

# Legitimizing and transforming gender relations within the contemporary equestrian sport of Charrería in Mexico

Cite this paper as:

Monterrubio, C., Dashper, K., Mendoza-Ontiveros, M. M., & Wadham, H. (2024). Legitimizing and transforming gender relations within the contemporary equestrian sport of Charrería in Mexico. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2023-0162>

## Abstract

The equestrian sport of Charrería is the national sport of Mexico. This ethnographic study illustrates ways in which Charrería helps legitimize unequal gender relations and, in some circumstances, provides opportunity to challenge and rework the wider gender order. Hegemonic masculinities are performed and reified through the gendered performances of male charros and the complementary, opposite, yet unequal gendered performances of female escaramuzas. Yet hegemony requires constant renewal and consent, and Charrería illustrates the potential for equestrian sports events to also contribute to challenging and reworking the wider gender order and reconfiguring relations between men and women, masculinities and femininities, to be less hierarchical and oppressive.

## Introduction

Sports events are gendered spaces in which inequalities between men and women, masculinities and femininities, are seemingly confirmed and celebrated (Gibson, 1998). As a structure of global domination and oppression, the current gender order consists of relationships between and within males and females, masculinities and femininities, positioned hierarchically in ways that uphold unequal gender relations (Schippers, 2007). Within this gender order, hegemonic masculinities and femininities help shore up gendered inequalities and are performed, reproduced, and legitimised in and through many sporting practices around the world (Connell, 1995). However, sports practices can serve as spaces where gender relations are reconfigured in ways that may begin to transform the social structures of power and gender inequality. Equestrian sports provide one such example (Adelman & Knijnik, 2013) and illustrate that it is possible to organise sport in ways which make room for moving beyond binary oppositions of male/female that exclude all those who do not fit within these narrow boundaries (Dashper, 2010). However, as Knights and Kerfoot (2004) argued, it is extremely difficult to examine gender relations and the exclusions and hierarchies that stem from them without presupposing the binary between men and women. Kelan (2010: 185) argued that “we seem to lack the vocabulary through which to imagine a post-gender world”, pointing to some of the limitations of conceptualisations of gender and their application to different sporting practices. In this paper we adopt the binary concepts of male/female,

masculinities/femininities, that form the basis of theories of gender power relations as originally proposed by Connell (1987) and widely utilised in sport sociology. However, we remain cognisant of the limitations of these binary concepts that form the basis for the organisation of most sports and sporting events and contribute to the exclusion and marginalisation of many groups and individuals (see Dashper, 2010).

The influence of gender values and norms in sports in Mexico has been significant. The traditional roles assigned to men and women have fostered a male predominance in this sphere (Fernández, 2020), and participation in sport has been largely defined on gender stereotypes within the country (Dosal Ulloa et al., 2017). In the case of equestrian sports and gender, the trajectory of Mexico at the Olympic level has been remarkable, with the country earning a total of seven medals: two gold, one silver, and three bronze, all achieved during the 1948 and 1980 Olympic Games (Cube, 2021). While this figure represents approximately 10% of the country's total Olympic medals, which amount to 73 in total (13 gold, 24 silver, and 36 bronze) (Castillo, 2024), it is important to note that all medals in equestrian sport have been won by men, both in individual and team competitions. However, due to the influence of global pro-feminist movements and governmental efforts to implement gender equality policies in sports, women have made strides in their presence, participation, and sporting achievements. From obtaining 25 Olympic medals since 1968 to exerting greater influence in decision-making at national, state, and local levels in the last thirty years (Salazar-C., 2023), women have notably progressed in this field. A tangible example of this progress is the consolidation of women's football through the Liga MX Femenil, which has challenged entrenched stereotypes in Mexican football (Añorve, 2019). This sport, long considered exclusively male, has been a battleground for the inclusion of women (de la Garza Tolentino & Cervantes Niño, 2022); nevertheless, the institutionalisation of this league has marked a significant step in breaking gender norms within the country's football landscape.

Charrería is considered the national sport par excellence in Mexico. As a part of the national heritage, it is listed in Article 88 of the Mexican Law of Physical Culture and Sport (Ley General de Cultura Física y Deporte). An equestrian sport practice of great cultural relevance, it is part of the list of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and is deeply associated with Mexican national identity and pride (Palomar, 2004; Monterrubio et al., 2024). As such, it is an especially revealing context for the study of gender relations, since it is not only a space for sport competition, but also for performance and celebration (Sands, 1993). As a gendered practice, Charrería condenses a large number of traits, behaviours, practices, performances, and structures that

reproduce and legitimise hegemonic masculinities and femininities, and the hierarchical relationships between them (Messerschmidt, 2018). However, because diverse masculinities and femininities continually interact symbolically and materially in this sport, and hegemony requires continual renewal and consent (Yang, 2020), Charrería also becomes a space where gender relations in equestrian sport are reconfigured, opening opportunities to change and possibly transform traditional gender power relations.

Based on interviews and ethnographic observations, the aim of this study was to examine the narratives, practices, gender performances, and structures that constitute, legitimise, and transform configurations of hegemonic masculinities and femininities, and the unequal gender order which they support, within Charrería in Mexico. Framed by global studies on hegemonic masculinities and equestrian sport, this article makes three main contributions. First, we develop Connell's (1987, 1995) theorisation of gender power relations, applying this to equestrian sports events, focusing on ways in which these practices sustain and legitimise the wider unequal gender order. Second, responding to calls of gender scholars to investigate the more radical possibilities inherent within the concept of hegemony and the gender order (Johansson & Ottemo, 2015), we illustrate how equestrian sports events are also sites that offer opportunities for change and transformation of unequal gender relations. Finally, we position equestrian sports as significant cultural events that reflect, reproduce and, sometimes, challenge broader gender relations in countries of the Global South, specifically Mexico. This latter contribution is particularly relevant to the advancement of gender studies in Mexico, where the body of social scientific knowledge on the relationships between masculinities and sports is very scarce (Lara Rodríguez, 2020; Núñez Noriega, 2017). Research on gender in sports in Mexico is a necessity because a masculine hegemonic model still persists, explaining the inequality between men and women in terms of participation and economic gains within some sports (Méndez-Sánchez et al., 2023; Salazar C. & Manzo Lozano, 2020).

