EMERALD STUDIES IN SPORT AND GENDER

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN A GLOBAL, PROFESSIONAL ERA

ALEX CULVIN AND ALI BOWES

Women's Football in a Global, Professional Era

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Women's Football in a Global, Professional Era

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We would like to acknowledge and thank each and every women's footballer, coach, volunteer and fan who has played a part in the history and development of the game, without whom none of this would be possible.

On a personal level, for Ali and I, this book has strengthened our working relationship but most of all our friendship. We have guided and pulled each other through, and dug deep when it mattered. Thank you, Ali.

Finally, from Ali to Noa, her beautiful, brave girl.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Women's Football in a Global, Professional Era

Alex Culvin and Ali Bowes

Abstract

This chapter introduces women's football in a global, professional era. Key in this is an acknowledgement of the male-dominated roots of the sport in many contexts, which has historically served to restrict women's participation. However, we identify the significant growth of women's involvement in football, which has resulted in professional opportunities for women playing and working in the sport. Football organisations are increasingly taking the development of the women's game more seriously and football can be considered a legitimate career opportunity for women. The chapter then identifies the scope of the book, which includes contributions on the lived experience of professionalisation, the processes of professionalisation and the role of commercialisation and media.

Keywords: Football; women's football; professionalisation; global; football as work; women's sport

Football is the most popular sport in the world (Roderick, 2006). Although historically dominated by men, over the last decade significant changes have impacted the political, social, and economic field(s) of women's football (Culvin, 2019). These changes have meant a surge in interest across the globe in the development of the sport. It would be remiss to neglect how football developed as a codified sport by men and for men at the start of the nineteenth century (Pfister, 2015). As such, historically, in 2018 the global phenomenon of football has been a profoundly male domain across many contexts, from coaching and playing, to journalism and fandom (Pope, 2011). Alongside this, and despite increasing involvement by women in all forms of the game, narrow assumptions exist of the nature of women's interest and participation in football as obscure and minimal (Pope, 2014). These aforementioned conditions mean that women's football has

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been largely marginalised in academic research and popular media. Yet these narrow assumptions hold less weight with each year that passes and interest in the women's game steadily grows, as this collection demonstrates.

In 2019 the FIFA Women's World Cup in France attracted over one billion worldwide viewers and the professionalisation or semi-professionalisation of the women's game is gaining global momentum. However, in spite of record-breaking viewership and increasing professionalisation, myths about the sport persist: women's football will never be as popular as the men's version and women's physical limitations make the game less of a competitive spectacle. In this way, the much mediated and laboured point of 'now is the time for women's football' is both aged and contradictory. Thus, the rationale of this book is to critique those age-old sporting 'truths' whilst documenting and articulating the development of women's football globally. As such, this collection brings together academic research on elite women's football in multiple settings, focusing on processes and lived experiences of professionalisation, media coverage and commercialisation. Within this, a critical position is adopted, to illuminate the unseen or invisible, to open up discussions to promote potential progress. This is not to say women's football has not progressed globally – it is evident there has been a shift in the football landscape towards a version of women's football that is more engaged in the public consciousness. Yet, this development is not and cannot be considered as an end in itself, merely the beginning.

The increased popularity of women's football was underlined at the 2019 World Cup, which documented record-breaking viewing and attendance figures (FIFA, 2019), and sparked an influx of impending sponsorships. The FIFA Women's World Cup 2023 sees the tournament expanding from 24 to 36 teams. In 2020, women in football globally challenged persistent political, religious and social norms: India's first professional footballer, Bala Devi, signed a contract with Rangers FC in Scotland and La Liga players went on strike to force a guaranteed minimum salary. In 2021 progress continued, as Saudi Arabia launched its first women's league to increase participation, and Japan launched the Women's Empowerment league (WE league), its first fully professional league. The United States Women's National Team secured a landmark equal pay agreement with their federation after years of legal battles.

