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"NEVER SEEN A BOY WHO CAN'T PLAY": GENDER, POWER, AND SOCIABILITY IN CHECKERS GAMES

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"Ladies First?": An Ethnography Of Checkers Games At School

In the game of checkers (*jogo de damas*), the light-colored pieces move first. Each player begins with twelve pieces arranged on the dark squares of the board, and each piece may advance only one square at a time, always diagonally and forward. Checkers is a game of constraint: pieces cannot move backward, and captures are mandatory. When multiple capture options are available, players must choose the move that removes the greatest number of opponent pieces. When a piece reaches the final row on the opposing side, it is crowned *dama* by stacking another piece on top of it. From that moment, the rules shift: the *dama* gains freedom of movement, able to travel diagonally in any direction.

Among the many activities observed during fieldwork, the game of checkers stood out for its frequency, performative intensity, and symbolic richness. This article focuses on a single emblematic episode—a match involving two girls and one boy—selected for the clarity with which gendered positions emerged and were negotiated through language, gaze, and movement. While the English term checkers neutralizes the game's gendered connotation, the Portuguese feminine noun *damas* [ladies] provides a serendipitous entry point into broader reflections on how gender operates as a structuring axis of children's sociability. Within this frame, the game board becomes more than a surface for play: it is a stage where gestures, glances, and utterances materialize social positions, mobilize *damas*, and enact both contestation and alliance. The rules of the game are not merely followed—they are interpreted, subverted, and redefined, revealing the political and creative dimensions of children's interactions.

The episode took place during a school break—an everyday interval often overlooked in the anthropology of children and childhood, though it has recently begun to receive increased scholarly attention (see also Marques and Müller 2019; Müller, Marques and Nascimento 2024). In Drawing on Goffman's (1963) concept of a "social situation"—originally not applied to childhood—we describe a setting in which children interact with relative autonomy from adult supervision. Far from being a marginal or chaotic interlude in the school day, the school break emerges as a structured time-space that children collectively shape and regulate. It operates as a microsociety (Delalande 2001), governed not only by institutional norms but also by peer negotiations, informal rule-making, and shifting alliances. Within this dynamic setting, spatial constraints, resource scarcity, and peer

hierarchies intersect, offering a privileged site for examining how children appropriate, reinterpret, and at times subvert dominant norms.

Tracing these moments required close attention not only to verbal exchanges, but also to the children's glances, gestures, and bodily orientations. Attending to these expressive modalities was key to understanding how children assert preferences, align with peers, and navigate exclusion. This attention to the full range of communicative practices represents one of the key contributions of this study.

This article draws on an ethnographic study conducted over one academic year in a government-run primary school located in Vila do Boa, a neighborhood within the administrative region of São Sebastião, on the outskirts of Brasília, the federal capital of Brazil. Officially established in 1993, São Sebastião has a population of approximately one hundred thousand residents, many of whom work in informal or precarious sectors and commute daily to the central districts of the capital. Vila do Boa is a subdivision of a large rural property that developed into a densely populated area marked by irregular land tenure, inadequate infrastructure, and pronounced social vulnerability. Most homes lack access to basic sanitation, piped water, and stable electricity.

The school—*Escola Classe Vila do Boa*—is the only school in the neighborhood offering early years education (grades 1–5). Its immediate surroundings include housing, a small market, a disused brick kiln, a precarious playground, and a community-run art project for children. The schoolyard thus became a key ethnographic site, offering insights into how children, through play, navigate symbolic orders and negotiate social positions in a context of structural inequality.

Approximately 130 children enrolled in the morning shift participated in the broader research project. Fieldwork was conducted in two stages. In the second semester of 2017, daily participant observation focused on understanding the spatial organization and social routines that shaped children's school break practices. In the first semester of 2018, audiovisual data were produced with selected peer groups using handheld video cameras and lavalier microphones discreetly worn by the children. The analysis focused on interactional episodes, transcribed using Jeffersonian (2004) conventions and examined through the lens of Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis. The integration of audiovisual data allowed for a microanalytic understanding of how children negotiated positions, alliances, and exclusions through multimodal resources.