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we present our theoretical framework focused on the inherently relational construction of hegemonic masculinities and hegemonic/emphasised femininities as initially proposed by Connell and then subject to development by numerous scholars (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007; Messerschmidt, 2018, 2019); secondly, we offer a description of Charrería and the methods adopted; thirdly, we present the findings from our ethnographic study and consider implications for the theorisation of gender relations within and beyond equestrian sports events. Finally, we present our conclusions.

## **Theoretical framework: Gender power relations in sports events**

Raewyn Connell's (1987, 1995) theory of gender power relations, incorporating the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, has been hugely influential in gender studies, particularly studies of masculinities, and has been widely used in fields from sport (e.g., Davis, 2016; Messner, 1990;), to criminology (e.g., Jefferson, 2002; Michalski, 2017) to education (e.g., Renold, 2001; Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). Connell (1985, 1987) theorised gender as a social structure of power, inequality and oppression that shapes relations between men and women, between masculinities and femininities, and within masculinities (and femininities). The concept of hegemonic masculinity lies at the centre of these configurations and has proven to be particularly influential. Drawing on a Gramscian understanding of hegemony, hegemonic masculinities are historically and culturally specific configurations of practice that are culturally exalted, helping stabilise structures of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole (Donaldson, 1993). Hegemonic masculinity is inherently relational - arguably, it has no meaning outside of its relationships to femininities and other masculinities - and is legitimised largely through cultural ascendancy and consent, rather than force and dominance (Messerschmidt, 2018, 2019).

Hegemonic masculinity may not be the most common or dominant form of masculinity in a given setting, but is the configuration of practice that legitimates unequal gender relations, operating both symbolically and materially in policing men's behaviours and excluding and/or discrediting women (Messerschmidt, 2019). A critique of the theory has been the tendency to reduce hegemonic masculinity to a series of masculine traits or behaviours, many of which are negative and toxic (Connell, 2000; Jefferson, 2002). As Beasley (2008) argued, this conceptual slippage conflates dominance with hegemony. Most men do not embody hegemonic masculinities but may gain from what Connell (1987) calls the patriarchal dividend and thus may be complicit in upholding its cultural exaltation and, therefore, perpetuating unequal gender relations. Nonhegemonic masculinities (variously described as complicit, marginalised, inclusive, subordinated, counter or alternative by different authors, e.g., Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Messerschmidt, 2018, 2019) play important roles in the gender order and may be understood through an intersectional lens that incorporates other axes of domination, such as race, sexuality, nationality and class, in understanding local, regional and global gender relations (Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Strier & Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2021). Hegemonic masculinity should be understood in the plural - masculinities - (as should all forms of masculinities and femininities), signifying that this represents a historically and culturally

specific configuration of practice that is variable and always open to change and contestation, as we discuss further below.

Connell (1987) argued that emphasised femininity was the practice that exists in a relation of compliance and submission to hegemonic masculinity, thus helping sustain the cultural ascendancy of hegemonic masculinity and the current gender order. As hegemonic masculinity theory has developed and gained increased popularity, femininities have tended to drop out of focus and many studies examine masculinities independent of femininities. Messerschmidt (2018, 2019) identifies this as a conceptual problem, due to the relational nature of masculinities which only make sense in relation to femininities and other masculinities. Schippers (2007) recognised this tendency to overlook femininities within Connell's theorisation and repositioned the gender order as centred not on hegemonic masculinity, as Connell proposed, but on the relationship between masculinity and femininity. Drawing on Butler (1999), Schippers argues that heterosexuality fuses masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites, but inherently unequal, legitimating the unequal distribution of resources, authority and power and providing the rationale for male dominance and gender hegemony (Schippers, 2004). We follow Schippers and others (e.g., Must & McGann, 2016; Annes et al., 2021) in renaming emphasised femininity as hegemonic femininity, which is just one configuration of femininity, defined largely through its relation to hegemonic masculinity in a given context. Although Connell (1987) argued that emphasised femininity could never be hegemonic in relation to other forms of femininity due to the unequal position of femininities in the wider gender order, Hamilton et al. (2019) suggest this reveals a conceptual blindspot as it fails to account for the ways in which some femininities do in fact dominate others. Adopting an intersectional lens that draws heavily from Collins' (2004) concept of the matrix of domination, Hamilton et al. (2019) suggest that some women - predominantly white, heterosexual, affluent women, in the USA, the context of their work - benefit from a femininity premium by embodying hegemonic femininity in ways that are not available to other women, due to their position in relation to race, class, sexuality or nationality. There are multiple forms of femininity, including non-hegemonic ones that are not positioned as complementary and deferential to hegemonic masculinity and thus not complicit in upholding unequal gender relations, named variously pariah femininities (Schippers, 2007) and positive femininities (Messerschmidt, 2019), which have implications for change and transformation within the gender order.

