



World Justice
Project

IN BRAZIL, FEMALE WARRIORS FIGHT FOR A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Photography by Deborah Espinosa



“ Sometimes we only had money to buy bread and butter... Our uniforms were the men’s old hand me downs. We had to wash them by hand, though the men’s team had a cleaning service. We played on astroturf while the men played on grass.

- Caitlin Fisher

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Excerpted from “In Brazil, Female Warriors Fight for a Level Playing Field,” available in full at: www.worldjusticeproject.org

Aline “Pelle” Pellegrino still recalls the day she gave up her passion—as an Olympic athlete—for a 9-to-5 real estate job that offered reliable pay and a break from daily discrimination. Despite a successful 16 year career as a professional soccer player (Pelle holds an Olympic medal and played with world famous Marta), she was harassed, underpaid, and had to buy her own equipment. Eventually, her working conditions became so unbearable she abandoned her dreams.

Pelle’s experience led her and American soccer player Caitlin Fisher to create the Guerreiras Project, a group of athletes, academics, and activists that use sports as a way to start dialogue about discrimination and unequal access.

But it wasn’t until Fisher spoke on a panel about sports and the rule of law at the 2013 World Justice Forum that she was inspired to incorporate a rule of law focus into the Guerreiras Project’s work. The Guerreiras Project received a seed grant through WJP’s World Justice Challenge to begin a pilot program to train 25 of Brazil’s top women soccer players as

“ambassadors” to address discrimination and labor rights for women athletes. These ambassadors travel to lead workshops with youth in major cities where the country’s future players will be recruited and talk with youth about discrimination and access for women and minorities in sports.

Soccer is a major symbol of Brazilian culture. The sport was introduced to Brazil in the 19th century and by the 1940s there were teams all over the country with 40 women’s teams in Rio alone. That all came to an end in 1941 when the government made it illegal for women to play sports, claiming it was “against their nature.” It took 38 years for the government to lift the ban on women’s football in 1979, yet attitudes remain the same. The poor treatment, sexual harassment, and low salaries that women players receive make parents reluctant to let their daughters play the sport. Women and girls who want to play pro soccer in Brazil are often stereotyped as homosexuals and pressured to adopt a certain image with tight-fitting uniforms and long hair—things which get in the way of playing the sport.



Aline “Pelle” Pelegrino, co-founder of the Guerreiras Project, was captain of the Brazilian women’s national team, playing alongside Marta and winning an Olympic medal. After 16 years of being shortchanged on her salary, uncertain of her employment status or medical insurance and facing harassment and discrimination, she left the sport. She quickly discovered that because she had always been paid under the table without a contract, she had no proof of income and was therefore unable to open a basic bank account or rent an apartment.

Beatriz Silva (left), a Guerreiras Project ambassador, stands with Guerreiras Project staff Anna Fiastro (center) and co-founder Caitlin Fisher (right). Silva continues to play, though she sometimes receives a paycheck only once every few months.



BREAKING THE GRASS CEILING

When Fisher joined Santos in 2004, one of the country's most prominent futebol clubs, she quickly discovered that although both the women's and men's teams were part of the same club, the differences in their treatment were vast. The women were not allowed to eat in the cafeteria, play on the same field, or use the team buses. Fisher recalls: *"Sometimes we only had money to buy bread and butter...Our uniforms were the men's old hand me downs. We had to wash them by hand, though the men's team had a cleaning service. We played on astroturf while the men played on grass. And we couldn't use the Santos bus, so we walked 45 minutes to and from practice each day."*

The most noticeable difference was salaries and medical insurance. Sometimes the women players were not paid at all, or left without medical insurance if a sponsor pulled their

support from the team. More than once, Fisher watched a team fold, leaving the pro players suddenly unemployed.

It's an uphill battle. FIFA, soccer's governing body, doled out \$576 million in prize money for the men's World Cup in 2014, with a full \$35 million set aside for the winners. This year, the winning team of the Women's World Cup received \$2 million.

Despite the tough road ahead, the Guerreiras Project is optimistic. The women's World Cup brought more attention to the issue, and more girls are playing soccer in Brazil, even as they struggle to get support at more competitive levels. "I am in love with the Guerreiras Project," says Guerreiras ambassador Beatriz Silva, who recently played in the 2015 World Cup. "I dream of watching my daughter play."



Above: In Sao Paulo, two of the top women's teams in the country—Sao Jose de Campos and Centro Olimpico—play a match. The women's teams are not often given access to play on fields with manicured grass, so they make do using a field in a public park with torn astro-turf, crumbling walls, and leaking water pipes.



About This Photo Essay

This essay is part of an ongoing series documenting pilot programs incubated at World Justice Project (WJP) convenings and/or launched with WJP seed funding. Since its founding, WJP has provided network connections and over \$1,000,000 in funding to 80+ pilot programs on five continents. These practical, community-led solutions to discrimination, corruption, violence, and more represent a broad cross-section of disciplines and approaches to strengthening the rule of law worldwide. Pilot programs are catalogued on the WJP website, where they can be searched by geography and issue area.

About The World Justice Project

The World Justice Project (WJP) is an independent, multidisciplinary organization working to advance the rule of law around the globe. Establishing the rule of law is fundamental to achieving communities of peace, opportunity, and equity—communities that offer sustainable economic development, accountable government, and respect for fundamental rights.

Our work engages citizens and leaders worldwide and from all work disciplines to advance the rule of law. Through our mutually reinforcing programs of Research and Scholarship, the WJP Rule of Law Index®, and Engagement, WJP seeks to increase public awareness about the foundational importance of the rule of law, stimulate government reforms, and develop practical programs at the community level. Learn more: www.worldjusticeproject.org