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A magazine for International Women's Day

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A magazine for International Women’s Day

So here we are, another International Women’s Day

We love IWD. It’s a day to celebrate and focus on us, our achievements, concerns and wants as women. Even if it says a lot that over half of the world’s population only gets a day of focus...

There is a lot to do. In sport, we continue to see an under-representation of women in leadership. Women’s football has been under particular threat in the face of Covid-19 responses, with funding to women’s teams and leagues often being diverted in favour of financing the men’s football. Globally, many players still do not have professional status, receiving minimal pay and lacking employment rights. And, as it’s becoming clear, incidents of sexual abuse are endemic globally.

For Fare, and for many of our partner organisations, the battle against injustice and inequality will continue year-round. Gender equality will not achieve itself, nor can it be reached in isolation. We need to take into account racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and other discriminations when actively tackling sexism.

In the past year, we have published ground-breaking work exploring the under-representation of women and ethnic minority communities in US Soccer, with the equivalent European research expected later this year. Our Ethnic Minority Women’s Group demonstrates the talent and experience football is missing.

And the expansion of last month’s Football v Homophobia grants saw campaigns promoting LGBTIQ+ inclusion taking place across the globe, from Brazil to Georgia, with several projects promoting trans inclusion and examining the intersection between homophobia and sexism.

There is always more work to do, but with the Euros scheduled for next year, the Australia/ New Zealand World Cup just two years away, and inspiring actors in the field such as those contributing to this magazine, there are many things to celebrate this International Women’s Day.

THIS MAGAZINE BRINGS TOGETHER SOME OF THE WOMEN AND GROUPS CREATING CHANGE AT EVERY LEVEL OF SOCIETY. READ THEIR STORIES, UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE, AND CELEBRATE THE GAINS THEY HAVE MADE.
Racialised women have had to walk this path alone

Writer SHIREEN AHMED sets out a manifesto for change from North America.

Every year on international Women’s Day, the sports media world decides to pay attention to women for a day. Be it digital pieces on women’s history, or a shallow dive into women who have “broken barriers”.

The past year has been challenging; the deadly virus has not only taken lives but pushed women athletes further to the margins. A FIFPRO survey collected data from over 60 different countries between July and October 2020. The report showed that women had their wages slashed and that communication regarding strategy and planning was subpar. The reality is that while women’s football has made steady gains in the last few years, it is not difficult to push it to the backburner and reprioritise the men’s game.

It is important to remember that in addition to being elite athletes, formidable coaches, professional members of the media and administrative experts, we also become advocates of our own existence in these spaces. I have rarely met a colleague in sports who does not have to fight ingrained sexism along with doing her job – as well as educate those around her. This latter applies very specifically to racialised women in sports spaces. Women of Colour have to patiently teach and help others unlearn while simultaneously keeping up with their own substantial workload and balance it all for their mental health and dare I say, survival.

This type of added labour is often un-renumerated. It is exhausting and it continues. Injustice in football disproportionately affects racialised women. We know this.
Furthermore, women of colour are expected to solve the issues themselves. Sky Blue player Midge Purce rallied teammates and created a Black Players Coalition in the National Women’s Soccer League. In a piece reported by Sandra Herrera for CBS Purce said: “As a community within the NWSL, we were very fragmented. There wasn’t a way where we could have conversations with each other or explain experiences.”

A rookie to the league, Purce took initiative and created a space for Black players who were navigating trauma and stress after the world was shaken by George Floyd’s murder by a policeman. That trauma and anger reverberated all over the world. It impacted sports in a way we had not previously seen; not because racism hasn’t existed but that it could no longer be denied. For the first time, calls to keep ‘politics out of sport’ rang very hollow.

Football and politics are inextricably linked. We have seen the work done to research on exclusionary systems in the sport. Fare’s own report co-authored by Dr. Brenda Elsey and Dr. Jermaine Scott on the representation of Women, Black and Latinx in US Soccer revealed a bleak reality: women hold so few senior positions in coaching or authority at clubs and in leagues.