All research procedures followed ethical protocols, including a collective explanation of the study, written informed consent obtained from parents or legal guardians, and verbal and written assent from the children, which included permission for the academic use of photographs. All proper names mentioned in the manuscript have been changed to pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. The project was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring compliance with established ethical standards for studies involving minors. The researchers were already familiar with the dynamics of the school environment and known by many children before the audiovisual phase of the study began. Their role in the field was reflexively constructed over time,

navigating ethical tensions around proximity and presence while striving to build relationships based on trust and respect for the children.

The article unfolds in three interconnected sections. The next section introduces the ethnographic context and methodological approach, including audiovisual data collection and the use of Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis. The central analytical section explores how gender is relationally and performatively constituted through children's embodied practices and interactional alignments during school break. In the final section, the analysis is situated within the broader political and legal context of Brazilian public education, highlighting how micro-level interaction enables children to engage with, contest, and reconfigure dominant gender norms.

The Board And The Stage: *Damas* And Gendered Play

A group of approximately eight children, mostly ten-year-old girls, gathered around the only complete checkers board available during school break. The scarcity of materials turned the board into a highly valued object and a focal point of interaction—not only for those playing, but also for those observing. In this context, the board mediated a range of social dynamics, becoming a stage for both cooperation and conflict.

Across the span of a single 28-minute-and-46-second school break on 07 December 2017, six matches were played by a rotating group of fourth-grade students, with Amanda consistently occupying one of the seats at the board. What began as a casual game among three girls—Amanda, Ana Beatriz, and Mônica—gradually evolved into a layered scene of social negotiation and exclusion. Felipe was the only boy to actively participate in the matches. Captured in full on video, the episode offers a situated and continuous record of interactional sequences that form the empirical core of the analysis developed in this article.

In the first match, Amanda faced Ana Beatriz in a highly competitive and silent game, marked by intense concentration and few verbal exchanges. Amanda emerged victorious. In the second match, she faced Mônica, now with Ana Beatriz and Felipe offering suggestions from the sidelines. Again, Amanda won. A third match saw Amanda and Ana Beatriz once more in close competition, ending in a draw and resolved by a game of chance—*par ou ímpar*, a Brazilian version of odd-or-even—that allowed Amanda to continue playing.

The fourth match, selected for close analysis, marks a significant turning point. Documented in a five-minute-and-twenty-six-second recording, this episode introduces Felipe, a previously marginal participant, whose presence escalates the interaction into a new frame marked by irony, realignment, and gendered positioning. Unlike the previous games, which were characterized by parity and silence, this episode unfolds as a moment of performative tension and shifting alliances.

At first glance, the match appears to follow the conventional two-player format, with Amanda (blue t-shirt) and Felipe (blue t-shirt) seated at the board. However, Ana Beatriz (yellow t-shirt)—positioned beside Felipe and ostensibly a spectator—quickly emerges as a central figure in the unfolding interaction. Through increasingly frequent verbal and gestural interventions, she transforms

the match into a triadic and asymmetrical encounter. Quantitative data reinforces her predominance: out of sixty-four turn-taking sequences identified in the episode, Ana Beatriz holds the floor thirty-five times, Amanda twenty, and Felipe only nine—clearly positioning Ana Beatriz not as an observer, but as a participant.

The shift in dynamics is also visually and interactionally observable in the excerpt presented below, which captures the moment when the tone of the match transforms entirely. The still image (Figure 1) shows the seating arrangement and spatial positioning of the players, while the transcription that follows highlights how embodied reactions, tone of voice, and laughter contribute to a shared ironic stance between Amanda and Ana Beatriz.

Figure 1. Amanda, Felipe, and Ana Beatriz around the checkers board. Video still by Rafaela N. Marques

Ana Beatriz:	hhh Felipe(h)? <como assim Felipe(h). hhhh>
Ana Beatriz:	**hhh Felipe(h)? <how come Felipe(h). hhhh>**
	>?=eu vou ter um ataque de ri(h)so hhhh
	>?=I'm gonna die lau(h)ghing hhhh
Amanda:	<ele vai mexer a minha pedra> hhhh
Amanda:	**<he's gonna move my piece> hhhh**
	((*risos de ambas*))
	((*both laugh*))

This excerpt reveals a marked shift in Amanda's footing, a concept defined by Goffman (1964) as the speaker's alignment with the interaction, the co-participants, and their own projected self. Having previously maintained a serious and concentrated stance in earlier matches, Amanda now adopts a playful, ironic, and performative position—signaled by her change in tone, rhythm, and the embodied gesture of leaning back while laughing.

