

'I Do Worry That Football Will Become Over-Feminized': Ambiguities in Fan Reflections on the Gender Order in Men's Professional Football in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This article draws on the responses of 2,347 football fans (male = 83.4%; female = 16.6%) collected via an online survey from September 2015 to January 2016 regarding the position of women (as fans, coaches, referees, journalists, board members and administrators) in the gender order in men's professional association football in the United Kingdom. Engaging with the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, we address two recurring themes emerging from the results: (1) the exclusionary practices of sexism and subordination aimed at women in men's football; and (2) the extent to which women are regarded as 'authentic' fans, given the gender inequalities and power imbalances they face in their practice of fandom in men's football. The article concludes by suggesting that although there are emerging 'progressive' male attitudes towards women in men's football, hegemonic and complicit masculinities remain a significant feature in the culture of fandom in men's professional football in the United Kingdom.

Introduction

It is widely recognized that there are gendered divisions, practices and assumptions in sport that, over time, have served to construct and perpetuate stereotypes concerning the position of women as players, fans, coaches, journalists, administrators, board members and referees (see Allison, 2018; Cooky & Messner, 2018; Dunn, 2014; Forbes et al., 2015; Jones, 2008; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017). Such inequalities can be attributed, historically, to how sport has played a key role in sustaining the privileged position of mainly white men in Western societies. For example, sport was viewed as pivotal in the development of 'manliness' (an arena where men demonstrate so-called 'masculine' characteristics, such as physical strength, power, toughness and bravery), whereas women were routinely excluded from strenuous sporting activities on the grounds that these were 'unladylike', masculinizing and could even potentially damage their reproductive organs (Hargreaves, 1994). Women's 'natural' role, therefore, excluded them from playing – or even watching – team sports dominated by men (Pope, 2017).

This gender divide has long been the case in association football (hereafter football)¹ in the United Kingdom (UK) – a professional sport since 1885 that was built around working men displaying fairly traditional masculine social attitudes and cultural norms, on and off the field, that produced barriers against the inclusion of women and girls. For example, although women’s football enjoyed a surge in popularity during the First World War, following it there were calls for a return to the ‘normalization’ of the sexual division of labor (Dunn & Welford, 2015). In 1921, the English Football Association announced that the game was ‘unsuitable’ for women, and its member clubs were forbidden from hosting women’s matches, thus initiating the rapid decline of women’s football in England (Cleland, 2015). In some ways, these views have recently been challenged – the England and Scotland women national teams attracted widespread support in the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup finals with record breaking numbers tuning in to watch televised matches (BBC Sport, 2019) – but they also remain rather entrenched in the culture of the men’s game.

Males in the UK are routinely socialized, from a young age, into playing and watching football as part of a ‘masculine’ rite of passage (Cleland, 2018). However, for heterosexual females, conventional femininities are usually assured by *not* playing football (Jeanes, 2005). Perhaps it is unsurprising, therefore, that if team sport participation has ‘naturally’ been regarded as the preserve of men, female fans still typically encounter barriers and are widely assumed to have little legitimacy or authenticity because of a lack of appropriate gender capital (Pope, 2017; Toffoletti, 2017).

However, in recent years there have been signs of a shift towards greater gender equality in football, in terms of both participation levels and spectatorship. Whilst football is still, predominantly, a global sport played by boys and men (there are national exceptions, such as across Scandinavia and the United States, where higher levels of participation exist amongst girls and women), the number of female players is increasing. FIFA’s international survey in

2019, for example, showed that over 13.6 million girls and women play organized football worldwide and over 4 million players were registered with clubs (FIFA, 2019). There have also been claims about a ‘feminization’ of sports fandom, at least in the sense that women now comprise a substantial minority of fans at men’s football matches across a number of countries (Ben-Porat, 2009; Pope, 2017). However, as indicated by Esmonde et al. (2015), such an increase does not necessarily lead to shifts in cultural discourse from one of sexism and subordination (discrimination, prejudice or sex stereotyping) to one of greater gender inclusion and equality.

At present, there remains a dearth of academic research on the views of *both* male and female football fans with regards to the position of women in the gender order of men’s professional football (as fans, coaches, referees, journalists, board members and administrators) in the UK. In addressing Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005, p. 848) contention that we must understand ‘the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups’, this article is based on the responses of 2,347 fans of UK football, collected via an online survey from club message boards, to two important research questions. Firstly, is there evidence of a cultural shift amongst fans towards more gender inclusivity in men’s football, or do there remain entrenched constraints and male hostility towards women? Secondly, what are the perceived gender norms applied to male and female fans around questions of ‘authenticity’, and have they been reinforced, or challenged, by the changing gendered power structures and conventions of football in the twenty-first century?

In presenting the results, we draw on Connell’s (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity to help explain the social construction of gendered power relations and the position of women in the gender order of men’s professional football in the UK. Given the gendered history of men’s professional football, we concur with Howson (2006, p. 3) that taking this approach allows scholars to investigate and interrogate the ‘axiomatic position that hegemonic

masculinity has assumed.’ After analyzing the data, our results are split into two thematic areas. The first assesses the exclusionary hegemonic and complicit practices of sexism and subordination towards women in men’s football. The second addresses the extent to which women are regarded as ‘authentic’ fans and illustrates the gender inequalities and power imbalances they face in their practice of fandom in men’s professional football in the UK.

