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A historical analysis

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A Reflection on Contemporary Myths of Women's Football: A Historical Analysis

Purpose: To provide a social accounting of early women's football as a form of consciousness raising, and to provide a platform to raise questions about the path of the future of the women's game.

Design/methodology/approach: Newspaper archival materials supplemented by books and journal articles

Findings: British woman's football was repressed for fifty years by the Football Association.

Originality: Use of feminist theories to consider the past and future of women's football.

On 31st July 2022, Wembley Stadium in London hosted the UEFA Women's Euro final between England and Germany. A record 87,192 people attended the game. This broke all previous records for any (men's or woman's) Euro final¹. In February 2022, the US women's national football team agreed a settlement reportedly worth £17.7million over equal pay, with a pledge that, in future, women and men football players would receive equal pay for international competitions². On 23rd April 2022, Barcelona Woman's football team broke their own world-record for attendance at a football match with 91,648 spectators, who came to watch their Woman's Champion's League semi-final against Wolfsburg³. Woman's football globally is attracting higher attendances as well as winning battles in terms of recognition of the skills of players.

What is less well known is that, a century ago, in 1920, the prior record for attendance at a women's football match was set when 53,000⁴ attended a Boxing Day match at Goodison Park⁵ in which Dick Kerr's Ladies beat St Helen's Ladies 4-0. This match was not a one off event, woman's football began to grow in popularity at the end of the nineteenth century; it further grew in popularity during the First World War (WWI), and after the war. Indeed, during the War and in the post war period, women played in front of huge crowds and made significant amounts of money for charity. Interest in women's games often exceeded that of the top men's teams (Wrack, 2022b). However, in December 1921, the Football Association (FA), while not actually banning women from playing football, smothered the women's game through curtailing its finances. The FA achieved this by banning women from playing matches on FA member club's grounds. If women could not play in enclosed stadiums, they would be unable to charge spectators to watch. The English FA Council lifted this ban in 1971⁶.

This discussion essay presents a brief social account of the early history of women's football from UK press reports from 1880 – 1930. In part, this is to act as a reminder of the history of the women's game – to dispel the myths that women playing football is somehow “new” - it was repressed for fifty years. It is hoped that this brief social account may also engender discussion about the future of the women's game. The paper begins by very briefly introducing some strands of feminist theory which are drawn upon later for analysis.

Feminist theory – a very brief introduction

From a theoretical perspective, feminist theory in the accounting literature has long recognised, different strands of feminist thought. Lehman (1992) carefully distinguishes between Individualist-liberal, radical and socialist feminism. Individualist-liberal feminist theory, asserts, “that inequalities are due to a breakdown in the democratic ideal” (Lehman, 1992, p263). Socialist feminists take a rather different view of society, viewing it as a “rapacious social order” in which capitalist institutions perpetuate inequalities. Within this order, women's exploitation differs from men's in at least three ways: women form a reserve army of productive labour, women perform unpaid work, and women are exploited through conspicuous consumption norms and as sexual commodities

¹ <https://justwomenssports.com/england-germany-final-break-euros-attendance-record/#:~:text=A%20record%20crowd%20showed%20up,for%20the%20Sunday%20night%20affair.>

² <https://talksport.com/football/1048720/us-womens-national-team-equal-pay-settlement-us-soccer-megan-rapinoe/>

³ <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/12596379/barcelona-break-their-own-attendance-record-in-womens-champions-league-win-against-wolfsburg#:~:text=Barcelona%20broke%20their%20own%20world,Women's%20Champions%20League%20semi%20final.>

⁴ Thousands of fans were unable to fit in. <https://www.thefa.com/womens-girls-football/history>

⁵ Goodison Park is the Everton FC stadium

⁶ The 1975 Sex Discrimination Act exempted professional football.

(Lehman, 1992, p263). Radical feminism argues that since the oppression of women has occurred in different socio-economic systems, capitalism is not the sole cause of gender inequality. The benefits enjoyed by male elites, regardless of the economic system, are powerful motivators for perpetuating women's subordination. We have a patriarchal system once these gender "benefits" become "institutionalised". Here we may take institutionalization to mean the establishment of a convention, idea or norm in an organization or in a culture.