There are a few teams that do not even have representation from Black and Latinx communities, the most populous racialised groups in America. This is a failure of epic proportions. What are the academies doing wrong, and what is the sport not doing to equalise on all playing fields? It is not enough to boast about gender equity when large swathes of the population — specifically racialised women — are knowingly excluded from what is supposed to be the world’s game.

There are blueprints for anti-oppression in women’s football. Whether it is the way that former players and allies rally to combat horrific abuse in Afghanistan or Haiti, we still need accountability at the highest levels. In both cases, both presidents of the aforementioned associations were banned for life from all football activities for sexually abusing players and other egregious crimes.

Football media also has a responsibility to accurately report what is happening in the world. Perhaps headcovering bans that continue for women in France may not be a click-bait story but it is important, nonetheless. Les Hijabeuses are a part of the continuing story of football.
While there are a handful of disrupters in mainstream sports media, we must hold the media accountable for their role in upholding the same conversations and demand that similar systems of oppression (racism and sexism) be exposed and expunged. How many women do we see in editorial roles at sports desks? Not just presenters, but executive producers and those in hiring roles? Who decides on how stories are told?

Changing language is necessary. Being forthright is necessary. We are not in a place to dilly dally with words. We are either committed to working against the evils of racism, misogyny and homophobia and the dangers of transphobia and xenophobia or we are not.

WORDS MATTER. ACTION IS CRITICAL.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that racialised women have had to walk this path alone. Feminist writer Ruby Hamad said that because white women have never had to contend or recover from racial or colonial oppression, it is unsurprising yet “regrettable” that they only see feminism through a gendered lens that leaves racialised women to navigate the other factors of oppression alone. This could not be more true in football spaces. Diversity is not adding white women to panels. It is adding more women and ensuring that racialised women are well-represented.

While the world looks to the USWNT as a stalwart of movement and advocacy for equal pay, the women await a settlement. They are the more accomplished and decorated national soccer team. They paved the way for important conversations about valuing the work that women do, but they are also some of the most celebrated and recognisable players in the world. What about those from whom we don’t hear?

Arundhati Roy once wrote: “There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

What we need to keep in mind is that no one is ‘voiceless’. On this International Women’s Day we must look beyond the performative to the sustainable and actionable steps that help women in football, women, and football.

Shireen Ahmed is a sports activist, public speaker and prolific writer. She pushes boundaries and challenges the norms of sports writing.

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The MATILDAS ACTIVE SUPPORT, the Australian women's national team supporters group, spoke to us about how they rocked France in 2019, what a home World Cup holds, and what needs to be fixed in Australian women's football.

How did you all get together?

It all began in April 2018 when a couple of Sydney FC fans set up a Facebook page to help people plan their trip to the 2019 World Cup. Interest rocketed and in a few months, the group had grown into the ‘Matildas Active Support’ FB page.

The community – and our chants and banners – kept growing and we had our first outing as a group in February 2019 to the World Cup training sessions in Sydney.

In June 2019, we headed over to France to support the Matildas in the Women's World Cup. From the first match (v Italy), the Aussie presence was visible everywhere our Matildas played – we rocked in and out of the stadiums!

The strength and credibility of our community has continued back on home soil. We’ve been involved in media calls with the Australian FA to announce Matildas matches, we’ve established our own ‘We are Matildas’ Active Support bay at Bankwest Stadium, we’ve been at every home game and our members are ready to fly Matildas Active Support banners for away matches whenever we get the chance!
Tell us more about France 2019. What made it so special and what would you like to see improved for 2023 when Australia and New Zealand play host to the tournament?

France will be a lifetime highlight for sure. The game day experience was the best, thanks to the Matildas Active Support organising crew. We met some of the most amazing people at the pre- and post-game meet-ups and have long-lasting friendships as proof.

The sheer number of Matildas supporters – and that particular Aussie enthusiasm – really added to the excitement, atmosphere and sense of ‘home’ in every host city. This spilled over as we travelled between host cities; wearing Matildas gear always sparked up conversations with people from around the globe. There was a very palpable sense of unity amongst all Women’s World Cup fans. The welcome offered by our French hosts was really heart-warming too, with locals (especially school kids) at every game.

What would I improve? Merchandise! Fans of the women’s game love to wear their team colours with pride and we’d be fools not to cater to our needs.