Women's football has professionalised or semi-professionalised in many countries across the world. In 2017, International Federation of Professional Footballers (FIFPro), the global players union, commissioned quantitative research to investigate the conditions and experiences of elite women footballers across the globe. A total of 3,295 elite women footballers were surveyed from across the world on their employment conditions. Data highlighted concerns of players, including childcare, economic remuneration, contract length and post-career playing options. In fact, only 53% of players had a written contract with their club, and only 9% have a written contract at national level. This is despite women footballers relying on their national team as a source of income, with 49.5% of female players not remunerated by their clubs (FIFPro, 2017). Of the players who were remunerated by their clubs, 60% received between $1 and $600 per month, and 37% were paid late.

Ambiguity exists between the growing professionalisation of women's football and the precarious work conditions in which players operate (Culvin, 2021). The unpredictability associated with a career in football is increased based on gender, as women's football is often considered unimportant for clubs and organisations (Culvin, 2019). Indeed, whilst considering player experiences solely based on gender is problematic, as it largely ignores racial and class processes that are essential aspects of the ongoing reproduction of inequalities (Acker, 2010). However, in football, whatever indices are considered – employment numbers, pay, contractual status – women are often faring worse than men (Conor, Gill, & Taylor, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility and precarity of women's football. COVID-19 highlighted the lack of financial security and precarious working conditions within women's football, as leagues were brought to a halt globally and the Women's European Championships in England delayed for one year to 2022 (Clarkson, Culvin, Pope, & Parry, 2022). Like workers everywhere, the pandemic meant players' experienced violations in their workplace: income loss, late pay, no pay and job loss. However, unlike the general population, the careers of professional footballers are short and contingent on popularity, commercial income and interest. Therefore, while accepting similarities of precarity for women associated with a career in football, a more nuanced, intersectional understanding women as professional and semi-professional footballers becomes pertinent.

The global underrepresentation of women's football has led to the development of this intersectional, critical collection of chapters. Football is considered to be a predominantly masculine pursuit; structurally, culturally and socially, yet chapters in this collection highlight an increase in women's involvement, particularly at the top level of the sport. The global spread of football continues, and women are a steadily increasing demographic. As such, the complex and changing nature of women's football is detailed within this collection. Thus, this book begins an important and noteworthy examination of the shift in women's football towards a global, professional era.

The Development of Women's Football

To understand the contemporary context of emergent semi-professionalisation and professionalisation of women's football, it is necessary to analyse its historical substance. Similar to the histories of most sports, traditionally, football offered men the opportunity to gain and demonstrate hegemonic forms of masculinity. Previous research, particularly in Western nations, indicates that football was a game played by men and invented by men, meaning football developed as a sport considered inappropriate for women (Pfister, 2015). Thus, scholarship over the last two decades has detailed women's football history as discordant (see Bell, 2012; Dunn & Welford, 2015; Williams, 2006), and there is much debate about when women started playing the game. There has been references to a female form of the game being played in a British colony in Hong Kong in 1840 (Williams, 2006); however, Macbeth's (2007) research on Scottish women's football reports the first matches were held in Scotland. The global reach of the game even in its early form is clearly evident and early forms of the women's game were well supported in Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Skogvang, 2019).