Lehman (1992, p 264) argues that,

"the subjective and ideological milieu of a social order must be changed as well as transformation of the economic system. To these ends, radical feminists recommend abandoning patriarchal thinking, insuring self-determination and autonomy for women in all spheres of life, and critically reappraising values and beliefs".

Other early work on feminism and accounting (Cooper, 1992; Shearer and Arrington, 1993), which could also be placed in the "radical" tradition, argued that equality does not mean that women should aspire to be the "same as men". The paper will return to this question, after the social account set out next.

The social account of women's football in the UK from 1880 – 1930

The brief social account presented here mainly draws from digitalised newspapers stored in the British Library. Four search terms were used in various combinations, - "women" "ladies" "football" and "soccer". This produced articles – which were read carefully to get an overall picture of how the sport was reported. These reports cannot be seen as "reflecting the truth". Different journalists had different perspectives on woman's football. Moreover, different newspapers represent differing political views. In addition, newspapers serve to help *create* society while also providing an imperfect reflection. Nonetheless, they provide a glimpse into society. The newspaper reports were triangulated with journal articles and books on the subject. These provided extra background and context and served to reinforce the story, which emerged from the press reports. The social account turns first to football's early origins, the purpose of this section is to set the context, and to dispel any myths that women playing football is something "new".

Early origins

Akin to the men's game, it is difficult to establish the precise origins of women's football (Cooper and Joyce, 2013); nonetheless, it seems that women have played variants of football for many years. Devereux Taylor (2019) reports on a 1628 kirk record from Carstairs Minister John Lindsay on the "insolent behaviour of men and women in footballing" calling on its ban. Later, in the 1790s in Inveresk, another Minister noted that the fishwives of Fishherrow played golf and football on Shrove Tuesday, connecting their sporting preferences to their masculine jobs. Williams (2003) too describes an 18th century Shrove Tuesday football match in Atherstone, which pitted single against married women. These football matches would not have been played according to a formal set of rules.

During the 19th century, football became popular in boys' private schools in England. Each school having its own particular rules (Gibbons, 2001). Football was codified in 1863 with the establishment of the Football Association (FA). The FA membership came from the upper echelons of British society: "Men of prejudice, seeing themselves as patricians, heirs to the doctrine of

leadership and so law-givers by at least semi-divine right" (Young, 1969). While football rules were created by men, women began to play according to FA rules, as is discussed next.

Football before WWI

The literature gives slightly different dates for the "first" matches to be played according to the new formal (FA) rules. According to Williams (2003), the first recorded women's football match took place in Inverness in 1888. Devereux Taylor (2019) states that the first international women's match played according to FA rules took place in Edinburgh in 1881 against England. While Williams (2003) states that, the first match within Scottish Football Association (SFA) guidelines was held in Glasgow in 1892. According to the FA's site⁷, the first woman's football match took place in 1895. This match was arranged by the British Ladies Football Club (BLFC). The BLFC was founded in 1894 by Nettie Honeyball, and the daughter of the Marquis of Queensbury, Lady Florence Dixie⁸. It attempted to link football with "ladylike behaviour" (Williams, 2003). The first match of the BLFC was played in London (Crouch End) in March 1895. The BLFC players split into two sides - North and South. This was to be the first of a series of matches played by the BLFC across the UK. Dixie, said that she sponsored the tour in hopes, "that the British Ladies' Football Club will be able to furnish teams to travel about the country, and endeavour to popularize the sport by playing some matches in different localities" Williams (2003, p 26). Lee (2012) argues that Dixie also intended to make money from a women's football league. The gate receipts of the BLFC could be used to pay BLFC members and players. Up until 1885, the FA had banned professionals from the game (Lloyd and Holt, 2005), so, the BLFC were able to take advantage of newly "professionalised" football.