Connell's (1987, 1995) theory has been critiqued for being overly negative, focusing on the ways in which local practices and gender performances sustain and uphold unequal

gender relations and giving inadequate space for change (Demetriou, 2001; Moller, 2007). However, this is perhaps a consequence of the ways in which the theory has been used rather narrowly to explore certain manifestations of masculinity and their implications for men. Although the gender order is relatively stable and persistent, it is open to change. Hegemony requires constant renewal; it is based on consent and complicity and so is continually renegotiated and sometimes modified through social action (Messerschmidt, 2019). Hegemony is never complete, it is always subject to struggle and is not something that should be struggled against and overturned, but struggled for and redefined (Johansson & Ottemo, 2015). Non-hegemonic or positive masculinities and femininities illustrate that gender constructions are possible that do not perpetuate unequal gender relations and rather contribute to 'legitimizing egalitarian relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities' - and, we suggest, femininities (Messerschmidt, 2018, p.142). Connell (1987, 1995) argued that power and hegemony can be forged from both above and below, and so change may result from various practices and positions in the gender order. Yang (2020) suggests that transformation of the hierarchical gender order is possible, even though changes have thus far been largely superficial, obscuring yet legitimating power and reinforcing unequal gender relations. As Messerschmidt (2018) argues, counter hegemonic practices are already evident in some places, critiquing, challenging and even sometimes dismantling hegemonic masculinities and the unequal gender order that stems from it, offering possibilities for more wide-ranging change in the hierarchical gender order. He states, 'The goal is not a simple androgyny in which everyone is the same, but difference with relational equality - not only between men and women but among men and women as well' (p.158, italics in original).

Connell's theorisation of gender power relations and hegemonic masculinity has been widely used to examine men's sporting experiences, focusing on the reproduction of masculine traits and practices (Giazitzoglu, 2019; Hart, 2016; Parker & Curtner-Smith, 2012), the legitimation of power and privilege for some groups of men (Lavelle, 2021) or the transgressive potential of events like the Gay Games (Jarvis, 2015). Reis et al. (2021) observe that within existing studies of men's sports settings, there has been a 'lack of specificity...with respect to how hegemonic masculinities might shift in varying contexts, and the implications that might accompany such changes' (p 18). Thus some of this research risks the conceptual slippage of which Beasley (2008) and others have warned, wherein hegemonic masculinity becomes reified as a set of masculine traits, or associated with a group of men, and detached from its relational foundation and role in legitimising

continuing unequal gender relations. In this paper, we draw on our reading of the theory of gender power relations and hegemonic masculinities, as presented above, in order to recentre the relationality of men and women, masculinities and femininities, and the ways in which unequal hierarchical relations are legitimated in our analysis and prioritise focus on the potential for change within the gender order.

Masculinities and femininities are historically and culturally specific practices, constituted at global, regional and local levels (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In the context of Mexico, research on masculinities and femininities in sports is notably scarce. However, recent studies have begun to address gender within the sports arena. For instance, Lara Rodríguez's collective work (2020) is relevant for understanding aspects of power dynamics and prevailing masculinities in Mexican sports. In this compilation, García Valtierra (2020) examines sports, particularly football, as a power mechanism shaping hegemonic masculinity, characterised by strength, suppression of emotions, competition among men, resilience, resorting to violence, and avoidance of any behaviour deemed feminine. Additionally, Salazar C. and Mando Lozano (2020) argue that sports practice in Mexico continues to be strongly influenced by a masculine tradition that restricts women's participation in roles such as athletes, coaches, referees, executives, and sports journalists. This suggests that, albeit with variations, hierarchical inequalities manifest in the specific practices of contemporary societies, although empirical evidence and theoretical underpinnings remain scarce within the Mexican context.

Sociological research on gender power relations in equestrian sports in Mexico is severely limited. A review of specialised literature reveals that, despite the relevance and diversity of equestrian sports in the country, the vast majority of sociological research has focused on charrería, with some exceptions focusing on equestrian training as a psychological intervention area (Rivas Garza, 2001), or on horse racing as masculinised spaces (Monterrubio et al., 2022). This concentration is unsurprising given the cultural, national, and sporting significance of Charrería. Consequently, as an equestrian sport, Charrería in Mexico has been analysed from various perspectives such as a symbol of Mexican identity (Palomar, 2004; Sánchez González, 2018), as a space for the production and enactment of gender and interspecies relations (Palomar Vereá, 2004), the inclusion and position of women (Gómez Orozco, 2022; Ramírez, 2016), to its heritage value in relation to concerns about animal welfare (Monterrubio et al., 2024; Ramírez, 2016).

The predominant focus of sociological research on Charrería and other aspects of equestrian sports in Mexico reflects an entrenched trend in the cultural significance of this practice. However, the inclusion of gender perspectives in research in the country is

crucial to understanding how unequal hierarchical relations are constructed and reproduced within these sporting contexts, as well as to identify opportunities to promote equity and inclusion. Expanding the scope of research on equestrian sports in Mexico will not only enrich our understanding of these practices but also contribute to fostering a more inclusive and reflective dialogue on gender issues in the sports domain across the country.

Consequently masculinities and femininities require empirical examination in different contexts, including Mexican equestrian sport practices, where wider social, cultural, economic and political factors shape gender relations in specific ways. Using the practice of Charrería in Mexico as an example, we explore the ways in which sports events can contribute to both sustaining and, in some circumstances, challenging and reworking the wider gender order. We address the following research questions:

- What practices and gender performances constitute hegemonic masculinities and femininities within this setting (i.e., Charrería in Mexico)?
- What non- or counter-hegemonic gender performances are present within this setting?
- What is the potential for change within the prevailing gender order in this setting?

## **Research context and methods**

### ***Charrería***

Charrería is a Mexican equestrian tradition and sport that was born from the work of men with cattle in rural life (Sánchez, 2018). Due to its long tradition, it has been described as a 'living history' (González, 2016). The charro (the man who does Charrería) is a figure who might be seen as representing the national identity and 'the Mexican' (Sánchez, 2018). Despite the cultural and ethnic plurality of the country, the image of the charro is thus recognised in many places as typical of Mexico (Palomar, 2004). It condenses a large number of symbolic manifestations through painting, poetry, art, music, dance, literature and food (Chávez, 2014). On stage and screen, in print and song, the figure of the charro emerges as a brave and fierce defender of his territory, but also a macho womaniser, a talkative braggart and a drunkard (Sánchez, 2018). Songs like "El Charro" (by Pedro Infante) and "Yo Soy Mexicano" (by Jorge Negrete) are compositions that highlight bravery and national pride, among other idealised qualities of the charro. However, this is a distorted image of the charro as it promotes stereotypes that are not performed by all men in the national sport (Federación Mexicana de Charrería, 2023a). The charro is much



more than a caricature of Mexican folklore and manhood; he is an emblematic character that has adopted different roles in history and continues to exert social, cultural and political power within contemporary Mexico (Palomar, 2004).