Globally, the meanings and practices of women's football essentially altered in the twentieth century. Cox and Pringle (2012) establish that two-thirds of ruling national football associations both in Europe and across the world banned women from playing football. For example, in adopting the prevalent medical myth of female frailty of the late nineteenth century that dominated Western assumptions of women's capabilities (Hargreaves, 1994), the German Football Association (DfB) rejected women's football participation for ethical and physiological reasons, arguing that football would impede a woman's ability to bear children (Pfister, Fasting, Scraton, & Vázquez, 1999). It was a similar case in England, where an initial ruling by the Football Association in 1902 prevented male teams from playing against women's teams, and then in 1921, with around 150 women's teams in operation, the FA imposed a pitch ban on women's teams, preventing them from playing on the grounds of their affiliated male clubs. The FA stated, 'the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and should not be encouraged' (Harris, 2001). It is thought the support for and the high standard of the women's game was seen by the FA as a threat to the men's game (Guilianotti, 1999). Further afield from Western Europe, in Brazil a similar ban on women's involvement in the sport came much later in the 1940s, and was not lifted until 1979 (Sequerra, 2014). Research has revealed that women experienced universal marginalisation and exclusion across the world in an attempt to safeguard men's football (Cox & Pringle, 2012; Sequerra, 2014; Williams, 2013). Williams (2006), crystalises this, concluding that the ban on women's football participation had consequences that not only limited women's opportunity to participate in football, but effectively marginalised the sport socially, culturally and economically.

The global ban on women playing football was not the result of a single category of social relations, or a particular social threat, such as gender, but is intertwined with sexuality, social class and the idea of 'proper' feminine conduct (Williams, 2006). To contextualise, socially scripted gender roles which underline the political and social categories of men and women were significant in the reluctant development and acceptance of women's football. Many of the current challenges faced by women's football originate from nineteenth-century understandings of codified physical activities that are culturally produced and shaped by those who practice them. Therefore, football culture and taste (Bourdieu, 1984) have been historically shaped to (re)produce binary gender differences and understandings. This has resulted in a culture which, even when able to participate formally, continues to position women as outsiders (Black & Fielding-Lloyd, 2017). As such, football as an institution continues to be closely associated with men and masculinity, despite increased participation of girls and women (Allison, 2018).

It is well established that the popularity, status, and support of women's football in the nineteenth century, before the various bans imposed on their involvement, never returned (Bell, 2012; Williams, 2006). Consequently, in the nineteenth century football participation manifested globally as a pastime predominately of men. However, it was impossible to ban women playing unofficially, and those women who continued to play were perceived as behaving in a manner inappropriate for women (Griggs & Biscomb, 2010). It is likely the persistence of women to continue their involvement in the game was influenced by the women's liberation movement in the early twentieth century and, later, the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s (Pope, 2011). These movements influenced the lives of women in the spheres of education, work, and healthcare, with obvious repercussions into women's involvement in sport. It is thought to be one of the ironies of second-wave feminism that while sports never ranked on the top of anyone's agenda, one of the movement's greatest achievements came in this realm (Fearnley, 2012).

Women's relative inferiority in football cultures means that for women to enter the male dominated world of football, they must challenge dominant gender ideologies, contradicting conceptions of femininity and female appropriate involvement in sport. For example, Scraton's et al. (1999) research revealed consistent themes across a sample of elite European women footballers. Players identified their femininity and sexuality being brought into question, creating a situation that reinforced power relationships in their football career. Indeed, women who attempt to enter the masculine space of football are considered deviant (Caudwell, 2011; Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999). Given the close association of sexuality and gender, unsurprisingly when women challenge sociocultural gender norms in the way women footballers do, research has reported their sexuality is invariably questioned (Caudwell, 2011). Indeed, homophobia is consistently deployed as a way to keep women athletes in check (Allison, 2018). Consequently, the relationship between women, sport, and sexuality can be considered a decisive factor in preventing the spread of women's sport.

What is clear is the historically subordinate position of women appears particularly pertinent today, especially in an era of increasing professionalization of the women's game. This is evidenced through consideration of the contemporary social, cultural, and economic concerns of professional women footballers globally (FIFPro, 2017). The historical and social marginalisation of women in football is inextricably tied to emergent, concurrent complications for women footballers (Williams, 2006). Despite increases in global participation in football, it is still not a taken-for-granted activity for women. The gendered meanings attached to sport influence whether and how people play them (Allison, 2018). Gendered meanings do not stand alone, they intersect with race, class, ableism, sexuality and so on. Thus, increased participation can often mask issues which continue to constrain women and girls in football. Across sport more broadly, this has involved ongoing scrutinisation and regulation of women's bodies – particularly by leading bodies such as the International Olympic Committee – via a narrow biological definition of female athletes, one that excludes transgender women and women with high testosterone.