The attitudes to women playing football were, in the main, negative. To some, a woman playing football in the street was "almost criminal". In 1898, the Evening Telegraph reported that a young woman from Woolwich, London, Mrs May, was fined 2s6d (12.5p) for playing football in the street. A policeman stated that May was playing a game with a number of others, and was taking a very active part; she had kicked the ball several times. Mrs May said that her little boy had taken the football out, and she had tried to take it away from the other lads. The newspaper reported that, after the fine, "the lady left the court laughing".

From the many press reports, it is clear that in the late 19th century, alongside other socio-political changes, women's football began to grow and women were certainly playing the newly codified sport, according to the same rules as men. They also demonstrate the overt sexism of the time. Press reports frequently mentioned the players' attire and treated the women players as objects of ridicule. For example, a press report (Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser, 30/3/1895) of the 1895 Crouch End game (mentioned above), while recording a crowd of 11,000 spectators, reported that, "... though the ladies were terribly in earnest. Their costumes were modest and becoming, but that is the only praise we can afford them". After describing the outfits of the two teams, it stated that a "tremendous roar of mingled shouts and laughter went up as the two teams came out together". Lee (2012, p 89), summarises the many press reports of the match as follows

Their observations illustrated with pinpoint accuracy the fissures, pressures, and angst of a society that feared 'masculine' women and 'effeminate' men, and highlighted the double

⁷ <https://www.thefa.com/womens-girls-football/history>

⁸ Dixie (25/5/1855–7/11/1905) became BLFC president (Williams, 2003)

standard that women playing sports with skill and energy were freaks, while those playing poorly proved the popular belief that women were physically incapable of playing football

Yet, not all press reports were negative. The Evening telegraph (9/5/1901) reported on a woman officiating at a match in Glamorganshire, as a “touch line judge”. The report complemented the woman on her knowledge of the game, and stated, “Her knowledge of Association rules would make any player blush ... it is quite possible that lady referees will be the order of the day by next season”.

A continuing issue throughout the whole period of the press reports was that women footballers had to face opposition to their playing on skill and health grounds. A piece in the Evening Telegraph (10/12/1894) stated that, “Woman seem now to have a task before her in which we fear greatly she will fail. ... the problem is how, on the one hand to make the performance graceful and, on the other, not to soil the game.” It then then goes on

... if girls chose to kick a ball about a field between their lessons, no one need object, but for young women to attempt to play as football is played is another matter. Many of the sudden jerks and twists involved in the game, as exactly such as are known to cause serious internal displacements, and it is impossible to think of what happens when the arms are thrown up to catch the ball, or when a kick is made with full force, and misses, without admitting the injury which may be thereby produced in the inner mechanisms of the female frame.

Williams (2003) argues that in spite of some important advocates of women’s football, the male football authorities (FA) were not supportive of women’s football and in 1902 issued a ruling that prevented men’s clubs from playing against “lady teams”. Slack (2022a) argues that the 1902 FA motion banned mixed-sex games and that there is “some evidence pointing to this ban having extended to women’s teams’ use of FA-affiliated grounds too.” Nonetheless, women continued to play. Akin to other fields, the First World War brought change (Loft 1998) to woman’s football. This is set out in the next section.

Football during WWI

Without doubt, WWI had a significant impact on women’s football. With countless young men conscripted into the armed forces, women took their place in factories, and other work places. Munitions-factories became the largest employer of women by 1918 (Wrack, 2022b). Women began to play football in their lunch breaks, especially in the munitions factories. Gradually, matches were organised between workplace teams and their gate receipts donated to various “war effort” charities. These matches became an important popular cultural pastime during WWI. In doing their “patriotic duty”, women could hardly be accused of moral decadence (Pfister et al, 2002), damaging their health (their work in munition’s factories was very dangerous), nor fined for kicking a ball in the street.

Just as one, in a myriad of examples, The Chelmsford Chronicle, (23rd November 1917) reported on a game between “Marconi’s ladies” and “Crittall’s ladies”. The report stated that there was a large attendance and the takings were donated to the St Dunstan’s Hostel for Blinded Soldiers. It further went on to describe the actual football played in the match, by reporting that the teams were evenly matched and the score was a three all draw. In the spirit of the times, these teams were lauded for their contribution to the war effort. Underhand comments about decorum, football outfits and women’s fragility disappeared. Women were building ships, tanks and bombs – and providing a

valued form of entertainment while raising money in support of injured service men. Nonetheless, it was perhaps unexpected that women's football would continue to thrive after the war – this is considered next.