Such transformations are made intelligible through what Gumperz (1982) calls "contextualization cues"—verbal and non-verbal signs, including prosodic elements (tone, rhythm, emphasis), gestures,

gaze, and posture, that guide how participants interpret the situation. In this episode, Amanda's expressive laughter, vocal inflection, and bodily movement signal a redefinition of the interactional frame. These shifts are not spontaneous: they occur in response to Ana Beatriz, who initiates the ironic stance and reinforces Amanda's amusement, creating a moment of interactional alignment and complicity between the girls.

This alliance marks a turning point in their interaction. While previous matches between Amanda and Ana Beatriz were characterized by mutual respect and restrained competitiveness, the dynamic here is entirely different. No longer opponents, they now coordinate speech, laughter, and gesture in a synchronized performance—an alignment that excludes Felipe and amplifies his symbolic marginalization.

The episode exemplifies the fluid boundaries between competition and cooperation among girls. Drawing on Goodwin's (1990, 2006) work, we observe that girls' peer interactions often shift between assertiveness and solidarity, shaped by situational configurations and interactional opportunities. Here, the presence of a less competent male opponent becomes the trigger for a performative alliance, through which the girls reassert control over the game—not only as players, but as co-narrators of the event's meaning.

These dynamics marked by ironic alignment between the girls become especially salient in the interaction captured in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Felipe gestures in response to a perceived lack of options. Video still by Rafaela N. Marques

Felipe:	[qualquer] peça que eu mexer aqui.
Felipe:	**[whatever] piece I move here**
Amanda:	tá morto?
Amanda:	**so you're dead, huh?**

As the match progresses, Felipe, increasingly aware of his limited position in the game, voices his resignation: "whatever piece I move here." His gesture—both hands lifted in a display of doubt or rhetorical surrender—visually reinforces his verbal expression of defeat. Amanda immediately

responds with a sharp, ironic question: “so you’re dead, huh?” Her tone and timing signal not concern, but amusement, affirming her superiority within the interactional frame. In this moment, Amanda is no longer merely playing; she is performing commentary and judgment, consolidating her alignment with Ana Beatriz. The checkers board thus operates not only as a field of strategic play but as a symbolic stage, where gendered relations are reorganized through mockery, exclusion, and laughter. Rather than a neutral game, this episode reveals a configuration in which the girls assert control over both the rules of engagement and the meanings produced in the scene. What unfolds is not merely a game, but a socially meaningful episode in which interactional cues, gendered hierarchies, and symbolic control are co-constructed in real time.

Figure 3 captures the final excerpt of this episode, showing the three children still gathered around the board at a moment just before a sequence of utterances that would mark the conclusion of the interaction.

Figure 3. Final moments of the fourth match. Video still by Rafaela N. Marques

Ana Beatriz:	infelizmente você perdeu dá licença >dá licença
Ana Beatriz:	**unfortunately you lost, excuse me >excuse me**
	dá zzzz< num sabe jogar, Fi'LIpe, eu hei::n::
	excu::zzzz< you can’t play, Fi'LIpe, I we::ll::
Amanda:	EU FALEI!
Amanda:	**I TOLD YOU!**
	(10.0)
Amanda:	hhh nunca vi um menino que num sabe jo(h)gar
Amanda:	**hhh never seen a boy who can’t pla(h)y**

The sequence that unfolds in Figure 3 begins with Ana Beatriz’s rapid, assertive dismissal—“unfortunately you lost, excuse me >excuse me excu::zzzz<”—a move that not only denies Felipe’s legitimacy as a player, but also positions her as an authoritative voice within the interaction. The

repetition and acceleration of “excuse me” function as both a command and a gesture of symbolic expulsion, reinforcing her control over the space of the board.

