Women's Football in a Global, Professional Era

Introduction

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 19th century (Pfister, 2015). As such, historically, 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 means that women's football has 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 old-aged 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 et al. 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 et al., 2020). 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 under representation 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 Williams, 2006; Bell, 2012; Dunn & Welford, 2015), 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 20th 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 bare children (Pfister et al., 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; Williams, 2013; Sequerra, 2014). 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 marginalized 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 19th 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 and 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 19th century, before the various bans imposed on their involvement, never returned (Williams, 2006; Bell, 2012). Consequently, in the 19th 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 20th 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 (Scraton et al. 1999; Caudwell, 2011). 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 26million 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 and 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 total prize money to $50 million. The increase in prize money was over triple the $15 million awarded in 2015. Additionally, FIFA introduced inaugural 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 $50million 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 professionalization. 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 19th and 20th 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 et al., 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) define 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 are 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 not been linear. The majority of elite leagues contain minimal professional teams and largely comprise of semi-professional teams competing in the top tier (Kjaer and 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 USA are the most successful team in history. Women's football in the USA reached its peak in 1999 with a World Cup final that had over 90,000 spectators (Kristiansen et al. 2014). The on-field success, commercialism, fandom and popularity of soccer in the USA 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: 257) describes the development of professional women's soccer in the USA as 'far more roller coaster than linear'. She indicates that the increase of women in organised sport in the USA 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 U.S. sport. She notes that, 'similar to men's sports, women's sports are influenced by the increasingly commercialized, corporatized landscape of U.S. professional sport' (Allison, 2016: 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 way, the FA has created a vagueness for the women's game more generally, and its players place within the sports market.

More recently, there has been positive shifts towards equal pay and improved working conditions for professional footballers in the women's game. FIFPro (2020) draw attention to equal pay deals emerging for national teams in Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Finland, alongside the development of professional leagues in Argentina, Columbia, Italy, Spain and beyond. Moreover, the Danish women's national team, who in the summer of 2017 went on strike and cancelled a World Cup qualifier to improve their employment policies in their contract. The Danish players requested to be official employees of the Football Association and to be remunerated adequately. Similar action was taken by Sweden women's national team (Culvin, 2019) who in 2021 secured equal pay with the men's team. The face of women's football in changing in a new professional era, symbolised by increasing participation levels and increasing support from the world's media. The 2019 Women's World Cup was the most watched, and thus most profitable, version of the tournament ever (FIFA, 2019). Perhaps most notably the USA, World Cup winners 2019, who sued their federation, US Soccer for equal pay with their male counterparts. The USA women's national team, whose improved collective bargaining agreement rested on the women's team being much more successful both economically, and in competition than their male equivalents (Culvin et al. 2021). What stands out is the professionalisation and semi-professionalisation of women's football is not a straightforward process, there are huge variations on professional processes and professional status, country to country, league to league, player to player.

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

It might be fair to say that we are at a tipping point for women's football. The game has developed rapidly in the last 20 years. Thus, the sport is currently experiencing increased participation rates, attendance rates and media attention. The degree of professionalisation in women's football has increased too. In this book, professional processes are understood as the beginning of football as work for women and the development of a new occupational field. Football is recognised as the most popular sport in the world for women and girls. Moreover, 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 (Culvin, 2019). To understand the process of professionalisation micro-structurally then, consideration is given to the introduction of football as work, combined with an increased commercial emphasis on women's football and an erosion of amateur values for players.

This collection aims to address a number of questions: What does professionalisation and semi-professionalisation of women's football look like and how is it framed by organisations? Women's football has arguably professionalised most successfully in England and the USA, but what

is the development momentum in other countries? What are women's experiences of football when intersected by race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, social class and so on? What influence do social and digital media have on the development of women's football and its players, especially in an emerging professional era? What are some of the problems of professionalisation? Does discrimination still exist globally for women and what are the ramifications of such discrimination? These and other questions have motivated us to develop a critical examination of the global professionalisation and semi-professionalisation of women's football.

This edited collection of chapters on the professionalisation of women's football has considerable importance as the women's game continues to grow. In Section A, issues surrounding the emergent professionalisation of women's football are introduced. Here, Beth Fielding-Lloyd and Woodhouse's contribution outlines the role of the Football Association in the professionalisation of women's football in England in Chapter 2. Mark Biram utilises extensive ethnographic research data to introduce the growth of women's football in Brazil, problematising sport policy that treats women's football as an add-on in Chapter 3. This is followed by Bente Skogvang's contribution for Chapter 4, which draws upon extensive historical data to present an overview on the development of professional women's football in Norway. In Chapter 5, Elise Edwards describes the growth of women's football in Japan, culminating in the launch of a professional league in 2021. The section is concluded by Hussa Al-Khalifa in Chapter 6, who presents a critical discussion of emergence of football for women in the Gulf region, problematising the very notion of professionalization by documenting both practical and cultural barriers to the development of women's football in the Arab region.

Section B draws together chapters that focus on the lived experiences of professional women's football. Chapter 7 is Jorge Knijnik's overview of the experiences of women's football in Brazil, which highlights both the sports sexist history, and recent developments. Luke Jones and colleagues present a Foucauldian discussion of women's experiences of playing in England's FA WSL at both its inception and a decade later during the present day in Chapter 8, which is followed by Ally Forbes, Kath Leflay and Jean Williams' contribution for Chapter 9, which considers the implications of (semi-)professionalisation for women playing in the second tier of the English league system. In Chapter 10, Gaby Garton discusses the Argentinian context via an auto-ethnographical approach, and the section concludes with Chapter 11, where Jean Williams discusses issues of race in the England Women's Football Team.

Section C focusing on commercialisation and media coverage of women's football, including considering the role of the media in positioning women as agents of social change. To start this section, Katie Liston ties together some of the broader socio-cultural and economic arguments, highlighting how commercialisation operates in women's football in Chapter 12. This is followed by Ali Bowes, Alex

Culvin and Sarah Carrick presenting a discussion of global debates regarding equal pay in the international women's game, highlighting some of the social and legal discussions and specifically focusing on the USWNT in Chapter 13. in Chapter 14, Kate Petty and Stacey Pope consider the positive shift in media reports of women's football in their significant research on media coverage of the England Women's National Team at the 2015 Women's World Cup. In Chapter 15, Rachel Bullingham and Rory Magrath then examine the media coverage of Megan Rapinoe, the openly gay 2019 world player of the year who has used her platform to unapologetically tackle social and sporting inequalities. In Chapter 16, Kayla Cloud and Erica Tibbetts consider the role of US nationalism in the explaining the dominance of the US women's national soccer team on a global scale, and in providing an environment where women's sport has been commercially successful.

Some of the chapters in this book draw upon the experiences of women football players, but focus on new aspects of their emergent professionalisation, or semi-professionalisation, and perspectives of this topic. Aspects include the broader implications of professionalisation, challenging the notion professionalisation is purely beneficial for women's football. Further, some chapters focus on increased media exposure and subsequent visibility of women. Often, women's football is last on the list of an organisation's priorities (Culvin, 2021). In contrast to the large body of work on men's football, contemporary studies on women's football remain few and far between and there is much work to be done to address this imbalance for the world's most popular sport. It is hoped that this book addresses the dearth of literature on women's football globally and provides insight into how women's football as a professional entity exists, especially in the USA and England, as two of the most successful examples, but also further afield, specifically in Brazil, Norway, the Gulf, as well as on a broader global scale.

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