The Mexican Law of Physical Culture and Sport, which aims, among other things, to promote the development of physical culture and sports in all their manifestations and expressions and to guarantee equal opportunities in physical culture and sports to all individuals without distinction of gender, age, disability, social condition, religion, opinions, preferences, or marital status, establishes in its Article 88 that Charrería is considered part of the nation's cultural sports heritage. Therefore, institutions must preserve, support, promote, encourage, and stimulate it (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2023). In sporting terms, Charrería tests the skill, strength and control that the charro has over participating animals (horses and bulls), while also facilitating the display of his courage, intrepidity and manliness to the audience (Chavez, 2014). As an institutionalised sport, Charrería is performed by men (and boys), while women (and girls) participate in a parallel event known as escaramuza (the term escaramuza is used to refer to the female event itself, to each team and each member). The existence of these two variants of Charrería, which often exist side-by-side, is particularly helpful to our analysis of hegemonic masculinities and femininities in practice.

Charrería consists of nine suertes (events) (see Monterrubio et al., 2024) where equestrian skills, cattle control, animal domination, strength, risk and courage of men are publicly displayed (for a detailed official description of each event and regulations see Federación Mexicana de Charrería (2022b)). In escaramuza, women compete in teams of eight, executing a coordinated routine to the beat of a traditional Mexican song. '[Showing] courage and mastery... at a gallop and with cadence they develop 12 series of evolutions...' (Chávez, 2014, p. 42). While Charrería showcases supposedly masculine traits, in escaramuza it is the aesthetic rather than sporting criteria that have more value, since the regulations emphasise the feminine and not the technical aspects of the practice (Palomar, 2004). What is rewarded then is how well women conform to feminine ideals (Palomar, 2004). As such, Charrería provides an opportunity to focus simultaneously on hegemonic masculinities and femininities alike, and their hierarchical complementarity, drawing attention to the inherently relational character of both.

## ***Methods***

As part of a larger study focused on gender and multispecies relationships in different equestrian sports (horseracing and Charrería) in Mexico, this study aimed to examine the

practices and gender performances that constitute and reconstitute hegemonic masculinities and femininities within Charrería. This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm; it did not aim to quantify, measure, explain cause-effect relationships, generalise, or replicate results. Instead, it sought to interpret the social world from the perspective of the individuals studied, providing thick descriptions of social contexts to comprehend the subjectivities and behaviours within which members of a social group operate (Bryman, 2012). Adopting an ethnographic approach, we used observation and in-depth interviews to facilitate understanding of the specific sporting culture in question (Smith & Caddick, 2012).

As largely passive participants (Spradley, 1980), the researchers were present in various scenes of Charrería and escaramuzas (e.g. training, exhibitions and competitions) but did not actively participate. The lead researcher has been deeply immersed in equestrian practices in Mexico for the past three years, observing the various social dynamics of different equestrian sports and cultures (e.g. Charrería, horseracing, jumping, cabalgatas (group horseback rides)). Over a period of eighteen months (May 2022 - October 2023), eight different sites were visited, sometimes by all team members and other times only by the lead researcher, within the State of Mexico, to observe both the public performance of Charrería and its behind-the-scenes culture, taking photographs, videos and systematic notes, and recurrently chatting with charros and escaramuzas. For the purpose of this paper, we primarily utilised twelve sets of observational records collected from repeated visits to the eight different sites. The first author's Mexican nationality and personal relationship with equestrian practices in the country were important to his acceptance within and understanding of this sporting culture.

Complementary to the number of sites and observations conducted, an independent stage of in-depth interviews was carried out. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with active adult participants of Charrería (10 charros and four escaramuzas) in central Mexico (within the State of Mexico, Mexico City and Hidalgo State) in 2022. The criterion for determining the number of participants was convenience; that is to say, those participants who were simply available for the study due to accessibility (Bryman, 2012), this ended in an unbalanced number of participants with regard to gender. Convenience was supported by snowball sampling, with a focus on including a range in terms of their gender, age, occupation, educational level, suerte executed and time in the sport. Due to participants' time and location constraints, nine interviews were conducted by phone, and the remaining five were conducted in person. Interview participants provided informed consent for participation before the start of the interview.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish and audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The research instrument comprised four sections: sociodemographic profile (i.e., gender, age, occupation and educational level); experience and meaning of Charrería (topics included, for example, memorable experiences, personal significance of the sport and Charrería and Mexican culture); gender in charrería (topics included, for example, suertes and gender association and attitudes towards women's participation), and the participation of horses, as well as providing the opportunity to add any additional comments or experiences that participants considered relevant.

Data analysis was undertaken manually; interviews were transcribed and initially analysed in Spanish. Two members of the research team have fluent proficiency in both Spanish and English languages. This allowed for an initial analysis of the data in its original language; the excerpts used in this paper were translated, ensuring as accurate an interpretation as possible into English. The preliminary analysis was then discussed with the third team member, who complemented the analysis based on her own field observations. Leveraging his native status within Mexican culture and deep involvement in the country's equestrian cultures, the lead researcher aimed to preserve the original cultural value of the observations and interviews to the best extent possible.

The data were analysed thematically by the team members, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interviews were read carefully alongside the observation notes. Initial coding focused on identifying the most relevant and significant ideas; this included cases, arguments and illustrations associated with gender in general, and masculinities and femininities in particular. Further coding involved assigning descriptive labels to identify related content across interviews; examples of these include interactions, challenge of traditional gender roles and interspecies relations. Subsequently, the coded information was organised into broader themes drawn from both the literature and the data itself. An iterative collective process of moving between theory (of hegemonic masculinities and femininities, as outlined above) and the data was followed (Tracy, 2013).