The (Semi-)professionalisation of Women's Football

Despite the historical difficulties of women's football, more recently the sport has experienced global, exponential growth. In spite of this growth, the wider impact of this expansion on sport and society in a more general sense remains lacking in research. Participation rates are frequently cited in both academia and the media as indicators of development, global spread, performance level and the extent of women's role in football more generally (Woodward, 2017). In 2006, a FIFA survey estimated that 26 million women and girls played football both as causal and registered players across the globe (FIFA, 2006). A further surge in participation was registered in 2014 as the FIFA's Women's Football Survey demonstrated women and girls' participation had increased to over 30 million (Pfister & Pope, 2018). Importantly for this book, statistics highlighted 4.8 million participants were registered as players. While these figures are of interest and should be considered positive, caution should be exercised when considering their compilation (Williams, 2013). When considering the growth of women's football, it is of critical importance to note *growth* is largely dominated by western football organisations.

It is not only participation rates that are considered as indicators of progress for women's football. The World Cup is unparalleled in its global reach and is considered the ultimate prize in football. In 2018, the FIFA council increased the Women's World Cup 2019 prize money to $30 million, and proposed a total contribution of $50 million (Reuters, 2018). The increase in prize money was over triple the $15 million awarded in 2015. This increase included the introduction of preparation money for each member association that supports qualified teams in their preparation, a total of $11.52 million. Furthermore, FIFA provided $8.48 million for the club benefit programme to reward clubs releasing players for international competition. FIFA's increased investment is significant for the women's game, although the increase can be considered negligible. While this introduction does not set out to compare men's and women's football, it provides us with a useful starting point when considering the global standing of women's football. In 2018 FIFA increased the prize money for the Men's Russia World Cup 2018 by $42 million to $400 million, eight times the amount of the women's tournament. The $50 million prize fund at the 2019 Women's World Cup was reached in 1990 in the men's version. In addition, the preparation money received by women equates to 32% paid to the men's teams for Russia preparation. Seemingly, preparation for a World Cup competition is similar, regardless of gender; however, the disparity in payment would suggest otherwise.

Women's football is clearly rapidly developing, not only in terms of governing body investment and participation rates, but at the elite level of the game. Before documenting the shift towards professionalisation across women's football cultures, it is important to outline what we mean by the process of professionalisation. Bowes and Culvin (2021) frame the professionalisation of women's sport as a process distinct from the professionalisation of men's sport. Whilst men's professional sport developed during a period of codification and later commoditisation of team sports, the women's version of professionalisation in sport is notably different, restricted by dominant gender norms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, the professionalisation of women's sport is understood as a modern process of increasing formalisation embedded in the shifting, western gender ideologies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, resulting in the formal contracting of women as athletes for financial renumeration (Bowes & Culvin, 2021).

The global deinstitutionalisation of amateur values in women's football has equalled a change in structure and culture of the game (Culvin, 2021; Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, & Sequerra, 2018); meaning professionalisation processes specific to women's football, as the most popular sport for women globally, include accelerated commercialisation, increased expectations on clubs for sponsorship and marketing, intense resource demand, and extreme competitive pressures. Despite the turbulent processes and uncertainty and conflict detailed by scholars, an oversight exists in how professionalisation processes impacted individuals. Typically, most women athletes have not been paid to take part in sport, but there is an increasing shift towards women's sports organisations, particularly in economically developed countries, in defying this trend. Subsequently then, in considering the process of the professionalisation of women's sport, there is a need to consider the role of the professional woman footballer, and the opportunity to perform football as a job, without the requirement or need of a second occupation (Bowes & Culvin, 2021).