Immediately afterward, Amanda delivers a loud, emphatic “I TOLD YOU!”, which echoes her earlier warnings and performs a stance of superiority and vindication. The ten-second silence that follows this outburst operates as an interactional punctuation—a pause heavy with dramatic effect. It is in this silence that power is allowed to settle: Felipe remains silent, while Amanda prepares her final blow. Her laughter-inflected comment—“Never seen a boy who can’t play”—delivers both a gendered critique and a public ridicule. The laughter embedded in her voice transforms the comment into a performative act, co-produced for Ana Beatriz, and indirectly, for any surrounding audience.

What we see here is not simply teasing, but a coordinated effort to establish a gendered boundary: the girls are not just mocking Felipe, they are redefining who belongs in the game, and under what conditions. Control over the game’s symbolic meaning, therefore, is not granted by formal rules but enacted through affect, timing, and ironic speech. By the end of the episode, the checkers board is no longer a shared space—it becomes a stage from which Felipe is excluded.

Serious Games And Symbolic Struggles

Gender, in this framework, is understood both as a relational marker of difference and as a normative and symbolic structure, continuously produced and contested through institutional, discursive, and embodied practices.. In Brazilian government-run schools, this marker intersects with class, race, and territorial inequalities, shaping children’s experiences and expectations from an early age. We also approach gender as a relational and performative construct—one that is not only reproduced but also contested in everyday interactions. Schools become privileged contexts where such contestation unfolds: not only through institutional structures such as curricula and discipline, but also in the social worlds that children themselves create through play and peer relations.

From this perspective, gender is not merely enacted but constituted through situated social practices. As Ortner (1996) argues, gender should be understood both as a positional structure—that is, a historically sedimented arrangement of symbolic and material asymmetries—and as a serious game, wherein actors, including those in subordinate positions, engage in strategic and relational actions within asymmetrical fields of power. In this view, children’s play is neither trivial nor derivative. It constitutes a social context in its own right, where children not only absorb dominant norms but also reinterpret, negotiate, and at times subvert them.

The checkers game analyzed here becomes a fertile moment in which two girls challenge normative assumptions by asserting control over the board, teasing a boy for his perceived incompetence, and collaboratively performing a stance of dominance. Their actions destabilize conventional gender hierarchies and expose the fragility of normative masculinity. Utterances such as “Never seen a boy who can’t play” are not merely teasing comments; they are performative acts that contest dominant gender scripts, producing new configurations of power and visibility among peers.

Ana Beatriz frequently interrupted Felipe with commands such as "Go!", positioning herself as an authoritative voice in the game. Amanda, in turn, aligned herself with Ana Beatriz through laughter, irony, and synchronized gestures. This dynamic illustrates what Goffman (1964) described as changes in footing and what Gumperz (1982) termed contextualization cues—elements that shape how interactions are interpreted in real time. In this context, the girls' alliance transforms the board into a symbolic stage where power is performed, contested, and redistributed. Their coordinated interaction contrasts sharply with Piaget's (1994) earlier interpretations of girls' games as passive or less rule-bound and instead aligns with Goodwin's (1990, 2006) work, which highlights the complex negotiation of stance, status, and exclusion among girls in peer settings.

Segato (1997) deepens this understanding by framing gender as a symbolic order that organizes the intelligibility of the world through asymmetrical relations. For Segato, such asymmetries originate in a "foundational scene" and are reproduced through seemingly mundane practices. The school break, in this view, becomes a privileged symbolic terrain where deep structures of gender are not only enacted but also momentarily displaced. The girls' ironic alignment and symbolic expulsion of Felipe expose the permeability of these structures, revealing their reliance on continuous reiteration and performative reinforcement.

This episode also reflects how material culture mediates and amplifies these dynamics. As Miller (2001) argues, the value of studying material culture lies not in reducing objects to fixed symbols of social categories, but in attending to the specificity of material domains and the culturally situated ways in which particular things come to matter. The checkers board—scarce, highly desired, and spatially central during school breaks—is not merely a backdrop to social interaction, but an active medium through which children negotiate relationships, assert dominance, and perform gendered identities. Rather than treating the board as simply part of the category of games or recreation, the ethnographic approach adopted here focuses on what the board is doing within this context: how it becomes a contested object, invested with meaning through children's actions, gestures, and speech.

