

Title: Women's Football Fandom and Growing the 'Beautiful' Game

Authors: Stacey Pope¹ and Rachel Allison²

Affiliations:

¹ Durham University

² Mississippi State University

We are now living in a 'new age' of women's football. Petty and Pope (2019) argue that this was first initiated by the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, when they found evidence that there was a shift towards substantial, positive media coverage of women's football in the United Kingdom. In 2019, a record 1.12 billion people watched the FIFA Women's World Cup. And the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, hosted by Australia and New Zealand, offers an opportunity to build on this momentum, further propelling women's football into the spotlight and advancing a long overdue gender revolution.

This special issue is dedicated to advancing the health and performance of women's football players. These operate cyclically with fandom – the more we can improve the health and performance levels of players, the more we can improve the 'product' of women's football and thus increase the fanbase, and vice versa, growing the fanbase and media coverage around the women's game has implications for sponsorship and investment in the sport, consequently helping to improve the health and performance levels of players. Drawing on our research in England and the U.S., we offer some solutions for growing the fan base.

Making Football Accessible to All Girls at School

In many countries across the world, football is still seen as a last bastion of male-domination. In our research, gaining basic access to football in physical education was an issue. Inequalities in football spanned across generations. Even younger England women fans had experienced a gender divide in school that prohibited them playing football. For example:

“It was very much boys played football; girls played netball...You never got the choice.”
(Alexa, age 29)

“It was very much like the sports had been allocated to certain genders based on what they [teachers] perceived that sport to be deemed adequate or relevant for them so football was never an option.” (Gaby, age 29)

This situation is not unique to England. Fans we have interviewed in countries such as Australia, France, and Sweden described a similar lack of opportunity. For instance:

“I always liked doing sports but growing up it was kind of like not an option. My friends who were boys went to football and my friends who are girls went to, I don’t know, theatre or dance class or things like that but never football.” (Carmen, age 24, Spain)

Action needs to be taken to ensure equal access to all sports in physical education at school. Boys and girls could be provided with the same opportunities to play sports at school, rather than segregating by sport. Where football is offered to boys, it needs to be available for girls. Accepting that the wider infrastructure will also need improvement (i.e. access beyond school to football clubs and academies), pathways to the elite level should move away from assumptions of gender-appropriate sports being introduced from a young age. Progress is clearly being made – see, for example, in the UK the introduction of the Academy system as a talent pathway for the FA Women’s Super League clubs. Women’s Super League clubs also became fully professional in 2018. However, clearly there is still more to be done. For example, according to the Football Association (2021), only 63% of schools currently offer girls’ football in PE lessons. This can be contrasted with the opportunities available in the U.S., for example, where football is the 2nd most common sport offered in school for girls aged 10-15 (Zhao et al., 2021).

Increasing Media Coverage of Women’s Football

Recent tournaments have demonstrated that there is clearly an appetite for watching women’s football. Our research (Allison and Pope, 2022) shows that watching women’s mega-events, usually on television, plays a key role in initiating interest in the sport. Events such as Olympic tournaments and FIFA Women’s World Cups were discussed by 91% of U.S. fans and 69% of England fans. This served to initiate their fandom, with many going on to become invested fans of women’s football. Therefore, increased and respectful media coverage needs to be a longer-term goal for women’s football. Such media exposure has also been shown to challenge sexist attitudes, leading to greater respect and appreciation for women’s football. Pope *et al’s* (2022)

study found evidence that love TV coverage of the FIFA Women's World Cup led to positive attitudinal change towards women's football:

“From a personal point of view, it changed my view on the sport. I used to see it as a bit of a joke, but having watched the [Women's] World Cup [I] now feel the opposite.”
(male supporter, age 26-35)

Promoting an Inclusive Culture

Women's football has shone the spotlight on how football fan culture can be an inclusive space. This perceived inclusivity of Women's football was the main motivation for attending matches in 21% of our U.S. fans and 39% of England fans (Allison and Pope, 2022). This was widely considered an inclusive space for *all* supporters. U.S. fans were also likely to note an acceptance of lesbian and gay fans, perhaps partly because of the number of publicly “out” lesbian players in elite women's football. Promoting women's football as an inclusive space that is safe for women, children and queer fans has potential to engage new fans. However, some fans in our research bemoaned the perception that clubs target a “family” audience in women's football, so it is important that certain fans are not marginalised from the sport through marketing efforts, such as such as adult fans who attend in groups, or men wishing to attend matches alone (Allison, 2018). Promoting an inclusive culture ensures that this space is welcoming to all.

A number of the fans in our study (62% of U.S. fans and 22% of England fans) were motivated in their fandom by a commitment to gender equality. Fans wanted to expand the commercial growth of the game and criticised media coverage in comparison to men's football and the gender pay gap for players. Whilst progress has been made, it is clear that moving forwards fans are looking for women's teams to have equitable resources to those of men's teams.

Bringing it back to health and performance

It is important to note that much of the existing research on fans of the women's game is focused upon England, the U.S., and Australia. In order to grow the women's game globally, there is an urgent need for more international research examining women's football in this ‘new age’ (Petty and Pope, 2019).

As discussed, while the focus of this special issue is not on ‘fan engagement’ we wanted to make the link more clear that fandom and health and performance are intimately linked to growing the Women’s game. Through increasing the fanbase and ability to generate revenues for federations and clubs there can be greater investment into the teams’ health and performance support and initiatives from youth to senior levels. And investing in enhancing the health and performance will allow a continual improvement and evolution of the technical, tactical, physical and mental qualities of players in a similar way as we have seen the men’s game evolve.

References

Allison, R. (2018) *Kicking Center*. Camden: Rutgers University Press.

Allison, R. & Pope, S. (2022) Becoming Fans: Socialization and Motivations of Fans of the England and U.S. Women’s National Football Teams. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 39[3]: 287-297.

Football Association (2021) We have Launched a New Campaign to Give all Girls Equal Access to Football by 2024. Available at: <https://www.thefa.com/news/2021/oct/11/letgirlsplay-20211011>

Petty, K. & Pope, S. (2019) A new age for media coverage of women’s sport? An analysis of English media coverage of the 2015 FIFA women’s world cup. *Sociology* 53(3): 486–502.

Pope, S., Williams, J. & Cleland, J. (2022) Men’s Football Fandom and the Performance of Progressive and Misogynistic Masculinities in a ‘New Age’ of UK Women’s Sport. *Sociology* 56(4): 730-748.

Zhao, X., Zhu, W., Chen, Z., Ren, S., & Qin, X. (2012) U.S. Children and Youth's Physical Activities Inside and Outside of School PE: 1985 vs. 2012. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Health*. 18(2): 398.