

## The gender of football

19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries

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### ABSTRACT

A “bastion of virility” ever since it was codified, football remains a privileged social space for the production of a masculinity consisting of strength and performance. The sport has nevertheless opened up to women. The first women’s football matches took place from the 1910s to the 1920s, although from the 1920s to the 1960s, the directors of national federations opposed the development of women practising the sport. Women’s football experienced a revival from the mid-1960s to the 1990s, and began to receive minimal attention from associative bodies. Finally, women’s football has asserted itself since the early 2000s, with the development of national as well as international competitions.



Women’s football match in Saint-Ouen during the interwar period

Football emerged as a sporting discipline in England during the second half of the nineteenth century. At the time, the game was reserved for an exclusively male social elite: the pupils of public schools, private single-sex educational establishments. It was between 1850 and 1900 that football spread in the British Isles, becoming more accessible and turning into a show. From the late 1890s, militants for gender equality began to organize the first women’s football matches. Football was nevertheless constructed as a true bastion of virility, which is expressed both in the practice of the sport as well as in the stands and media commentary on the game. In this context,

football has remained difficult for women to access, particularly as the sport has been accused of altering their bodies and making them more virile, and even of provoking sterility and favouring lesbianism.

On the continent, where men's football was established in the late 1890s, the First World War played an important role in the beginnings of the sport's feminization. The conflict blurred the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine, as the violence of the battlefield mangled the virility of bodies that had nevertheless been hardened by sport and heavy physical work, and the so-called bodily fragility of women was contradicted by their increasing mobilization for the war effort at the rear. The end of the conflict ushered in the first women's matches in France in April 1918 at the initiative of the club Femina sport, which had been created five years earlier. These matches were part of a European dynamic, as first matches were also held in Austria and Switzerland in the very early 1920s.

In the aftermath of the war, men's sporting associations, whose membership increased considerably, adopted medical discourses, thereby taking their place within the conservative, antifeminist, and natalist context of the period. A genuine offensive against women's football ensued: in December 1921, the English football association prohibited its affiliated associations from supporting women's football. One year later, the Belgian association followed suit, and conservative journalists expressed their disapproval in France. Moral arguments were also offered by the leadership of men's football—for instance football matches would give women a bad image, or divert them from the more important tasks of family life—in an effort to hinder the possible development of women playing the sport.

Women's football resisted, although participation was marginal from then on. At the same time, men's football was used by authoritarian regimes seeking to exalt the conquering force of virile bodies and the national masculine imagination. In the aftermath of the Second World War, its greater accessibility and presence in schools promoted the rise of women's football, especially in communist block countries. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the victory of the men's national team at the 1954 World Cup sparked new popular enthusiasm and led to the creation of women's clubs. Albeit less numerous, women's matches were also organized in England, Austria, and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, national and international associations—whose directors were exclusively men—were still opposed to the development of women's football, anxious to preserve this bastion of virility.

Beginning with second-wave feminism during the 1970s, denunciation of masculine domination, demands for gender equality, and women's control over their bodies provided arguments for denouncing the gender of football and removing the obstacles to its feminization. The question of women's football was debated for the first time during sessions of the general assembly of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) in 1971. In the ensuing years, the UEFA took measures under the leadership of Scandinavian directors, despite the influence of a certain conservatism. In 1982, it created a European championship, with the 1989 edition held in Germany enjoying popular success. At the same time, the popularity of men's football continued to grow, supported by strong media attention and commercialization. This heightened visibility and transformation of players into stars reinforced the sport's virile character, especially among the working class. The professional football player became a symbol of social success, and fueled multiple representations of masculinity.

Since the early twenty-first century, women's football has become commonplace. According to the UEFA annual report for 2013-2014, the number of licensed female players has quadrupled in a quarter of a century, numbering over a million across all member associations. The status of some female football players has also improved. For example in 2011, the players who competed in the English championship were able to obtain semi-professional status. A club such as l'Olympique Lyonnais has placed women's football at the centre of its development strategy, an approach that has since been followed by other clubs, including Paris Saint-Germain and Arsenal Football Club.

Women's football has nevertheless struggled to have a media presence, and the majority of players are not paid (or are paid little). Refereeing remains a male bastion, and women are remarkably absent in the organizational

charts of clubs as well as national and international organizations. Corinne Diacre, the first woman to coach a professional men's team in France, and whom the weekly *France Football* voted as the best coach in League 2 in late 2015, has been the target of many sexist attacks. Finally, some claim that despite progress, the level of play cannot really be compared to that of the best male players. As a result, a symbolic and practical gap still separates men's and women's football, and female football players must continually prove that playing a traditionally masculine sport does not make them less feminine, and has no impact on their sexual identity.

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