It’s important to recognise that the WWC will be a predominantly female crowd, so facilities and services should be planned accordingly to avoid bottlenecks and people waiting in lines – at security gates or toilets, for example.
What are your hopes for the World Cup in 2023 in terms of the legacy of women's football within Australia?

I'm really hopeful that the lead up and the event itself will shine a bright light on the women's game, and that we can capitalise on the national interest to establish women's football in its own right. The measure of success post WWC23 for us would be a fully professional W-league attracting crowds because each team has local legends and future Matildas talent on show. This is fed by a strong and deep framework of grassroots football, benefitting from increased funding and clear pathways for girls to enter all areas of the game – player, ref, coach, physio, etc.

What are the main challenges facing women and queer football fans in Australia?

Well, we have to acknowledge the misogyny that has historically manifested at football games through homophobic or sexist comments overheard at games. These are often directed at players but are also sometimes levelled at other fans. It can definitely make for an unwelcoming environment, and definitely drives away people when it tips over into them feeling unsafe.

In my experience, women's football attracts a much more diverse fan base. The efforts of grassroots groups are really driving the visibility of that. W-league Active groups like the W-Jets Active and the Victory Vikings fly rainbow flags at every game, and all the groups I know of – including Matildas Active Support – have inclusivity at their core.

A full home and away season in the W-league! Every year we come to an end just when we're getting started. It's just unacceptable not to offer a full season to women. The disadvantages are endless – less play time overall, disproportionately greater loss of time in the event of injury, 'luck of the draw' competition, etc. Just get it done.

That also needs to be supported by increased and better coverage of the games. Fox Sport's performance this year has been woeful. But it would also be reasonable to demand equitable media and social media coverage and promotion of the women's game from the clubs and leagues.

What more do you want to see from clubs, leagues and associations to support the women's game?

I would like to see that effort supported more visibly by the clubs. That could include a range of things, such as enforcing behaviour breaches [fan sanctions] at games, moderating discourse and comments in response to their own social media posts, and supporting all leagues to have a Pride Round to celebrate all diversity – race, disability, sexuality, etc.

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And our women deserve professional status. They live double lives at the moment, with many of them completing advance degrees or holding down other professional careers that they must take time out of to suit last-minute fixtures. They shouldn't have to do both, nor can we expect them to thrive within the sport if they are forced to.

I think if we fix those things, we'll see a magnitudinal lift.

With thanks to Brodie, Claire and Amanda from Matildas Active Support and champion of women's sport, Danielle Warby
What’s in a name in Mexico?

What’s in a name? Juliet has posed this question countless times on stages the world over. For many people, especially those who are trans, the answer may be ‘quite a lot’. A name that matches your gender identity and reflects who you are is an opportunity to own your narrative. Using people’s chosen names – and pronouns – is just one element of inclusive language.

As part of Football v Homophobia’s month of action, we at Somos Versus created a guide for journalists to highlight the lack of representation of LGBTIQ+ athletes in sports media and advise journalists on how to approach the subject of LGBTIQ+ issues that may feel daunting if unfamiliar to them.

The guide recommended, among other things, that inclusive language is used. For as much pushback as we may have expected to face, we did not contemplate that the use of gender-neutral pronouns in the campaign would attract the greatest rejection.

Language matters. Being careful and selective in our choice of language allows us to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions. In the case of gender, using gender-neutral language enables us to recognise people and experiences that are not normally represented in the binary systems that dominate both Spanish and English.

Despite the many areas our guide for journalists covered, the majority of negative responses we received were to criticise our choice of words. Some responses demanded that we use “correct language”, some others expressed disappointment in our willingness to overlook the long-standing traditions of Spanish.

Interestingly enough, most of the people who chose to scold us did not seem to be as angry with the use of stereotypes in the media, or with the erasure of some athletes’ identities. The harmful practices of news outlets were overlooked in the name of grammar.

There are multiple reasons to support use of inclusive language. The first, and perhaps the most important, is that the LGBTIQ+ people we know have told us that it matters to them. The use of inclusive language gives us the possibility of addressing people in their own terms and allows us to recognise diversity.