The professionalisation of women's sport involves the employment of women as (semi-)professional athletes. It is then important to frame what is meant by a professional athlete in women's sport. FIFA (2014) defines a professional footballer as 'a player who has a written contract with a club and is paid more for his (sic) footballing activity than the expenses he (sic) effectively incurs. All other players are considered to be amateurs'. As such, any woman footballer who has a written contract and covers at least her expenses in playing the game is considered professional. However, in many places, women footballers are treated as amateurs despite making professional commitments, meaning they are not afforded the appropriate benefits and protections (FIFPro, 2017). In this book, a professional woman footballer is considered *a woman whose financial income from her involvement in football enables her to commit full time, without the need to pursue a second occupation*. Any professional woman footballer who earns enough from the sport to cover at least expenses, but not enough to warrant a full-time commitment, will be considered semi-professional.

Women's Professional Football Across the Globe

There has been a proliferation of professional leagues established across the globe (albeit predominantly in Western nations) since the turn of the century, although the path to professionalisation has not been linear. The majority of elite leagues contain minimal professional teams and largely comprise of semi-professional teams competing in the top tier (Kjær & Agergaard, 2013). Therefore, it may be assumed the leagues which exist in Europe and worldwide vary considerably to their degree of differentiation (Klein, 2018). According to FIFPro's (2017) report, the most developed leagues are Germany's Frauen Bundesliga, France's Division 1 Féminine, England's Women's Super League (WSL), Sweden's Damallsvenkan and US National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). Despite these five leagues being more developed than most, professional women's football globally operates within ambiguous circumstances and large disparities exist, from league to league, team to team and player to player.

At the elite level of women's football, the US is the most successful team in history. Women's football in the US reached its peak in 1999 with a World Cup final that had over 90,000 spectators (Kristiansen, Broch, & Pedersen, 2014). The on-field success, commercialism, fandom and popularity of soccer in the US cumulated in the establishment of a professional league in 2003, the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA). However, despite its popularity, women's soccer exists in the contradictory sociocultural space between increases in participation at a grassroots level, and a persistent glass ceiling on women's achievements at the elite level (Allison, 2016). Following the implementation, and subsequent demise of both the Women's United Soccer Association (2001–2003) and Women's Professional Soccer (2007–2012), the current National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) has been in operation since 2013. Thus, Allison (2016, p. 257) describes the development of professional women's soccer in the US as 'far more roller coaster than linear'. She indicates that the increase of women in organised sport in the US post-Title IX challenges the long-standing historical equation of athletic capability with maleness, and is cited as both cause and effect of the evolving gender order in US sport. She notes that, 'similar to men's sports, women's sports are influenced by the increasingly commercialized, corporatized landscape of US professional sport' (Allison, 2016, p. 241).

Another instance where the process of professionalisation has been actualised is England. In 2011, the Football Association (FA) the national governing body of football in England, launched the first semi-professional league for women and thrust European women's football into a professional era. The inception of the FA WSL created the opportunity for football as work for its elite women footballers, in an occupational field tied historically to a highly masculinist and thus, gender exclusive culture (Culvin, 2021). In 2018, the FA WSL adopted full-time professional status. As Fielding-Lloyd et al. (2018) report, the focus on financial criteria in the FA's introduction of FAWSL mirrored the commercial narratives relating to consumption, profit and financial viability. Moreover, for women's football to secure its position and future, it appeared necessary to align with the commercialised, commodified men's game. In this way, although the field of women's football has its own internal structure, it is not wholly independent from other fields' influence. The recent unitary professionalisation and restructure of women's football in 2018 has shifted the values and structure of the football field. Increased emphasis on both commercialisation and marketisation of the FA, clubs and players is symptomatic of the neoliberal sports system in operation in England, although there is some ambiguity in this approach for the FA WSL. Prevailing discourses of the FA WSL have depicted the game as culturally distinct from men's football, a fairer form of football (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2018). In this