The Gender Order and Gender Exclusion in Men’s Football

According to Pfister et al. (2013, p. 860), gender is ‘understood as a social arrangement that is constructed by means of dominant discourses, anchored in institutions, negotiated in interactions and integrated into individuals’ identities.’ For Connell (1987), unequal power relations between men and women help explain key aspects of the gender order in society. However, we must always be mindful, of course, of the different ways in which men and women experience both class and gender structures, and how such features are likely to intersect with configurations of racialized social relations, in and through sport (Scruton et al., 2005).

Given the ‘masculine’ characteristics that have historically shaped most men’s team sports, these sporting spaces have epitomized arenas designed for showcasing Connell’s (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity. Based on Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony, where one group dominates another via managing and controlling cultural institutions, Connell sought to explain the benefits of patriarchy for men, as well as highlighting their different positions within an intra-masculine hierarchical structure. According to Connell, although few achieve it, most boys and men aspire to one hegemonic archetype of masculinity and those located near the top of this hierarchical structure are rewarded with valued social and cultural capital.

In highlighting an asymmetrical gender order, Connell (1995, p. 77) explained how hegemonic masculinity is ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently

accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees...the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.’ It also explains how some men have a dominant power over other subordinate or marginalized groups of men, such as minority groups based on ethnicity and sexual orientation. As defined by Hearn and Morrell (2012, p. 4), hegemonic masculinity is therefore:

A set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men’s identity, men’s ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy.

The social organization of sport might be especially amenable, following Acker’s (2006) work that draws on Connell, to the associated idea of gender regimes; that is, internal structures, processes and beliefs that distribute women and men into different tasks and positions within a common organizing frame. Gender regimes in sport are culturally and historically shaped hierarchical systems of power that embody domination and subordination along the lines of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of ethnic difference, taking white heterosexuality as a norm. They do this normatively through their routine procedures; via images, and ideologies that legitimize inequalities and differences; via face-to-face interactions where group members ‘do gender’; and, finally, via identity and the making of the self as an accepted, and suitably gendered, organizational performer (Acker, 2006; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2019).

Threats to established sites of hegemonic masculinity, such as sports venues, might produce expressions of extreme versions of ‘protest masculinity’ – fan abuse, including racism and other forms of discrimination, as well as hooliganism, for example – as some traditional white male sports fans may feel their domains are under attack from challenging new racial and gender configurations. Alongside protest masculinity and hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987) also initially conceptualized hegemonic femininity, but this was later changed to

‘emphasized femininity’ in order to recognize the lack of symmetry in the positions of masculinity and femininity in the gender order. According to Connell (1987, p. 183), emphasized femininity was ‘oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men’, most notably concerning matters of marriage and raising children.

Although Connell did not directly address the question of multiple femininities or hierarchies of femininity in her original work, others have since developed approaches in this area. Schippers (2007, p. 85), for example, critiques how researchers have made widespread use of Connell’s theoretical concepts, despite the fact that ‘femininity’ has been widely undertheorized in her work, claiming that, ‘a compelling and empirically useful conceptualization of hegemonic femininity and multiple, hierarchical femininities as central to male dominant gender relations has not yet been developed.’ Sisjord and Kristansen (2009) have also pointed out how subordinated femininities that reject ‘emphasized femininity’ have remained largely invisible due to the attention devoted to maintaining a version of ‘emphasized femininity’ in society. Indeed, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) later acknowledged that more work was needed on femininities, so that research on hegemonic masculinity could offer closer attention to women and the interplay between femininities and masculinities. Thus, Connell’s (1987, 2005) original binary drawn between ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and ‘emphasized femininity’ could be addressed to allow for the construction of other forms of femininity, beyond that of ‘emphasized femininity’ (Pope, 2017).

Schippers (2007, p. 94) uses the term ‘hegemonic femininity’ to refer to the characteristics defined as womanly that ‘establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.’ Here, we need to focus upon multiple and hierarchical configurations of masculinities and femininities and on their positioning against the idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity rather than

their difference from, and inferiority to, hegemonic masculinity, as implied by Connell. In order to guarantee men's exclusive access to desire for the feminine object, dominant physical strength and authority, these characteristics must remain unavailable to women, as this is what differentiates men from women and what defines the former's superiority. Those women who enact characteristics associated with 'hegemonic masculinity' – for example, by exhibiting sexual desire for other women, being promiscuous, sexually inaccessible, or showing aggressive behavior – are necessarily labelled as performing 'pariah femininities' rather than 'subordinate femininities'. This is because they are deemed to be contaminating the relationship between masculinity and femininity rather than simply being expressive of relations of gender inferiority and superiority. In this model, hegemonic femininity is ascendant to pariah femininities and there are severe social sanctions for women enacting hegemonic masculinity, who are seen as deviant and stigmatized (Schippers, 2007).

Research on women's sports fandom has also shown how women navigate different kinds of identity within the constraints of 'performing' femininities in a male-dominated space. For example, Jones (2008) found that female football fans in men's football in the UK adopted different strategies of adaptation or resistance as ways of responding to abusive masculine fan behavior whilst negotiating their own identities. Some female fans agreed with definitions of authentic fandom that drew on hegemonic masculinity and saw gender abuse as a core part of football culture. In order to enhance their own status as 'real' fans in this masculine arena, some female fans distanced themselves from emphasized femininity and those female fans who did not 'do' fandom properly.