Post War

1920 – 1921 might be described as the heyday of British women's football. Games attracted large crowds, and women played internationally. The most famous and successful factory team came from the Dick Kerr munitions factory in Preston – the “Dick Kerr ladies” (Newsham, 1997). In 1921 alone, Dick Kerr ladies played sixty-seven games. The FA website⁹ states that the first women's international game was played in 1920; Dick Kerr's Ladies beat a French XI 2-0. The attendance at this game was 25,000.

Although the charity aspect of women's football remained, it broadened, and arguably became more political. For example, in 1921, coal miners were locked out of the newly privatised coal industry mines for refusing to accept wage cuts¹⁰. Dick Kerr ladies and other teams shifted their fundraising games to these communities, playing in mining cities/towns such as Swansea, Cardiff and Kilmarnock (Wrack, 2022).

Press reports of women's football remained broadly positive. The Dundee Courier reported (2/3/1921) on a match involving a new Edinburgh team, against the established Dick Kerr Ladies. The money raised was to go to the Glasgow Fund for the relief of the unemployed -7,000 people attended and the play was “surprisingly good”. Some women players began to develop reputations - the Evening Telegraph (31/5/1921) reported on the Auchterderran team, and described Miss Watson as a “tricky player”.

On 6th September, 1921, the Evening Telegraph reported that a forthcoming match between the Dick Kerr team against Dundee would provide a “rare treat ... for followers of football, men and women alike...” The piece goes on to discuss the charity achievements of Dick Kerr, reported to “have raised £47,000 for those in need is no mean achievement...” then, it returns to discuss the sporting prowess of the team and some of the individual players. “Lily Parr, the sixteen year old outside left can boot a ball father than any in the country.... Miss Walker and Miss Woods have remarkable times for the hundred yards sprint.”

In the early 1920s, women's football was extremely popular, among men and women. Post war press reports moved from discussing the outfits of the women, the health issues and so on, to discussing football. Yet, the “propriety” of women's football remained an underlying issue. One piece discussed the attitudes of male attendee, the Hull Daily Mail (29th November 1921) reported that a fight broke out between two men over women's football. One of them said, “We were arguing the point over the ladies' football match. Jones said I only went to the match to see the ladies' figures. I thereupon knocked him down.”

Unfortunately, towards the end of 1921, some press reports began to reflect a developing undercurrent of hostility towards the women's game. Decorum and health began to raise their heads again, but perhaps more importantly, was the issue of the growing “semi-professionalization” of the very best women footballers. Concerns surrounding money was perhaps the biggest threat to

⁹ <https://www.thefa.com/womens-girls-football/history>

¹⁰ The new owners tried to starve the miners back to work

the women's game. The next section looks at the growing resentment against women's football and the FA ban.

The FA case against women's football¹¹

While women footballers were amateurs, some (for example Lily Parr, a nurse and legend of the Dick, Kerr team) were reported as receiving "broken time" payments – this is compensation for having to take time off from their paid jobs. Towards the end of 1921, the issue of payments to women for lost time and expenses began to receive sharp criticism.

In stark contrast to the press report on 6th September 1921, in the Evening Telegraph (see above), on 13th October 1921, The Dundee Courier reported some financial details of a charity match played by Dick Kerr against Dundee at Dens Park in support of the Lord Provost's Unemployment Fund. Specifically mentioning that the Dick Kerr team had incurred expenses for loss of working time (and travel) which were "somewhat heavy", it was further noted that out of revenues of £200, the Unemployment Fund would only benefit by £50. The idea that women were making money for themselves (if only for lost wages and travel) from football seemed to be particularly unpalatable, to this journalist. Furthermore, as noted earlier, women's football attracted significant sums of money, which, were out of control of the FA, some going to "anti-establishment" causes.