## **Findings**

### ***Context***

As a sport, Charrería involves training, the care, preparation and transportation of horses and cattle, and competitive events, all of which provide opportunity for reinforcing and, less frequently, reconfiguring gender relations. The findings of this study mainly focus on competitions, due to their status as intensely public, interactional and symbolic events. This allowed us to perceive sports not merely as a spectacle but as a cultural phenomenon

that shapes ideologies by possessing and publicly promoting social values (García Valtierra, 2020). It is through the public execution of suertes, the interactions between charros and escaramuzas, and the symbolic value that the spectators give to the manifestations of the sport, that Charrería becomes a legitimising agent of the current gender order that upholds unequal relations between men and women, masculinities and femininities, and within masculinities and femininities (Messerschmidt, 2018).

Institutions play an important role in sustaining hegemony. The Mexican Charrería Federation (FMCh) establishes that men must compete with other men in suertes, and that escaramuzas must be composed exclusively of women; therefore, although both men and women participate in Charrería, they do so separately and differently. Sex segregation is a widespread characteristic of many sports and helps sustain gender inequality by highlighting differences between males and females, differences which are hierarchically valued to favour males and devalue the sporting and social significance of some females (Monterrubio & Dashper, 2023). Additionally, the leadership of the FMCh is highly masculinised; according to the FMCh official website, the 2020-2024 Charrería National Board of Directors, who lead and guide the development of the sport, is made up of 26 men and only two women (the FMCh 'queen' and the national escaramuza coordinator). Thus, the gender inequality in the administration of the sport structurally perpetuates and legitimises unequal power relations, not only through competition but also through the organisation and institutionalisation of the sport. This provides evidence to the work of Salazar C. and Manzo Lozano (2020) that supports the idea that institutions play a crucial role in the promotion and consolidation of women's presence in the Mexican sports arena.

The power of institutions is strengthened not only by the sporting but also the cultural, tourist and economic importance of Charrería. The national championships are organised and promoted by institutions with political power in sports and tourism; these include the FMCh, the host State Government and the Tourism Secretariat, as well as the National Sports Commission. For example, the 78th edition of the National Charro Championship, held in October 2022 in the state of Zacatecas, broke records for attendance and the number of participating teams and had a significant impact on the tourism industry (Zacatecas, 2022). At least over the past three years, there has been a consistent trend of men outnumbering women in competition. According to the official programmes of the National Charro Championship, in 2021, total participation was divided into 144 male teams and 112 female teams. In 2022, the participation numbers were 228 male teams and 164 female teams, and in 2023, the division was 228 male teams and 169 female teams (Federación Mexicana de Charrería, 2021; 2022a; 2023b). Although official male

competitions typically involve three teams while female competitions involve two, this difference serves to reinforce the association between Charrería and masculinity. Given the importance of the sport as a tourist attraction and income generator, as well as its national identity value and recognition as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, Charrería plays an important role in Mexican society and helps shape wider social gender relations.

Charrería is thus structured in such a way that supports the perpetuation of unequal gender relations, and this is reinforced when the practices of men and women in the sport are examined further. The following sections address the research questions set out above. We first consider some of the dimensions of Charrería that show the relationships between masculinities and femininities that sustain hegemony. We then present some examples that challenge traditional gender relations and roles in the Mexican national sport.

### ***Identifying hegemonic masculinities and femininities in Charrería***

Hegemonic masculinity is a historically, socially and culturally specific configuration of practice that legitimates unequal gender relations, both between men and women and within masculinities (and femininities) (Messerschmidt, 2018). In identifying the practices of masculinity that are hegemonic within this setting, we explored those which operate to uphold and legitimate unequal relations between and within men and women, often marginalising women (and animals (i.e. horses and bulls) see Monterrubio et al., 2023) and sustaining men – particularly charros – as the dominant force and most celebrated actors within Charrería. This status is maintained both symbolically and materially through policing men's behaviours and excluding women from positions of status (Messerschmidt, 2019). One way in which this is achieved is through the visual presentation of charros and escaramuzas, particularly through dress and bodily comportment.

In official competitions, charros and escaramuzas wear traditional costumes, as this is a requirement of the regulations. The hats, belts, spurs, saddles, horses, among others, in turn mark differences between charros. According to our observations, socialisation unfolds mostly between competitive and non-competitive males: the way they greet, talk, mount their horses and recognise good sporting performances reflect a sense of brotherhood (hence book titles like *En cada charro, un hermano* [In every charro, a brother] (Palomar, 2004)), manliness, hypermasculinity and gallantry, constitutive of hegemonic masculinities in Mexican society more broadly, and within the culture of

Charrería specifically (Palomar, 2004). These and other masculine behaviours mark differences between a charro (and among charros themselves) and other men. According to the sport's regulations, men should wear charro dress with gallantry, reinforcing the idea that the charro represents an idealised form of masculinity. In official competitions, while escaramuzas can wear different colours in vestido de Adelita (one of the three types of permitted costumes), men are not allowed to wear pink-like colours; article 75 of the General Official Regulations for Charro Competitions 2020-2024 (Reglamento Oficial General para Competencias de Charros 2020-2024) establish that, regarding charros' shirts, '[c]olours such as pink, violet, lilac, fuchsia, orange, mamey, melon, all of these shades with red stripes or red dots giving the hue of pink, fluorescent tones, metallic and/or pastel tones are prohibited.' (Federación Mexicana de Charrería, 2022b, p. 23). The same official prohibition applies to charro ties, belts, gloves, reins, and breast collars (pretales). This suggests the rejection of any associations with femininity and reinforces the symbolic dominance of the hegemonic masculinity of the charro.