Pope's (2013, 2017) research on female football fans in the UK also illustrates the diversity and complexity of women's attachment to sport. Those women who performed more 'masculine' femininities in relation to their sporting activities, for example, expressed an enduring hostility to female fans overtly performing more 'feminine' femininities. Like some

of Jones's (2008) participants, the former were often frustrated by more 'feminine' fans who 'played up' their sexual interest in (male) players, allegedly lacked sporting knowledge, and who marked out their femininity at football matches, for example by wearing high heels and/or make-up. As Toffoletti (2017, p. 51) explains in her work on female fans of the Australian Football League:

While "fandom" and "femininity" need not be incompatible identity positions, women followers of sport are often required to manage and negotiate the performance of these identities in male-dominated sport spaces like football stadiums in order to be accepted as legitimate or authentic sport fans.

She notes that this hierarchy of spectator practices is highly problematic, because those fans who fall outside of the expected preconceived male-defined notions of sport fan identity – for example, because they do not have the 'look' of a regular sports fan due to ethnicity, race disability, sexuality or gender – are less likely to be acknowledged as 'authentic' sports fans.

Notwithstanding these sorts of correctives, Connell's model can help to explain why racialized and sexist and misogynistic behavior, chants and verbal abuse, as well as non-verbal comments on social media, can constitute forms of exclusion within the culture of men's football in the UK and elsewhere. For example, in 2015, the UK's national broadcaster, the BBC, reported that former Chelsea physiotherapist, Eva Carneiro, and assistant referee, Helen Byrne, were the victims of obscene crowd chants at men's matches (BBC Sport, 2015). In 2013, the UK anti-discriminatory football organization, *Kick it Out*, introduced a mobile phone app so that fans could anonymously report discriminatory incidents taking place during matches, though many female fans may prefer to be seen as 'gender-neutral' supporters and could be reluctant to report sexist abuse at matches, which they might dismiss as 'banter' or 'part of the game' (Crolley & Long, 2001; Jones, 2008; Pope, 2017). However, it is not just abuse within the confines of the stadium that victimize women. In 2018, a *Women in Football* survey reported a 400% rise in cases of sexual discrimination and harassment of high-profile

women in football, with social media identified as the biggest reason for the increase (Kelner, 2018).

Indeed, one of the criticisms of the equality and diversity-focused *Kick It Out* campaign in the UK is its lack of attention to anti-sexism agendas in comparison to opposing racism and homophobia, despite national initiatives having been in place for some time. It was in 1993, for example, that '*Let's Kick Racism Out Of Football*' was launched by the UK Commission for Racial Equality and the Professional Footballers' Association (it subsequently changed to *Kick It Out* in 1997), with the intention of eradicating racism and racist language among fans by implementing written codes of conduct for attending matches (Cleland & Cashmore, 2014). Even though *Kick It Out* have promoted greater race and gender diversity (most notably surrounding homophobia) in English football, stadia remain public spaces that are, largely, an 'unfriendly' landscape for women (Pope, 2017).

Of course, it is not only UK venues that harbor sexism and other forms of misogynistic behavior. For example, Bacchi (2018) reported how the *ultras* at SS Lazio in Italy handed out flyers stating that the stand they occupied at the *Stadio Olimpico* was a 'sacred place' and that women were not welcome in the first nine rows of seats as they were 'trenches' reserved for men only.² In New Zealand, Reilly (2018) reported findings from the independent Muir Report into the culture at New Zealand Football, which described the body as a 'boys club' with 'a tolerance of inappropriate banter'. It also found that no women were represented on the senior leadership team at the organization, with just 21% of its staff base being female. In Zimbabwe, Chiweshe (2014) found that football songs and chants routinely expressed misogynistic messages that celebrated men's sexual domination and degraded women, leading to some women avoiding parts of the stadium or refraining from going to matches altogether. Likewise, in their analysis of men's football in Denmark, Pfister et al. (2013) discuss how the number of

women in fan groups decreases in the face of expressed misogyny and violence and that all female fans have to cope with some level of sexism in their practice as fans.

Despite the application of hegemonic masculinity to gender studies, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have also recognized that masculinity is not fixed or static and they have acknowledged how other theories have emerged that illustrate more inclusivity, resistance and choice, from within hegemonic traditions (see Anderson, 2009). As noted by Cooky and Messner (2018), some men in sports settings are now showing resistance to expressions of traditional hegemonic forms of masculinity, with some scholars also claiming that football and other sports are not the broadly homogenous experiences for boys and men they were once widely assumed to be (see Cleland, 2018; Magrath, 2017). It is also very clear that the increasing use of black male models and popular 'gay imagery' in recent men's fashion and mainstream advertising has less to do with traditional, white hetero-machismo, strength, and virility, than it does with the emergence of a new men's hetero-aesthetic, and the associated fracturing and eroticization of the male body. This suggests that 'the form of masculinity that is capable of reproducing patriarchy is in a constant process of negotiation, translation, hybridization, and reconfiguration' (Demetriou, 2001, p. 355).

Of course, all of this confirms that not all men, today, engage in activities that are in accordance with the traditional hegemonic model. But, Connell (1995) outlined quite early in her body of work how a large number of men are likely to continue, passively, to sustain the hegemonic model, and are thus likely to be broadly 'complicit' with its key elements in their everyday practice. Explaining this outcome, Connell illustrated how the functioning of society is likely to motivate heterosexual men to honor, desire and support the hegemonic order and to position themselves in a relationship of advantage to it. In the remainder of this article, we focus on the extent to which hegemonic forms of masculinity – and ideas and values pertaining to them – persist in the culture of fandom in men's professional football in the UK.