In addition, the women's game was becoming a threat to the men's game. Some of the large crowds who attended women's games might have attended men's matches¹². Wrack, (2022a) highlights the Boxing Day match played by Dick Kerr against St Helens in 1920 attended by 53,000 fans. Indeed Wrack (2022a, 2022b) makes a compelling case that the game had a seismic impact on the future of women's football.

On 5th December 1921, the Council of the Football Association (FA) passed a resolution that the game of football was quite unsuitable for women, and accordingly "requested" that Association clubs refuse the use of their grounds for women's matches¹³. The FA stated that -

"Complaints having been made as to football being played by women, the [FA] council feel impelled to express their strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged. Complaints have also been made as to the conditions under which some of these matches have been arranged and played, and the appropriation of receipts to other than charitable objects."

The Hull Daily Mail (6/12/1921) asserted that, "No one wishes to be a mere spoil-sport, but it is an excellent thing that the Football Association has considered the question of women playing football..." The financial aspect to this, according to the Hull Daily Mail piece were central to the FA decision. Having women play on FA grounds, "discourages its clubs offering or selling the use of their grounds." But, most importantly, "It deplores the fact that in some cases so large a share of the "gate" receipts have gone in "expenses". The piece argues that "We are not in the least enamoured of woman's football. There have been one or two exhibitions which have not lacked a passing

¹¹ See Jenkel (2021).

¹² It became a tradition in England that teams would play "back-to-back" matches against the same opponent on December 25/26. <https://the18.com/en/soccer-entertainment/history-boxing-day-soccer-how-dec-26-became-biggest-day-british-football> (accessed 20/11/22)

¹³ The Dick, Kerr Ladies had their own pitch <https://www.dickkerrladies.com/about-the-team>

interest as a novelty, but it is to be feared that some, at least among the crowd, went in order to see the women “make exhibitions of themselves.” The piece goes on to argue that, medical opinion is certainly against women’s participation in football. Hockey was suggested as the most vigorous game that women could tolerate. Perhaps, “for balance”, the piece then states, “The women’s teams certainly have raised large sums for charity, but that is an agreeable fact, and not an argument.”

The following day, the Hull Daily Mail (7/12/1921) reported that the ban received a good deal of support from “sportsmen and doctors alike” and that women’s football created “a bad effect on the public mind”. Citing the secretary of the FA, it explained that some women’s clubs were merely “circus affairs” and that the FA had ample evidence that certain teams *were being run in the financial interests of men who had taken them up*. This piece goes on to cite “the views of a lady doctor” and Mr Peter M’ William (Tottenham Hotspur manager) – “I have seen one or two women’s matches and these have left me convinced that the game can only have injurious results on the women”. However, the piece also notes that the “ex-servicemen of Leyland, and also of Preston, have sent a telegram of protest to the Football Association”; and cites an interview with a Miss T Berkine, a footballer of five years, stating that she “has never been ill since she commenced playing football, and always had a good appetite after a match”.

The Evening Telegraph (14/12/1921) declared that the FA decision was justified and the answer to the question “should girls play football” was that “they don’t”. This piece was scathing about the quality of the football played by two work teams (Strand Corner House and Messrs Lyons’). The piece finished by stating “But they were all very charming girls – in skirts. The game as played by these girls was not football, and if it had been football it would not have been feminine.”

After the ban

Women footballers did their best to attenuate the impact of the FA ban. They moved to cricket, rugby grounds, and so on. Accordingly, the FA began to put pressure on other sports not to host women’s games. Nonetheless, games went ahead, even if in fields. The Western Times (5/1/1922), reporting on a game between St Thomas and Exmouth, reported that the club-secretary of the ground (St Thomas’s) spoke to the ground’s landlord. The landlord agreed that he would loan the women a field. It sounded like a desperately uncomfortable game. “Two rough poles, and lengths of rope for crossbars, were placed at the end of the ground to mark the goals, and an Alphington sympathiser having no official connection with the FA refereed the match, which was played in heavy sleet showers.” The St Thomas’s team members expressed their intention to carry on playing.