Hegemonic (emphasised) femininity is the feminine configuration of practice that helps sustain the dominance of hegemonic masculinity, through positioning as complementary and opposite, but also unequal and was identified in this study through many of the practices of the escaramuzas (Schippers, 2007). This was observed in the clothing worn by escaramuzas, clothing that presents a picture of traditional femininity and largely obscures the skill and physical competence required of the female riders. The long, brightly coloured dresses, the makeup, the way of riding (side-saddle only), use of feminine colours, the stylisation of women's bodies, and the appointment of them as 'queens of Charrería' highlight the femininity of escaramuzas. This coincides with Ramirez's (2016) statement that escaramuzas 'must perform these dangerous, high-speed maneuvers while heavily dressed and still looking good and feminine in costumes that are hardly adapted for riding' (p. 155). This is acknowledged and embraced by participants, as one escaramuza (participant 13) explains,

Putting on a charro suit or a dress is a big deal for me... It's like putting on, I don't know, like a star that will light everything up. That is what makes me feel special when it's time to get dressed.

Thus, among charros and escaramuzas, the sense of pride for being a charro or escaramuza and wearing the traditional costume that represents 'Mexicanness' is evident. So too are the visible differences and complementarity between idealised masculine appearances and idealised feminine appearances (Schippers, 2007). In such ways, hegemonic masculinities and femininities are embodied by participants in Charrería,

visually and symbolically representing the hierarchical but complementary relationship between the macho, active and gallant hegemonic masculinity of the charro and the highly feminised, elegant and less active hegemonic femininity of the escaramuza.

The environment in which Charrería takes place also reinforces the ideals and structures of masculine domination and contributes to the exaltation of a specific form of masculinity as hegemonic in this context - i.e., that which is exalted over other masculinities and femininities and legitimates ongoing gender inequality (Messerschmidt, 2019). Music is usually a constant component of the Charrería environment; it is ranchera music, a type of male-centred music that highlights idealised qualities of Mexican men such as manliness, nationalism, self-sufficiency and pride (Ortega, 2012); iconic ranchero singers like Antonio Aguilar, José Alfredo Jiménez, Vicente Fernández, Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, to name a few, allude to these characteristics in many of their songs. Regional Mexican music contributes to the reinforcement of stereotypes and gender violence (Araiza, et al., 2017), and the expansion of macho messages in Mexican culture (Córdova, 2015). Observations confirmed that the use of sexist, homophobic and heteronormative language is also part of this masculine environment (Palomar, 2004), marginalising women and men who do not fit the macho ideals of the sport.

Interspecies dimensions are central to the performance of hegemonic masculinities in Charrería. Many of the suertes involve the charro showing physical dominance over another species (horse or cattle), often bringing the other animal down to the ground with a rope, or illustrating dominance through handling and remaining mounted on an unbroken and often bucking animal. In such ways, charros display their masculine strength, bravery, skill and expertise, over other species, in relation to other men (who would not be capable of or dare to attempt these skills) and over women (who are largely excluded from taking part in these activities). Fear or signs of physical pain or weakness are downplayed, as illustrated in this field note:

During the *paso de la muerte*, a young man hurtles around the outside of the ring bareback on a small grey mare, chased by two other mounted charros. The audience is totally silent. Everyone watches and waits as the charro attempts to leap from his horse onto a smaller bay mare who is galloping along the concrete perimeter. Missing his landing spot, he crashes to the ground and the crowd gasp in dismay as the horse catches him in the face with her hoof. Heedless, the two riderless horses continue galloping round the arena, while the two charros behind skid to a halt and other members of his team leap over the barriers and rush towards him. As they help him to his feet, it soon becomes clear that the charro is winded and bruised, but

otherwise uninjured. One of his companions wipes the blood from his face, while the others lean on the railings, waiting for proceedings to restart and joking amiably at his expense (observation records, 14th August 2022).

Charros thus perform hegemonic masculinity through their interactions with and attempted dominance over other species. Lassoing a horse or bull, and bringing them to the ground, symbolises strength, power and expertise and is highly rewarded by others in this context. Displaying the bravery, physical prowess and expertise to ride unbroken horses and bulls further demonstrates the charro's superiority and dominance over other men as well as other species. In the field note above, the charro's failed attempt at *paso de la muerte* brought some good-humoured mockery from his peers, illustrating how hegemonic masculinity acts to police the behaviours of men and reinforce hierarchies between those who successfully embody hegemonic masculinity in a given setting and those who do not quite make it. Our observations confirmed that when a charro did successfully complete this risky and difficult *suerte*, he was rewarded with enormous praise and elevated status amongst other men, confirming the hegemony of these masculine practices within this social world. The following field note illustrates the ways in which audience members are themselves recruited into perpetuating the gendered distinctions that underpin this and other *Charrería* events:

During a round of *manganas a caballo*, a sorrel mare is being chased by three charros on horseback. Wearing the traditional charro dress, a mounted man wields a lasso several times around his head and his horse as the mare gallops ever closer. This is his third try, and the audience are willing him on. At just the right moment, he launches it across the arena, deftly encircling the mare's front legs and bringing her to an abrupt halt. Cheering in delight, the crowd get to their feet, the men throwing their hats into the ring, while the women instead toss their boots (observation records, 1st April 2023) (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Hegemonic masculinities and hegemonic femininities are further reinforced through segregation, a common practice in sporting events to signify categorical differences between men and women, differences that are also usually predicated on the supposed sporting superiority of men (Monterrubio & Dashper, 2023). Men play active roles in *escaramuzas*, through handling horses and training women, but women cannot do so in *Charrería*, illustrative of a more passive and lower status accorded to women. Observations revealed that for *escaramuzas*, men are usually the ones who transport and



load and unload the horses from the trailer, thus demonstrating their ability to control and dominate the animals and keeping women away from this more physical, potentially dangerous, aspect of interspecies interactions. The horses ridden by escaramuzas are initially trained and, when necessary, 'corrected' by men. Charros are trained solely by male trainers while escaramuzas can be trained by either female or male trainers. In the hypothetical scenario of being trained by a woman, a 23-year-old charro who has competed since childhood (participant 4) doubts a woman's ability and sets higher demands for her by stating, 'I wouldn't have a problem being trained by a woman, but she would have to have a lot of experience to teach me'. Furthermore, as one escaramuza (participant 2) who has competed at various levels pointed out, it is usually male-trained escaramuzas who compete at national levels. Success, particularly at higher levels of competition, is thus related to men and masculinity, even when it is women who are performing.