Method

To capture a wide range of responses from fans on the position of women in the gender order of UK men's professional football, we constructed an online survey. Across projects investigating a range of social issues in football, the lead author (Cleland) has developed relationships with editors at over 150 UK football club message boards; people who now allow the use of their respective sites to collect data for academic purposes (see, for example, Cleland & Cashmore, 2014, 2016, 2018). Wherever possible, opening posts are located in the 'off topic' section of the respective club message board as this is often viewed by message board editors as less disruptive to discussions around the club first team (which is the reason why the majority of fans engage in club message boards in the first place).

In carrying out the survey, we followed the ethical guidelines established by The Association of Internet Researchers concerning potential harm, privacy, consent and deception (see also Cleland et al., 2019). To address these concerns, the introductory paragraph included on the 150+ fan message boards centered on an overview of our research topic, whilst including a link taking the participants directly to the survey, where the protection of anonymity and privacy was again emphasized (for example, no personal details were captured outside of sex and age). Fans were also under no obligation to complete the survey as they could simply ignore the request to participate in the research. Those fans who did complete the survey were reminded at the end that 'by clicking finish, you are giving your consent for your views to be used as part of this research project'.

The survey covered a range of issues connected to women and football, but for the purposes of this article we focus our analysis on questions about whether participants were in favor of more women being involved in men's football, as fans, board members, referees,

journalists and coaches. To establish more about the general attitudes of fans, the survey also contained some open-ended sections where participants could expand on their views regarding the position of women in men's professional football.

The survey was conducted between September 2015 and January 2016. Of the 2,347 fans who completed the survey, 83.4% self-identified as male and 16.6% female. Comparing this to actual match attendance, women have been estimated to make up a substantial minority of football fans in the elite English Premier League (26%), between 20-30% in the German Bundesliga and between 10-12% in the Danish Super League (Pope, 2017). In terms of age, 1% of our sample said they were aged 17 or under, 12% said they were aged 18-25, 18% said they were 26-35, 20% said they were aged 36-45, 26% said they were aged 46-55 and 23% said they were aged 56+. We are well aware, of course, of the self-selection issues in relation to online surveys, but given that we aimed to gather as large a range of views as possible we felt that this method was the most appropriate to collect a wide geographical spread of data. For example, it allows participants to produce responses anonymously in their own time and in what we hope is an honest and frank way and, by doing so, reduce the potential bias of social desirability that can come from face-to-face survey interaction. No prizes were on offer and there was no motivation to deceive beyond, perhaps, the playful subversion typical of some fans but as the dataset was large this would have had a small impact on the overall results of the study.

Of course, we recognize that those fans engaging with club message boards are only one sub-section of what constitutes a late-modern football 'fan'. Given the global consumption of football in the UK, particularly the Premier League, we cannot be sure that all of our participants attend matches or that all are from the UK. Instead, some are likely to consume games online or through satellite television. Therefore, although we managed to achieve a sizeable response to our research study, we make no claim that the results are representative of

all active football fans. Nevertheless, we would contend that they provide us with a unique opportunity to gain a deeper insight into the views of fans who visit club message boards on gender issues in men's professional football in the UK.

In analyzing the data, replies to the closed-ended questions were presented as descriptive statistics, whilst the open-ended data were inductively analyzed by each author, separately going through a process of open coding across a number of phases to thematically identify emerging patterns and commonalities, as well as any anomalies within the 2,347 responses (Bryman, 2012). Upon completion of this phased process of open coding, all three authors then worked in a collaborative process of interpretation and verification that eventually identified two recurring themes: (1) accommodation, sexism and subordination; and (2) women as 'authentic' fans.

Findings

1) Accommodation, Sexism and Subordination: Changing Times?

As we have already stated, UK football has been viewed as a very traditional masculine domain that is hostile to women. Although women and girls have much greater access to football today, both as players and spectators, in their analysis of men's football in Denmark, Pfister et al. (2013) describe how the domain of sport remains one of the relatively few social institutions still defined by strict gender segregation and a rigid gender hierarchy. Men's sports are the norm, and women are the 'other sex', with their sporting activities often not acknowledged as the 'real thing'.

However, among our most striking findings, at least in the closed questions, were the overwhelmingly progressive positions taken by many respondents in relation to the roles of women in men's football. For example, in our male-dominated sample, 94% of all respondents said that they wanted to see more women fans at men's football; 91% supported more women board members; 80% wanted more women referees; 90% wanted to see more women

journalists; and 81% wanted more female coaches. These views contrast starkly with the current reality, in terms of the numbers of women actually working in men's football. For example, a FIFA survey published in 2014 found that out of 177 member associations, 138 have a women's football league, yet only 7% of registered coaches were women and only 8% were executive committee members at member associations. In England, although 27% of workers in men's professional club football are women, only 7% have a position in the boardroom (Gill, 2019). There are a handful of women journalists, no women referees currently in the elite UK professional game, and few women coaches.

Set against the very positive aggregate figures on men's apparent willingness to accommodate and even welcome more women in men's football in the UK, we also had plenty of more 'traditional' male views expressed qualitatively, often based on a highly gendered sense of entitlement where the culture of football helped elevate masculinity through overt expressions of sexism and subordination. Those identifying as male in our sample generally offered support for gender change *in principle*, but in practice they often seemed much more concerned about a move to a more 'feminized' sporting culture. At the extreme end of their intransigence came responses like these: 'If the feminazis³ don't like male football culture then they should fuck off and go and fuck themselves and each other', from a male (aged 46-55) Cardiff City fan, whilst this male (aged 36-45) Aberdeen fan concurred, if less colorfully: 'Sexism should be more severe. Women have no place in football.'