It was still possible to play abroad. The Dick Kerr team toured the US in late 1922, playing men’s teams. The evening Telegraph (17/11/1922) reported that the team had spent two months in the US playing in total seven matches (3 wins, 3 losses and a draw). One of the players is reported as saying “as far as football is concerned the girls of England and the boys of America, honours are even”. The Dick, Kerr Ladies team was unique in that it, against overwhelming odds, continued to play football and raise money for charity until 1965.

But, most women footballers were finding it difficult to carry on. The Hull Daily Mail (19/5/1923), reported that the “Rutherglen Council, Lanarkshire, have by nine votes to seven refused to allow a ladies’ football match to take place in the public park in aid of the fund in the local Lest We Forget Association”. Furthermore, “One councillor said it was nothing short of disgraceful to have an exhibition of twenty-two women playing football, and another councillor agreed that it was wrong

to encourage girls to take up the game, wrong physically and morally, and wrong for the community to “look at it.” It was a disgraceful sight he added”. A councillor who supported the match going ahead is reported as saying that his colleagues were getting “ancient minded”.

While women footballers tried to battle on, the FA ban, really was a huge setback for the women’s game.

Summary and conclusion

The past

Press reports provide an interesting social account of the history of woman’s football. These reports reveal that football was a popular spectator sport for men and women alike during WWI and the early 1920s. Women became accomplished players and they were incredibly successful. The press reports further reveal that women’s football was not simply a “wartime oddity”. It thrived after the war.

The feminist theories set out early provide a lens through which to view this social account. Individualist-liberal feminist theory is concerned with “democratic ideals”. From the outset, the FA was not a democratically elected public body. It was unaccountable. As football has grown geographically and financially, it is still the case that a very small cabal of (mainly men) control the game, in spite of evidence of corruption¹⁴, not operating the game in the interests of the fans, nor being committed to diversity and inclusion¹⁵.

Radical feminism presents an understanding of patriarchy as the institutionalization of male elites. For patriarchy to “work” men and women have to be differentiated - women were designated as “graceful”, physically weaker than men and “incapable of playing football”.

Socialist Feminism believes that women’s oppression is perpetuated by making women into a reserve army of labour, providers of unpaid work (mostly for their families) and as commodities. Women acted as a “reserve army of labour” during WWI only to be forced out of their jobs after the war. Royle (2014) states,

“In reality the employment of women in men’s roles was a temporary wartime measure and by 1924 the Ministry of Labour reported that the ‘reversal of the process of substitution which was so striking a feature of wartime industry is now practically complete’” (Royle, 2014, p209).

The men who imposed the FA 1921 ban were not acting in a vacuum; the broader political/economic situation was a powerful factor too. During the newspaper search, it became clear that the 1920’s, British economy was very poor. In the face of growing unemployment in the 1920s, moves were made to push women back to the “domestic sphere”. The Dundee Courier reported (19/10/1921) that the Dundee Juvenile Employment Committee had set up training for girls (16–18) in cookery, laundrywork, housewifery and dressmaking to make them employable as domestic servants. For the first half of the twentieth century, domestic service employed the largest numbers of women of any

¹⁴ See Michael Garcia’s investigation of the award of the hosting of the 2022 world cup to Qatar. (<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/soccer/2014/09/05/michael-garcia-sends-world-cup-report-to-fifa/15119773/>)

¹⁵ Independent report, Fan-Led Review of Football Governance: securing the game’s future, 24/11/2021 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fan-led-review-of-football-governance-securing-the-games-future/fan-led-review-of-football-governance-securing-the-games-future#foreword>)

labour market sector in Britain (Delap 2011). Women, even to this day, bear the major burden of domestic labour in the home (Seedat and Rondon, 2021). The 1921 FA ban could be seen as an establishment move to push women back to the home and to low paid domestic work. Domestic servants and housewives had very little time off – and certainly not enough time to travel the world playing football or even to watch it. The socialist feminist concern with business interests, in terms of football, is perhaps demonstrated by Wrack’s (2022a) belief that the Boxing Day match played by Dick Kerr in 1920 took spectators/revenue away from FA matches and so proved to be an important factor underpinning the FA ban.

