced pioneering athletes who secured their country's first Olympic medal for women: Argentinean Paula Pareto (Judo), Puerto Rican Mónica Puig (tennis), Bermudian Flora Duffy (triathlon), Ecuadorian Neisi Patricia Dajomes Barrera (Weightlifting), and Venezuelan Yulimar Rojas (Triple Jump). Table 3 compiles other women's gold medals from Latin American or Caribbean countries and territories.

Chart 3 – Gold medals from Latin American or Caribbean women per country or territory.

Country	Gold Medals/ Olympic edition		Total
Argentina	Paula Belén Pareto (Judo)	2016 Rio	1
Cuba	María Caridad Colón Ruenes (Javelin)	1980 Moscow	8
	Odalis Revé (Judo)	1992 Barcelona	

Country	Gold Medals/ Olympic edition		Total
	Maritza Martén (Discus throw)		
	Curt Volleyball Team		
	Curt Volleyball Team	1996 Atlanta	
	Curt Volleyball Team	2000 Sydney	
	Yumileidi Cumbá (Shot put)	2004 Athens	
	Idalys Ortiz (Judo 78kg)	2012 London	
Costa Rica	Claudia Poll Ahrens (Swimming 200m freestyle)	1996 Atlanta	1
Brazil	Jacqueline Silva and Sandra Pires (Beach Volleyball)	1996 Atlanta	10
	Curt Volleyball Team	2008 Beijing	
	Maurren Maggi (Long Jump)		
	Curt Volleyball Team	2012 London	
	Sarah Menezes (Judo)		
	Rafaela Silva (Judo)	2016 Rio de Janeiro	
	Martine Grael and Kahena Kunze (Sailing)		
	Rebeca Andrade (Artistic Gymnastics)	2020 Tokyo*	
	Martine Grael and Kahena Kunze (Sailing)		
	Ana Marcela (Open water 10km)		
Bahamas	Pauline Davis-Thompson (Athletics 200m)	2000 Sydney	3
	Savatheda Fynes-Coke, Chandra Sturrup, Pauline Davis-Thompson, Debbie Ferguson-McKenzie and Eldece Clarke (4 x 100m)		
	Tonique Williams Darling (Athletics 200m)	2004 Athens	
Bermudas	Flora Duffy **(Triathlon)	2020 Tokyo	1
Colombia	María Isabel Urrutia Ocoró (75kg weightlifting)	2000 Sydney	4
	Mariana Pajón (Cycling BMX)	2012 London	
	Caterine Ibargüen (Triple Jump)	2016 Rio de Janeiro	
	Mariana Pajón (Cycling BMX)		
Ecuador	Neisi Patricia Dajomes Barrera (Weightlifting)	2020 Tokyo*	1
Mexico	Soraya Jiménez Mendivi (58kg weightlifting)	2000 Sydney	1
Puerto Rico	Mónica Puig (Tennis)	2016 Rio	1
Jamaica	Deon Hemmings (400m Hurdles)	1996 Atlanta	12
	Veronica Campbell (Athletics 200m)	2004 Athens	
	Tayna Lawrence, Sherone Simpson, Aleen Bailey, Veronica Campbell Brown (Athletics 4 × 100 m relay)		
	Shelly-Ann Fraser (Athletics 100m)	2008 Beijing	
	Melaine Walker (400m hurdles)		
	Veronica Campbell-Brown (Athletics 200 m)		
	Shelly-Ann Fraser (Athletics 100m)	2012 London	
	Elanie Thompson-Hera (Athletics 100m)	2016 Rio	
	Elanie Thompson-Hera (Athletics 200m)		

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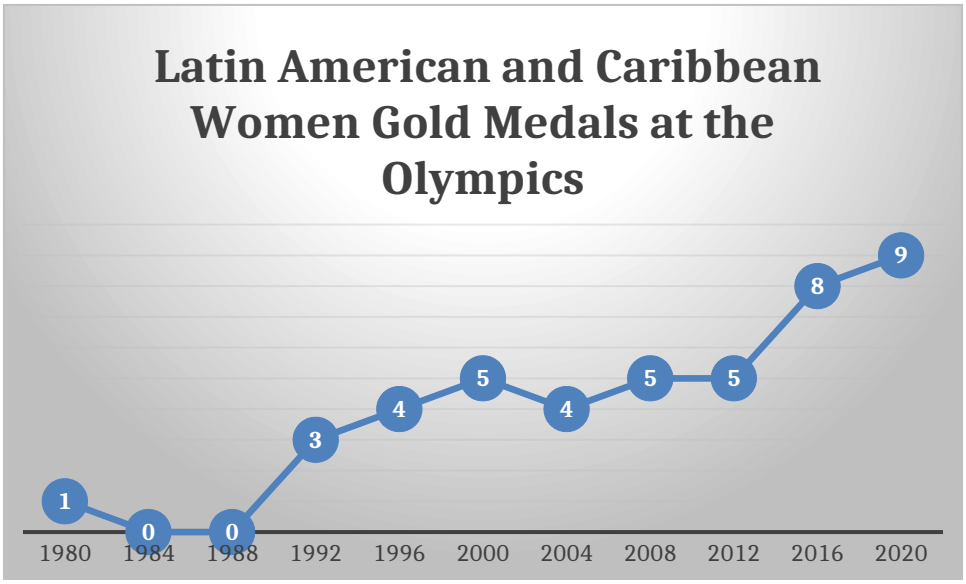
Country	Gold Medals/ Olympic edition		Total
	Elaine Thompson-Herah, Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and Shericka Jackson, Briana Williams (4 x 100m)	2020 Tokyo*	
	Elanie Thompson-Hera (Athletics 100m)		
	Elanie Thompson-Hera (Athletics 200m)		
Venezuela	Yulimar Rojas (Athletics Triple Jump)	2020 Tokyo*	1

Source: Based on the IOC's Olympic Results database

*Tokyo 2020 Games happened in 2021 because of the pandemic world.