Fans like these, identifying as male, clearly enjoyed this transgressive expression of opposition to change. Despite broader messages from male fans about their welcoming of wider gender shifts, football clearly remains an important site for sustaining the gender order, confirming Esmonde et al.'s (2015, p. 35) suggestion that there remains 'a resistance to women entering male-dominated cultures.' In the case of football fandom, male fans claim greater legitimacy and authenticity simply through their 'natural' gender association with the game. In

this sense, the football stadium is constructed as a public space, one where sexist behavior and attitudes remain normalized. Thus, the increasing numbers of female fans present in men's football in the UK helps explain why some male fans might still engage in a form of protest masculinity as a sign of frustration that 'their' once secure public space is now considered under threat.

Any shifts to what Pope (2017) outlines as a 'feminization' of UK sports fandom may also provoke a 'backlash' from those male fans who may feel threatened by 'boundary crossing'. This was evident in a response from a male Harlow Town (age 46-55) fan, who seems to connect recent law changes in football that limit physical conflict and effectively outlaw traditional forms of heavy tackling with the growing involvement and pressure of women, as both players and fans:

I'd prefer to see football kept as a traditional male sport. A number of the rule changes⁴ over recent years and the continual attempts to limit physical contact seem to be geared to changing the game to make it a more suitable for women to participate in. I do worry that football will become over-feminized in its efforts to adapt to the requirements of the female lobby.

Reference to how football should be 'kept as a traditional male sport' was also addressed by some female fans, who saw sexism as deeply embedded in the attitudes and behavior of a significant number of male fans. By way of illustration, this young female (aged 18-25) Manchester United fan saw sporting sexism as unique to the UK context, and to football:

From my experience, sexism is more of an issue because of attitude rather than governance. As far as I know there are no sexist practices in football (i.e. women can't apply for certain jobs) but, more, there is an underlying attitude among those in the footballing world that it is a man's world which doesn't exist in other sports, nor other countries. In most countries I've visited, football is considered gender neutral (in some European countries it's even more of a women's game!) but in England there seems to be an underlying culture of football being exclusive for men.

There is an important point here about the masculinist structure of the British game. Football is not, of course, 'gender neutral' in most countries in Europe, but attitudes in men's football in the UK *are* probably more prohibitive than they are in many other locations. Indeed, a

number of male and female fans made similar points across the data, including this more critically aware response from a male (aged 26-35) Glasgow Celtic fan:

The disparaging attitude towards women in football is no surprise: the sexist attitudes of blokes like [former Sky TV employees] Andy Gray and Richard Keys⁵ (who many actually defended) sadly reflect, I think, quite a large percentage of the people who watch them...I'd suggest that anyone who denies the fact that sexism and misogyny are still rife in football has their head in the sand. In this way, the sport reflects wider society, but it is perhaps magnified in football because of how male-dominated the sport is and how the 'boys club' mentality seems to have hung around so long.

Through responses like this, some male fans were able to identify and even challenge the persistence of this gendered hierarchy, in which they are still likely to assume their superiority to women, based broadly on normalized gendered assumptions and on the role and history they have had in the culture of football (Forbes et al., 2015). As another Glasgow Celtic male (aged 36-45) fan stated: 'I think there is still a deep-seated feeling that football is a man's game amongst most male fans.' The views commonly expressed across our qualitative dataset tended to reflect aspects of this residual complicity, reflected in the references to 'head in the sand' and 'deep-seated feeling' from the male fans quoted above. These helped, in turn, to sustain patriarchal discourses by effectively bolstering a normative gender order long established inside the culture of men's football in the UK. There was plenty of concern amongst male fans, for example, about the sort of social engineering which might threaten the dominant, male-orientated status quo, such as this response from a male Hull City fan (aged 36-45) who asserted: 'I don't see men wanting to play netball and I don't see women playing football in the park or having a kick about. It all comes across as trying to be politically correct!'

But there *were* more gender-inclusive responses from some male fans, possibly reflecting wider social and cultural changes, including from this male (aged 46-55) Newcastle United fan who recognized that something of a sporting gender transformation might be slowly underway across the UK game:

Any congregation of a majority white male crowd, where there's athletic competition, will produce a lot of stereotypical reactions, as people play to stereotypical expectations...But things are slowly changing, basically because there are more women visible in football.

To try to challenge notions of football as a game for men, there has been a renewed emphasis in the UK on elevating the roles that women can (and do) play across both men's and women's football. At the time of writing, however, there have been no fan-focused anti-sexism initiatives to match those targeted at racism and homophobia in British men's football crowds. For participants like this male (aged 18-25) Aston Villa fan, the relatively uncontested existence of sexism in football stadia pointed to the urgent need for stronger governance and more support for women in and around the game:

The FA, UEFA and FIFA have done a good job tackling racism in football. However, sexism needs to be treated in the same vein, and the reason it hasn't been is because there is still this institutionalized sexism within our society and the football governing bodies, which absolutely has to be addressed.