In line with Miller's emphasis on mattering, the analysis foregrounds not only what children say about the game, but also how they embody attachments to it—claiming space, issuing commands, and establishing hierarchies through it. The material specificity of the board and its pieces—their weight, tactility, and visibility—are not incidental but central to the way power is enacted and felt. Appadurai's (1986) concept of the social life of things complements this view, suggesting that the board's meaning emerges not from its form alone, but from its circulation, use, and transformation within the lived world of the playground.

That the game is called *damas* in Portuguese—ladies—adds an ironic layer of meaning: while conventionally dismissed as a simple or even "feminine" game, the scene analyzed here inverts these assumptions. The girls do not merely play the game, they rule over it. Their performative control re-signifies the space of the board, subverting expectations of male strategic superiority and inscribing their own authority into the material and symbolic texture of the interaction.

Moreover, Felipe's reactions illustrate how subordinate positions are not passively accepted. His gestures of surrender and ironic verbal resistance ("That makes no sense") reflect attempts to reassert agency, even as he is narratively and interactionally marginalized. Yet, the alliance between Amanda and Ana Beatriz reinforces temporary hierarchies that delegitimize his participation. Gender here is not a stable identity but an emergent configuration negotiated moment to moment, shaped by the flow of interaction, the control of material resources, and the performance of irony and ridicule.

If, as Segato argues, gender is naturalized through repetition, then its disruption—especially by children in playful contexts—sheds light on its fragility and the possibility of transformation. The performative exchanges documented in this episode exemplify how gendered norms are not only reproduced but reworked through peer interaction. They also reflect how children actively engage with and contest the broader cultural logics that frame their social worlds.

These dynamics resonate with broader institutional contexts. Recent legal and policy developments in Brazil—such as the Supreme Court ruling in ADI 5.668 and Law 14.986/2024—explicitly recognize the role of schools in preventing gender-based discrimination and promoting inclusive pedagogies. Within this evolving legal framework, episodes like the one analyzed here gain further significance: they not only reflect the reproduction of social norms but also the micropolitical ways in which children, through play, resist, adapt, and reshape them.

Reconfiguring the Board

The game of checkers, while governed by formal rules, proved to be far more than a structured pastime. In the hands of children, it became a dynamic context for negotiating social positions, enacting authority, and subverting normative expectations. The ethnographic approach adopted in this study made it possible to capture how power, irony, and exclusion unfold in the microgestures, turns of phrase, and shared laughter of a playground interactional episode.

Rather than illustrating fixed roles or developmental stages, the episode analyzed here revealed how gender is relationally and situationally constructed. The ironic alignment between Amanda and Ana Beatriz not only redefined the interactional frame but also reconfigured symbolic hierarchies, destabilizing normative masculinity and claiming authority over the board—both as object and stage. Their actions echoed what Ortner (1996) called serious games: relational and strategic enactments within asymmetrical fields of power. They also activated what Segato (1997) describes as a symbolic order—one that can be inhabited, reproduced, but also momentarily dislocated.

This relational and strategic alignment resonates with Mendoza-Denton's (1996) analysis of *cholas* in Californian schools, who similarly subvert dominant gender and racial norms through stylized performances of stance, voice, and aesthetic markers. Like the *cholas*, Amanda and Ana Beatriz deploy everyday resources—tone, timing, laughter, and ironic commentary—not to reject the symbolic order, but to reconfigure it from within. In both cases, the micropolitics of resistance emerge

not as grand gestures of refusal, but as embodied and relational practices woven into the texture of ordinary interaction.

The checkers board was central to this process. As Miller (2001) and Appadurai (1986) remind us, objects are never neutral: they acquire meaning through use, trajectory, and investment. Here, the board emerged as a scarce and symbolically charged artifact, mediating forms of access, recognition, and exclusion.

By tracing the layered interactional choreography of a checkers match, this study shows how children do not passively absorb gendered expectations; rather, they reinterpret and contest them through relational creativity and embodied stance-taking. School breaks—often dismissed as informal or marginal—emerge here as a privileged context where the everyday politics of gender and recognition are played out with precision, irony, and force. In this sense, *damas* becomes more than a game: it is a generative site for understanding how children inhabit and remake the social world.

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