Given the twin challenges of patriarchy and business interests seen in the first heyday of women’s football, what is the situation today? Finally, this discussion paper turns to contemporary women’s football and its possible futures. It begins with finance.

Today and the future

The gender differentials in terms of football finances are perhaps easier to see in the twenty-first century when huge corporate interests dominate football. In 2022, in terms of money, the differences between the men’s and women’s games are gargantuan¹⁶. The women’s game currently, “is reliant on the potentially volatile whims of rich businessmen” (Wrack, 2022b p203). Wrack, (2022b, p210), argues that,

The FA and Premier League talk the talk when it comes to equality and “football for all” but when it mattered most it seemed as though an asterisk was attached with a footnote saying “unless it asks questions of the might and morals of the market-driven Premier League”.

As socialist feminism would suggest, the market still perpetuates inequality.

Patriarchy remains a powerful institutional force in society, and shapes decision-making organisations like the FA (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). This is in spite of the fact that the FA set up the Woman’s Super League in 2011. Fielding-Lloyd et al, (2020) argue that, in setting up the Woman’s Super League, the FA has eradicated the history of woman’s football. The FA “constructed women’s football as inherently distinct from, and inferior to, men’s football, negating any perceived threat to the wider gender order within the sport” (Fielding-Lloyd et al, 2020, 166).

The recent growth in the popularity of women’s sport has been accompanied by the growth in misogyny towards woman’s sports. A piece in the Press and Journal (16/2/2022)¹⁷ reported on a large survey of women in football. It found that woman “footballers across the north and north-east of Scotland are facing a barrage of sexism and abuse – just for playing the game they love”. The Guardian newspaper (20/1/2022) reporting on a Durham University led survey, based on 2,000 male football supporters, who regularly use fan message-boards, found “openly misogynistic masculinities”. The issue of sexism is embedded across the field. In the 2022 Scottish football writer’s awards, several women journalists walked out when an after-dinner speaker made sexist, misogynist and racist “jokes”. The Conversation (19/5/2022) reported that in “late January, Spanish premier league club Rayo Vallecano announced its decision to hire disgraced coach Carlos Santiso to take charge of its women’s team, despite a recording emerging of him encouraging his staff to find a girl to gang-rape to help team bonding.”¹⁸

¹⁶ The “Woman’s Super League” sponsorship package with Barclay’s Bank is worth £10m over three years (2019/20–2021/22) - £500,000 for winning the league (Men’s = £44m).

¹⁷ <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/pj-investigations/3946200/sexism-in-football-survey/>

¹⁸ <https://theconversation.com/why-football-needs-a-gender-revolution-182394>

Contemporary woman's football is challenged by an interplay between patriarchy, capitalism and a lack of accountability in the same way as the 1920s. However, while women's football provides a stark reflection of our unequal society in terms of gender, it also presents an opportunity because it is still developing. This raises the question as to the future direction of the women's game. Should it model itself on the men's game? Does "equality" mean having to be "the same"? To consider this, the next paragraph will briefly discuss the state of men's football to see what women might be aspiring to.

The men's game has perpetuated growing inequalities across global football; such that the majority of clubs, even some of those in the top leagues, are in precarious financial positions, and the grass roots of the game are impoverished (Goldblatt, 2019). There is an inherent contradiction in league sports, which is that the self-interest of individual clubs denies the collective interests of the whole sport. A very few clubs across the globe take the vast majority of the money to the expense of the collective interests of football. Football is now in an unhealthy oligopolistic position where the outcome of games/competitions are predictable since they are normally won by the "select few". Clubs are not run in the interests of fans¹⁹ (Cooper and Johnston, 2012). Some have described this as a "death spiral". Is this what the woman's game should aspire to?

Of course, I don't know enough to answer this question, but it is a very interesting one. Could the future of women's football, be more enlightened, inclusive and egalitarian? This is not to argue that women should be content to play part-time and for charity. Nonetheless, the history created by women players of the early 20th century show that other football paths are possible.

¹⁹ Football is expensive. <https://www.olbg.com/blogs/supporting-premier-league-team-costs>

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