However, it was significant that, across our responses, the possible introduction of more concrete measures – most notably, campaigns to challenge sexism in football – were widely opposed. Previous research has highlighted concerns among female fans that identifying fan sexism as 'problematic', and therefore worthy of the introduction of new policies or practices, could trigger a backlash from male supporters in a way that might have an even greater detrimental impact on women (Pope, 2017). Our findings show that whilst a large number of fans recognize the existence of sexism in UK football, many of them – and not exclusively male fans – rejected the use of campaigns, suggesting that such approaches are 'unnecessary' for something perceived to be a more 'limited' problem and which was better kept 'buried':

Any attempt to force yet more anti-sexism campaigns into places where it is only a limited problem is little more than a destructive, progressive scheme to ruin a sport and pushed by people who were probably never real fans in the first place (male, aged 26-35, Bristol City fan).

Rather than make a big deal out of it, I think it would be better to keep it buried...There are always bigots in this world, and they will not be swayed by some liberal campaign. They are just sad, stupid people, and others on the

terrace will soon out them and embarrass them into silence (male, aged 36-45, Barnet fan).

Perceived as being rooted, simultaneously, in both the mire of 'progressive' politics and the fog of simple 'stupid people', tackling crowd sexism effectively is seen here to be a particularly sensitive and tricky project. For some fans, any social and cultural change in this respect was seen as likely to be generational, with these respondents counselling patience; that sexism and the subordination of women would gradually disappear from football as older male fans are slowly replaced in stadia by younger, more diverse, fans. For example, some younger males in the 26-35 age group noted:

Sexism does exist. However, I feel this is a generation issue and, as the game evolves, the issue of sexism will reduce greatly (Liverpool fan).

In my experience the majority of sexist or disparaging comments about women's sport come from the "older generation", whereas younger men, having been brought up in a different world, and are much more likely to look beyond the gender barrier (Chesterfield fan).

Conflicting comments from younger fans on sexism in football do raise some serious questions about normative assumptions on links between younger fans, moves towards more gender equality, and pressure for progressive social change in the game. But other fans also pointed to more recent shifts, as illustrated by this response from an older female (aged 46-55) Crawley Town fan:

There is sexism, but the game has far more women involved than ever before. I grew up in a culture with a strong traditional and somewhat stifling patriarchal hierarchy and so it's inspiring for me to see women get on and do well.

Indeed, in terms of attitudes towards women already working in men's football, some respondents praised the work of women in senior roles at their club, including this account from a male (aged 46-55) fan of Tranmere Rovers: 'We had a very good former chairwoman in Lorraine Rogers, and the current vice chairwoman, Nicola Palios, is working tirelessly in the local community to develop a future for the football club.'

Despite the overwhelming support in our *quantitative* dataset for more female involvement in the game – including in the boardroom – the qualitative data demonstrated opposition to what was often referred to as ‘positive discrimination’ for women applicants.⁶ Most fans clearly regarded football as a meritocratic marketplace for talent – despite much evidence to the contrary – which meant that only if a woman was deemed ‘good enough’ should she then be offered a job. Illustrative of this point was this response from a male (aged 26-35) Hearts fan: ‘Personally, I would like to see more women getting top jobs in football, but only if they're good enough and not just to 'even up' numbers.’

The implication here, of course, given the paucity of women employed at senior levels in men’s professional football in the UK, is that the vast majority of women candidates were simply not up to the job, rather than being systematically excluded by networks exercising unconscious (or knowing) bias against them. Indeed, research from the UK *Women in Sport* body in 2018 found that 40% of women employed in the UK sports industry reported that they faced discrimination because of their sex, but 72% of their colleagues who were men said they saw no such inequality (Kessel, 2018). Such meritocratic ideals – that anyone can reach the top level – also places the burden of responsibility for women’s under-representation in leadership roles onto individual women, rather than acknowledging the inequalities that exist within organizations (Nash & Moore, 2019).

2) *Women as ‘Authentic’ Fans?*

Social norms around masculinity and sexism can be both challenged and expressed through football fandom and they can also lead to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and power imbalances. As our dataset illustrates, change in the football gender order is widely supported *in principle* by many fans, but it was clear that stadia are also regarded as venues for expressions of traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity amongst like-minded male fans – in some cases this can also include outbreaks of violence (see, for example, Cleland & Cashmore,

2016). Female fans, in this context, have often been perceived as lacking in both dedication and commitment to, and knowledge of, the cause. Instead, they face claims that their fandom is driven largely by family connections, their own relationships with men, the seductions of the male gaze, or by their sexualized attraction to male athletes (Pope & Williams, 2011; Toffoletti, 2017). As one male Ipswich Town fan (aged 18-25) observed: ‘So many of the women involved in men's football seem to be there as “eye candy” or as tokens, rather than because they have a serious involvement and understanding of the game.’

Not surprisingly, many female fans challenge this perception and the associated lack of fan status or capital it implies. Female fans often feel ‘on trial’ at men’s football and that they have to prove, more than male fans do, their status as committed, ‘authentic’ fans (Dixon, 2015). Addressing this point, a female (aged 18-25) Everton fan argued:

As a female football supporter, I feel I've had to prove myself to the male supporters who sit around me on match day – it was almost like an interrogation. Did I know the offside rule? The player’s names and positions? Did I go to away games or just the cup games? I doubt male supporters are treated like that when they start attending.

Responses like this show that, despite the support for wider gender change reported by many fans in our sample, there is the persistence of prevailing stereotypes about alleged ‘uncommitted’ female fans. As a consequence, some female respondents described how they felt they still had to work harder to demonstrate their fandom in this predominantly male public space. For some, this meant different standards were routinely applied: ‘As a female football fan, I have seen that my views and opinions are deemed less important than men’s’, reported a female Reading fan (aged 26-35), whilst this female (aged 26-35) Gillingham fan concurred: ‘I still feel I have to prove myself with my football knowledge, because I’m a woman.’