Chart 3 shows that the 44 Olympic gold medals won by women from Latin America and the Caribbean between 1980 and Tokyo 2020 were distributed across only 12 countries and territories, revealing a strong concentration of Olympic success within a limited number of national contexts. Jamaica (12), Brazil (10), and Cuba (8), accounted for 30 of these achievements (68.2%), while several countries registered only a single gold medal throughout the entire period. Of the 44 gold medals, 33 (75%) were won in individual events, whereas 11 (25%) resulted from team or paired events, including volleyball, athletics relays, beach volleyball, and sailing. Furthermore, 31 gold medals (70.5%) were won in the twenty-first century, highlighting the increasing concentration of these achievements in more recent Olympic editions.

Of course, women from the region have not won only gold but also silver and bronze medals in the Olympics, and every participation and medal counts. Other medal data will be further analyzed and integrated into the broader research study we are conducting. As illustrated in Graphic 1, the trajectory of gold medal achievements by Latin American and Caribbean women from Moscow 1980 to Tokyo 2020 reveals both the late emergence and the growing achievement of Latin women in the Olympic arena.



Graphic 1 - Number of gold medals won by Latin American and Caribbean women from the 1980 Moscow Games to the 2020 Tokyo Games.
Source: Based on the IOC's Olympic Results database

The data presented in Graph 1 do not indicate a linear or continuous process of growth in women's Olympic success in Latin America and the Caribbean. Rather, they reveal a slow trajectory, marked by periods of limited achievements and modest advances across the decades.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study's objective of documenting and critically examining women's Olympic gold medal achievements has shown both the late emergence and limited frequency of such successes, framed by broader sociopolitical hurdles.

Cuba's early leadership, beginning with Colón in Moscow 1980, was consolidated through team and individual victories in athletics, volleyball, and judo, totaling eight gold medals. Jamaica emerged as the most successful nation, with twelve gold medals, all in athletics, reflecting the country's remarkable concentration of Olympic achievements in sprinting, hurdles, and relay events. Brazil followed with ten gold medals across diverse disciplines, including beach volleyball, sailing, gymnastics, and judo, particularly from the 1990s onwards. Other countries achieved symbolic milestones: Costa Rica with Claudia Poll's swimming triumph in Atlanta 1996, Argentina with Paula Pareto's judo victory in Rio 2016, and Puerto Rico with Mónica Puig's historic tennis gold in 2016. The Bahamas also demonstrated regional strength in athletics, while Colombia and Mexico added weightlifting and cycling to the tally. More recently, Ecuador, Bermuda, and Venezuela joined the list with landmark victories in Tokyo 2020.

Rather than offering a linear causal explanation, the findings invite reflection on how colonial legacies, economic dependency, and gender hierarchies intersect to shape citizenship, rights, and opportunities of success in sport.

The absence of robust academic production on these milestones suggests that women's Olympic victories are not yet fully inscribed as collective memory within Latin American and Caribbean scholarship. Despite groundbreaking achievements by athletes such as Jacqueline Silva e Sandra Pires, Claudia Poll, Pauline Davis-Thompson, María Isabel Urrutía, Soraya Jiménez, Elaine Thompson-Hera and other women, the limited academic production surrounding their legacies illustrates an epistemic silence that continues to marginalize women's sporting triumphs in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Overcoming social barriers for Olympic excellence remains a challenging process for women from Latin American and Caribbean countries or territories. Despite the importance of such accomplishments, the fact that these 'firsts' are still occurring as late as 2024 Paris Games stresses the ongoing challenges and disparities in global sports culture.

By situating women's excellence within these historical contexts, the research contributes to the field of Olympic Studies and women's participation in sports, highlighting the need for deeper engagement with regional sport policies and for amplifying the visibility of women's struggles and accomplishments. Governments and National Olympic Committees need to integrate gender-sensitive frameworks, ensuring equitable investment in infrastructure, coaching, and athlete development programs for women. At the regional level, Panam Sports could take a leading role by promoting initiatives that document and celebrate women's achievements, such as the creation of museums, archives, and digital platforms dedicated to women athletes. These spaces of memory would institutionalize their accomplishments as part of national and regional heritage, countering epistemic silences.

In addition, Pan Am sports could establish funding mechanisms and training programs specifically aimed at women athletes, coaches, and administrators, thereby fostering leadership and representation across all levels of sport governance. Such measures would not only preserve the legacy of women's Olympic success but also inform inclusive and sustainable sport policies for the future.

As we approach gender and sports relations in Latin America and the Caribbean, a call for transnational, postcolonial, decolonial, and intersectional research is crucial. Promoting sports for social change and gender inclusion in the Olympic Games will benefit from a more diverse epistemological representation of women, who merit visibility for their struggles and accomplishments in all parts of the world.

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