In Spanish, replacing a single letter is all that is necessary to move from a binary male/female pronoun or noun to a neutral one. This shift in language, that requires the smallest of efforts, contains in it the potential for substantial change. While diversity is not limited to what we can name, finding more words to express and define it helps our understanding. This diversity of expression is particularly important for sports journalism, where gender roles are reinforced constantly: strength and aggression are celebrated for male athletes, while beauty and femininity are celebrated for women. Gender-neutral language helps
create a lens through which to view athletes as just that: athletes, irrespective of gender.

Much of the pushback we received was from fans, not the media. The guide aimed to respond to a particular need within the press, but it shone a light on the demand for wider change and education. Complaints aimed at our choice of words will not deter us from using inclusive language. We will continue to prioritise the dignity of all, and to respect the diversity that so enriches the sports world. We will continue to work for more and better media representations of LGBTIQ+ people in football. We will continue to ask journalists to do better when it comes to reporting on people who do not conform to gender binaries, but whose humanity and right to practice sports should never be called into question. We will continue to remember that the censure we receive is but a fraction of that experienced on a daily basis by those who dare to stand on a pitch while being gay.

DIVERSITY OF EXPRESSION IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT FOR SPORTS JOURNALISM, WHERE GENDER ROLES ARE REINFORCED CONSTANTLY: STRENGTH AND AGGRESSION ARE CELEBRATED FOR MALE ATHLETES, WHILE BEAUTY AND FEMININITY ARE CELEBRATED FOR WOMEN.

Versus is an NGO based in Mexico which works towards gender equality in sports and journalism. Their guide for journalists can be found at www.versus.mx/guia.pdf

With special thanks to Andrea Martínez de la Vega and Marion Reimers
“If we really want to have meaningful change, what I think is most inspiring would be if everybody were outraged by racism; if everybody was as outraged as the LGBTQ players and if everybody was as outraged by the lack of equal pay and investment in the women’s game, other than just women. That would be the most inspiring thing.

“I ask everybody here to lend your platform, to lift people up, to use this beautiful game to change the world for better.”

Megan Rapinoe
For the love of the game

By GOAL DIGGERS FC, London

It is time to change the narrative, to flip the script. It is time to celebrate 100 defiant years of women’s football, because football is NOT a man’s game.

In 1921 the English FA declared football “quite unsuitable for females” and banned women from playing football on any FA affiliated pitch for 50 years. This policy has meant that women’s football is still fighting for space 100 years later.

To mark 100 years since the ban, Goal Diggers FC has created a new kit to spotlight the exclusion of women from football and to draw attention to the pitch struggles women’s teams face as a direct consequence of the FA’s actions.

The kit has been designed by North London based artist and Goal Digger Lily Rose Grant. It features six scenes that shine a light on the history of women’s football. We can guide you through the history-making, boundary-breaking women the kit spotlights:

Alice Kell

Alice Kell was a leader. Captain of the infamous Preston-based Dick, Kerr Ladies. Alice scored an outstanding hat-trick in the historic 4-0 victory against St Helens at Goodison Park when 53,000 spectators watched the match on
26th December 1920. One year later on the 5th December 1921, the FA issued a statement which effectively banned women from playing football. It called on clubs belonging to the association “to refuse the use of their grounds for such matches”.

Alice and the team were defiant. “We play for the love of the game and are determined to go on”. And so they did.

Our kit celebrates this strength and determination. Alice is on the front of the shirt, an image taken from a powerful moment in 1921 when she shared a kiss with the French captain Madeline Bracquemond.

**Preston Ladies Training**

In the face of the FA ban, the Dick, Kerr Ladies continued to play at non-FA grounds and became Preston Ladies FC in 1926. And why were these women willing to defy the FA and society at large? They were determined to continue playing: “For the love of the game.”
Sue Lopez

Born in 1945, Sue Lopez grew up at a time when women were banned from football in the UK. This did not stop her dedicating her life to the game: her career as a footballer, coach and manager spanned five decades. During her time playing semi-professionally in Italy, her goals helped Roma win the Italian League Cup. She played in front of crowds in their thousands and toured the United States and Thailand. In the UK, however, there was no financial support given to women footballers, meaning they had to pay their own way, from travel to equipment. After retiring as a player, Sue earned coaching qualifications in order to remain in the game. She also wrote Women on the Ball (1997) tracing the history and development of the game.