In light of responses such as these, Dunn (2014), Jones (2008) and Pope (2017) have all reflected on the different navigation routes female fans typically feel they must travel in order to develop an identity as ‘authentic’ fans, set against the waves of institutional, as well

as individual, sexism they routinely face. Whilst some female fans may accept masculine bravado and feel that they must adopt behavior that is approved by male fans to gain acceptance into fan communities, others resolutely resist it.

Our data shows that one way to ‘fit in’ with male experiences and expectations is for female fans to simply accommodate misogynist comments in a football context in a way they might not generally accept outside the culture of football (Jones, 2008). In a space in which gender is intensely contested, female fans can distance themselves from positions of heterofemininity in order to defend or reinforce, in this case, their status as ‘authentic’ fans. Drawing on Connell’s (1995) theoretical framework, female fans who distance themselves in this way can be said to reject emphasized femininity and identify more strongly with male fans and with attributes more typically associated with hegemonic masculinity. In highlighting this particular strategy, a female (aged 36-45) West Ham United fan stated:

As a female, I have felt more comfortable in a group of males and often a group of football supporting males, than I ever have with a group of females. Females are naturally bitchy and nasty. I have had a lot of fun supporting football with groups of men. So called ‘sexist chanting’. I think of the phrase ‘sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me.’ The feminization of the game has a hidden agenda, as does the racism and homophobia agenda. It is as if they want to destroy, primarily, male activities. I can't really understand why.

This kind of response is challenging on a number of levels. Firstly, in the hostility casually expressed here towards other women and to female fans; and, secondly, in the casual bundling together of sexism, homophobia and racism as equivalent and expressly positive features of male sporting cultures. As we explained earlier in this article, racism as well as homophobia remain a feature of the game in the UK and elsewhere, of course, despite campaigns seeking to address it (Cashmore & Cleland, 2014; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014).

Female fans, such as the one above, seem to be performing a version of ‘pariah femininities’ (Schippers, 2007), by identifying very strongly with conventional sporting masculinities and even welcoming verbally aggressive forms of behavior as a result. In search

of acceptance among men as ‘authentic’ fans, such female fans might be more willing to accept the norms and rules of established male fandom, including a level of casual sexism and sexist abuse they witness or face. Indeed, Dixon (2015) argues that some female football fans attempt to deflect or disavow gender discrimination by positioning themselves as ‘similar’ to males, including by adopting typically masculine modes of communication, or as it is otherwise termed, as dark and humorous ‘banter’ (see also, Allison, 2018; Jones, 2008; Pope, 2017).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, treading what can be a difficult boundary drawn between enjoying humorous and boisterous football ‘banter’, whilst resisting outright abuse, was also a regular concern reported in our data, including by this (aged 18-25) female Sunderland fan:

There is a fine line between what people will class as ‘banter’ at football matches and when this banter becomes sexism. I see light-hearted jokes as being playful and funny, but I feel this is overstepped a lot by fans. Women should come to a game without fear of being discriminated against.

She also had some male support on this point, including from this Chelsea (aged 18-25) fan:

People that I consider liberal and forward thinking, in terms of social progression, can suddenly have their morals turned upside down when football is involved. Pathetic references to ‘Going back to the kitchen’ and being ‘On a period’ are used regularly at football matches where there is a female official or physio. I have challenged certain individuals over this and they are sometimes not even aware that they are doing it.

This idea that football stadia somehow ‘stand outside’ other domains as a liminal, transgressive space, was a prominent feature in our dataset. Some male fans – though supportive in general of more female involvement in the game – broadly concurred that abuse (‘banter’) is a part of the culture of football and that ‘authentic’ female fans should accept that some of it, including offensive gestures and language, might focus on them and on other women. This is often rationalized by suggestions that male fans (such as those who are overweight or have ginger hair, for example) will also be confronted with abuse and this does not deter *them* from participating in, or attending, matches. In research conducted on Spanish fans, however, Serrano-Durá et al. (2019, p. 255) found that, ‘sexist chants in football stadiums reinforce

gender-based discrimination and keep women excluded from the public arena.’ Thus, sexist attitudes become normalized in football stadia, and this not only reinforces gender bias but, in some cases, it can also encourage gender-based physical or symbolic violence as well as gay male and female self-exclusion.

In this way, those male fans – and some females – who enjoy the perpetuation of traits of conventional hegemonic masculinity in stadia tend to legitimate the overall subordination of women to men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). What such claims made by male fans about how women must ‘negotiate’ their own space within the culture of football fail to acknowledge is, firstly, the ways in which men are automatically conferred legitimate status as fans, based on their gender association with football (see Esmonde et al., 2015). And, secondly, how crowd chants aimed at women are typically misogynistic and frequently sexually degrading. Whilst, as Jones (2008) points out, female fans are expected to develop their own defenses here, most heterosexual white men manage this issue by arguing that *all* abuse in football cultures – including racism and homophobic abuse – carries equal weight, is playful and is strategic – aimed, simply, at unsettling opponents and their fans (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012). As one male (aged 36-45) Tottenham Hotspur fan contended:

There is clearly still a degree of laddish/yobbish culture around football, but I would really question the extent to which this prevents women from getting involved in the game. Yes, there are occasions on which women are the subject of verbal abuse, but the repertoire of most football crowds is based upon abuse of one form or another towards males e.g. towards the referees, towards opposing players, teams, fans, cities, countries or even towards your own team or fans etc. This abuse does not prevent young men from going into the game: indeed, many of them welcome the atmosphere it generates as part of what stimulates and/or motivates them.