Although women are allowed to participate in Charrería in some contexts, it is a space where femininity is emphasised, and female gender stereotypes reproduced. According to our participants, escaramuzas are highly skilled and athletically competent riders; however, they also see women as the beauty that decorates Charrería. Escaramuzas reproduce Mexican feminine traits, by riding sidesaddle, wearing makeup, and donning long colourful dresses that ensure their modesty by covering them from their necks to the tops of their boots (Sand, 1993) (see Figure 2). Escaramuza official regulations emphasise and rate the importance of clothing based on the conservation of Mexican customs and traditions. Beauty, femininity and grooming still prevail as idealised characteristics of Mexican women (Aguilar et al., 2013) and have permeated Charrería. A 40-year-old charro (participant 7), who started in the sport as a child and has participated in national competitions, views it this way,

women are an important piece in sports; they are the other side of the coin, the beauty of the ladies is reflected in the art of sport.

Furthermore, escaramuzas' and women's femininity – based on idealised beauty and delicacy – is often emphasised through the narrations, sayings and 'poems' that the competition male announcer communicates to the audience. In an escaramuza competition, the announcer recited:

A gentleman asked me, "What is an escaramuza?" and I replied with a smile: "She is, for me, a beautiful muse, she is the woman on horseback, a reason for inspiration to compose a verse, resembling a song... she is feminine presence showcasing her

beauty and horse power. (observation records, 23rd April, 2023).

Thus, as Sand (1993) observes, women's role in Charrería tends to be secondary, as it is aesthetic rather than competitive. Thus, the femininity embodied by escaramuzas operates to reinforce the symbolic dominance of the hegemonic masculinity of the charro and contributes to ongoing gender inequality in this context. Escaramuzas are skilled sportswomen, but they are positioned as the complementary opposite of the gallant, powerful and esteemed charros. In such ways, in the context of Charrería escaramuzas embody hegemonic femininity, which helps sustain unequal gender relations.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Charrería thus provides a context in which unequal gender relations are reconfirmed and re-established – through the organisation of the sport, the positions acceptable for men and women to occupy, the clothing and physical embodiment of men and women, and the exaltation of hegemonic masculinities as configured through dominance over women, other men and other species. It seemingly confirms as natural the relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, as one of complementary opposites that are hierarchically positioned, with the charro being the leader and the escaramuza the visually appealing support. It thus helps legitimise unequal gender relations both within and beyond the sport, due to the cultural status and prominence of Charrería as the national sport of Mexico. However, hegemony is not the same as total dominance, and in the next section we consider ways in which hegemonic masculinities and femininities are challenged within the sport of Charrería.

### ***Identifying non-hegemonic gender performances in Charrería***

Hegemony requires constant renewal and consent must be continually renegotiated, meaning that there is always the potential for change and modification through social action (Messerschmidt, 2019). Non-hegemonic gender performances are those which do not perpetuate unequal gender relations and rather contribute to legitimising more egalitarian relations between men and women, masculinities and femininities (Messerschmidt, 2018). Women are part of the national sport of Charrería, albeit in the segregated and less socially valued practice of escaramuza. However, this still represents a challenge to masculine dominance of this sporting space, as both men and women in this study recognised that women also possess sporting capability, courage, risk taking, horse control, and the desire to compete against men. An escaramuza (participant 2) who has travelled to different parts of the country to compete commented,

before, women used to only accompany the charro, but now it has been proved that women can ride and control a horse and that men and women can do the same.

Some even commented that, unlike charros, women require greater physical condition in the sport due to the duration of their executions, galloping for long periods, and necessity to ride side-saddle. In such ways, the active presence of women as escaramuzas challenges normative ideas that women are weak, or escaramuzas are less capable than charros; a 40-year-old charro (participant 1) commented, 'women have the ability to compete against men in any sport.' This has begun to redefine the relationship between the masculinity of charros and the femininity of escaramuzas as closer to one of 'difference with relational equality' (Messerschmidt, 2018: 158), rather than as a relationship of hierarchy and dominance.

Our interviews and observations of training revealed that some women have begun to engage informally in the execution of some male suertes. A 65-year-old charro, who has participated in national and state competitions and has been awarded a gold recognition for 50 years of experience by the FMCh (participant 5), stated, 'I have two granddaughters who practise cala, colas, and manganas [different suertes] and handle the lasso... I had the pleasure of taking one of them to compete against other women, and she achieved third place in colas'. A charro who practises the sport due to family tradition (participant 10) added, 'there are girls who are braver than some men and who do colas better than I do'. Similarly, a charro who won a children's championship at the age of nine (participant 9) stated, 'I have seen cases of women who demonstrate they can do it (suertes). I know of three women who ride bulls; they can be just as good or even better than us men'.

Although very few in number, some women's teams compete in unofficial spaces, demonstrating their physical prowess and equestrian sports capability. Although limited in quantity, unofficially mixed teams have been created recently, made up of men and women; in this type of team, the women are usually relatives or partners of charros and are trained by brothers, boyfriends, fathers, grandfathers or uncles, this is not surprising, given that the development of Mexican women largely entails being subordinate to the presence of men in the household (Salazar C. & Mando Lozano, 2020). A 24-year-old charro (participant 11), who has competed at the state level and is against the exclusion of women in the sport, said,

the suertes are not exclusive to men, we are trying to include women through female or mixed coleaderos [...] they practise all the suertes and do not do it badly, they are capable, they have no limits; with practice, work and dedication, they can achieve it

[...] I am preparing my girlfriend so that she can do Charrería with me.