Another male (aged 46-55) Oldham Athletic fan added:

There are far more female fans, owners/directors and backroom staff than ever before. You will still get stereotypical comments on social media sites, myself included; but I believe that the comments are now more ‘tongue in cheek’ and not intended to be sexist. It is a measure of how far women's football has come, especially in a traditionally male dominated sport.

In responses like these, we can see traces of what Connell (1995) refers to as support for forms of complicit masculinity, even in knowingly seeing sexism as, simply, irony or a joke; as ‘part of the game’. This is in the same way that homophobic chanting at football is often argued to be about competition and rivalry, rather than expressions of openly hostile attitudes (Magrath, 2018). In such accounts, racism, sexism and homophobia can all be justified as a normative part of an established culture; one that should best be left undisturbed for the benefit of football and for all fans. We are open to the notion that ‘different rules’ might apply in late-modern football cultural contexts, where irony and banter are highly pleasurable currencies and modes of exchange. But what they risk, of course, is naturalizing misogynistic verbal and gestural exchanges in football crowds as a valued feature of the culture of the game. Accepting, uncritically, such practices also allow some heterosexual white male fans to confirm their masculine capital through their involvement in the normative practices of football fandom – whilst it also allows some female fans ‘fair’ access by effectively excluding other women.

Conclusion

This article reported on results from an online survey that, uniquely, asks both male and female followers of UK football about the future role of women in the men’s game. This is the first such survey of its kind and it produces a complex picture – signs of real change and evidence of staunch lines of resistance. While the vast majority of our respondents expressed support for increasing opportunities and involvement for women as fans, coaches, administrators, referees and journalists, our qualitative data confirm that many male fans are also clinging onto their hegemonic advantage, particularly by defending existing fan practices. They are supported here by some fans identifying as female who also value core features of ‘traditional’ sporting cultures in the UK. These sorts of tensions reveal how women in sport can both challenge and

collude with the sorts of masculinized discourses that still substantially shape sports imaging, talk and access.

Perhaps reflecting the more progressive debates generally in play across UK society today, more male fans also feel safer in expressing general support for greater gender equity in football, even if they hesitate to countenance the diminution of familiar, masculinized sporting practices. For many male fans – and some female, it seems – the expressed ideal of more involvement of women in men’s football in the UK is, inevitably, subjugated to the existing hegemonic practices of male fandom and the opportunities it continues to provide for acquiring and reinforcing masculine capital.

For all its complexities and nuance, we would contend that this sort of rupture ultimately promotes and sustains hegemonic forms of masculinity, which include stereotypical, discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes that uphold the power and dominance of white heterosexual men over subordinate masculinities and women in football culture. This, in turn, reinforces the notion that whilst most male fans might profess support for more women in men’s football in the UK, the stadium must remain, essentially, a masculine space. This is not only as a reassuring and pleasurable place to watch the match, but also a site for enhancing and reinforcing differences between men and women by both promoting and accepting sexist and misogynistic practices. In this way – and despite claims about fan irony and friendly banter – we would argue that sexist abuse and forms of sex discrimination remain damagingly entrenched in the culture of men’s football in the UK. More reluctant male fans – and some females – are broadly complicit towards promulgating the hegemonic model in relation to their own and others’ gender-based practices. Indeed, some female fans seem pressed to embrace sexism and stereotypical assumptions about women as fans, even as other females might strive openly to resist such views and practices (Dunn, 2014; Jones, 2008; Pope, 2017).

Overall, we would argue that there is *some* evidence of a cultural shift regarding the position of those fans who engage with UK club message boards, but that deeply embedded constraints and hostility remain. Moving forward, as Dunn (2014) points out, there is little agreed policy on how sexism is to be challenged in UK football, with anti-sexism campaigns targeting the treatment of women in the men's game yet to gain popular support. But, as we have seen with various high-profile and successful anti-sexism initiatives driven by social media – #MeToo and #EverydaySexism immediately come to mind – establishing momentum can be an important element in achieving more widespread support for equity change, even in a masculinist preserve such as UK football. In this context, we would argue that many male fans seem to have grasped reasonably well the ‘theory’ of a positive gender shift in football culture, but support for concrete change to the entrenched citadels of cultural masculinity across the men's game in the UK still seems rather elusive.

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Notes

¹ We use the term ‘football’ to describe the association game, though we are aware that ‘soccer’ is the preferred term in some parts of the world, particularly North America.

² Ultras are a sub-cultural group of mainly young fans that are highly organized and committed to a particular club.

³ Feminazi – the linking of ‘feminism’ with ‘nazi’ – is often used as an offensive term to describe women who are considered to have radical or extreme views on gender issues, rather than seeking to achieve gender equality.

⁴ Some law changes to the game with respect to tackling and indiscipline have been toughened up in recent years, thus making it less aggressive and violent – less ‘manly’ – than it had been in the past.

⁵ Gray and Keys had been the main presenters in Sky's flagship coverage of the English Premier League since 1992. They were sacked in 2011 when they were recorded directing sexist abuse towards women, in and out of football, when they thought they were off-mic. They have since moved to Dubai to present coverage of the English Premier League.

⁶ Equality law in the UK allows for ‘positive action’ programs, but not for discriminating directly in favor of certain groups, including women.

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