Although the male charro remains the expert here, this is repositioned as a relationship of training and development rather than hierarchical superiority. He is training his girlfriend to enable her to practise Charrería with him rather than maintaining the role of skilled and powerful charro as an all-male domain.

Recognising women's sports capability, participants believed that some adjustments within the sport can help the integration of women in Charrería suertes. In the case of coleaderos, for example, it was suggested that modifying the size and weight of the bulls and horses ridden based on the physical capacity of the women would help with the inclusion of women. A 29-year-old charro (participant 8) who has competed at the national and state level, commented,

women can compete with men in all suertes if cattle are taken into account; it would not be fair for a woman to ride the same big and heavy bull that a man rides, for a woman it can be more complicated.

A 64-year-old charro (participant 12), who competed at the national and state level added:

there should be competitions [in suertes] among women; in official competitions, the bulls and mares are very heavy and very strong, they should participate with cattle that are more comfortable for them.

An escaramuza?

Participants also suggested that changes in Charrería competition regulations can favour the leading participation of women in mixed competitions. An escaramuza (participant 3), who has been involved in the sport for 11 years and has participated at the national, regional and state level, commented,

Charrería is a very traditional sport [...] the women who are dabbling in the sport are admirable [...] there are many suertes that require strength, such as jineteo de toro, jineteo de yegua, manganas, colas, but there are others that do not require as much strength to handle the animals, such as cala, terna, and even paso de la muerte. Naturally, a man is usually stronger; women could compete, but adjustments would have to be made to the regulations to make mixed competitions possible.

Indeed, making some moderations to sporting structures, regulations and practices, such as those suggested here, might increase sex integration in sport, which is one route

towards challenging the hierarchical and oppositional relationship between masculinities and femininities, and working towards more egalitarian relationships and greater gender equality (Kerr & Obel, 2018; Monterrubio & Dashper, 2023). Through recognising the skill and capability of female riders, and the possibility of adapting some aspects of competition to suit female bodies as well as male bodies, hegemony is challenged. This challenge may not be radical, or even widely noticeable, as the dominance of hegemonic masculinities remains widely accepted in Charrería, as demonstrated in the previous section. However, these challenges do indicate that hegemony is never complete, it is always open to change and modification that may, over time, lead to more egalitarian gender relations within the sport. We discuss the implications of these findings for understanding and reworking gender relations within and beyond Charrería in the conclusion.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper has explored Charrería as a sporting practice within which hegemonic masculinities and femininities are performed, reproduced and challenged. By highlighting the complex and relational character of these processes of ascendancy and resistance, our study also contributes to wider debates within research about gender, events, and equestrian sport. We will therefore return to the three research problems identified at the outset, before acknowledging the limitations of the present study and its implications for future research.

First, although Connell's (1987; 1995) theorisation of gender power relations has been widely adopted in the sociology of sport, this has been largely limited to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. In this paper, we reposition the relationship between masculinity and femininity as central to this theoretical lens, rather than hegemonic masculinity itself. Distinctions between men and women, masculinities and femininities, are central to the way Charrería is understood, regulated and practised. Male and female are positioned explicitly and unashamedly as complementary opposites by practitioners and audiences alike. However in highlighting the relational co-existence of hegemonic masculinities and femininities, the paper also points to their potential instability.

The second contribution of the paper, then, is to illuminate the possibilities for transformation that are inherent even within this highly gendered sporting context. The profoundly ritualised nature of Charrería - the emphasis on style and precision for male and female practitioners alike, and the way the sport is celebrated in songs, prayers and other aspects of material culture - have enabled it to endure across generations. However,

the gradual participation of women in suertes that have traditionally been established as masculine and the recent unofficial creation of mixed teams have begun to challenge the hierarchical gender relations in Mexican equestrian sport. Other challenges to hegemonic masculinities and femininities unfold more slowly and imperceptibly. Alternative masculinities - including those that support and fight for equality between male and female competitors - and non-hegemonic femininities that seek to demonstrate the equestrian sporting capacity of women and destabilise the feminine aesthetic in the sport are other forces that symbolically and materially transform the social structures of power and gender inequality.

The possibilities of change in gender relations within Charrería could be influenced by the ongoing changes in the broader social and institutional environment of sports. For instance, the appointment of Ana Gabriela Guevara Espinoza, a female Mexican Olympic medallist in athletics, as the director of the National Commission of Physical Culture and Sport (Comisión Nacional de Cultura Física y Deporte [CONADE]), suggests that beyond Charrería, the increasing participation of women is driving significant transformations in the social, cultural, political, and institutional realms of sports in Mexico. Additionally, the growing popularity of gender-integrated sports such as horse racing (Monterrubio & Dashper, 2023), and initiatives promoting new collaborative sports activities aimed at inclusivity of persons with disabilities and gender equality, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (for example, Tiro en Braille) (Añorve Añorve, 2022), serve as potential catalysts for Charrería and other sports in Mexico that challenge gender segregation in the sports arena.

Finally, the paper adds to the literature on the cultural significance of equestrian sports events in the Global South. Charrería reproduces gender and other social relations through practice and performance, shaping and being shaped by social, cultural and political structures. These reproductive processes unfold both bottom-up via family/community and top-down through governmental support at national and global levels, as enshrined in its world heritage status. Charrería is a multisensory performance, spectacularly colourful, noisy and odiferous. Events themselves and preparations for them take place in full view of the public and, increasingly, online. Challenges to traditional gender power relations in charrería thus have potential to have wider implications in Mexican society.

This study has focused on gender relations in Charrería within the limited geographical area of central Mexico. Increasing rates of national and international mobility are likely to impact the way it is practised here and elsewhere. Future research could therefore

usefully focus on how and why the practices and rituals associated with Charrería vary across different places, and the implications this has for transforming gender relations on local, regional and global levels.

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