Hope Powell

The ban on women's football ended in 1971, but it took until 1983 for the FA to allow the Women's FA to affiliate and a further 10 years to assume administrative control of the women's game. Hope Powell grew up at a time when the FA's ban was only just being lifted, yet has achieved so much due to her devotion to women's football. A pioneer in every sense, Hope began as a player in the early eighties, aged 17. Her CV is unsurpassable: she captained a double-winning side, scored 35 times in 66 appearances for England and helped found a club. At 31, after retiring as a player, Hope became England's first woman manager — and England's first black manager in either the men's or women's game — as well
Sammy Walker is a transgender footballer who currently plays in the Women's National League South, the third tier of English women's football. Even though the FA rules are clear that Sammy can play, some in the footballing world still can't accept her: "I've been the subject of a lot of online abuse and the last thing I want is for people to start protesting at games where I'm not even playing." Despite the prejudice, Sammy is determined to "prove the doubters wrong". She will keep playing and battle the misconceptions around trans people in sport. Sammy is vocal in the media about the importance of trans inclusion in football and runs advice, training and guidance for football teams on how to provide a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ players.

Chloe Morgan

Alongside her full-time job as a lawyer, Chloe Morgan gives everything to football. She has had an impressive career as a goalkeeper for Arsenal, Tottenham and now Crystal Palace. She played a big role in Tottenham's historic 2018/19 promotion to the Women's Super League and subsequently their first ever match at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium. Prior to the match she stated defiantly: "we deserve the right to be on that pitch".

Chloe is a professional goalkeeper and a football coach but she is also working to change the racist, sexist and homophobic structures which still exist in football. As a board member for Women in Football and Inclusion and Diversity officer at Goal Diggers FC, Chloe has become a vocal spokesperson on the issues within football, from tackling the lack of diversity amongst decision makers — "change starts from the top" — to the lack of investment into the women's game: "equality should be given as standard, the default position. It's a prehistoric situation that we've been left in, so step up! That's my message."

The protest kit drop on 08 June, available to pre-order from 19 April. Visit www.goaldiggersfootballclub.com/store @goaldiggers_fc
Football and wider sport are littered with phenomenal sportswomen role models from Crystal Dunn, Nadia Nadim, Naomi Osaka, Serena Williams, Abbey Wambach, Kadeena Cox, Eniola Aluko, Magdalena Erickson, Megan Rapinoe to Caster Semenya the list is never ending. They use their voices to give a more rounded picture of what it means to be a woman talking on topics that include gender inequality, body image, homophobia, pay disparity, disability, mental health and racial inequalities. Their words go beyond inspiring others to participate in sport but serve up volley after volley of wisdom and life lessons.

When we learn about the human stories of athletes our connection to them builds especially when this is connected to a social and moral purpose which is higher than their sporting abilities. Such is the cultural presence and sense of belonging that arises from sport, the sportswoman becomes an agent of hope and inspiration.

As a Black woman when I see a woman from a marginalised identity excel I'm not only inspired by their talent, but my identity is reaffirmed because I see in them the struggles they endured to overcome oppressive barriers to reach that point. It is this struggle that binds us together in the common humanity of our shared histories. Their victories belong to me as they do all women. Sport becomes a symbolic expression of freedom from the confines of gender and intersectional oppression and the sportswoman as a role model becomes the vessel of inspiration to the masses.

Yet, despite visible diversity on the sports field, scratch the surface and the stark reality of under-representation is hiding in plain sight. Women are starkly underrepresented in the governance, leadership and administration of football and sport.

Across Europe the numbers in football are bleak with 95.8% of all senior governance positions at elite level clubs, national league associations, national federations and UEFA held by white men. With 4.2% of positions held by white women (3.6%) and ‘visible’
minority women (0.1%). As startling as this data is, it is even lower in coaching. (Fare Network 2014 Glass Ceiling report)

The issue comes down to power; who has it, who is prepared to share it, give it up and ultimately do the work to dismantle systemic oppression. To increase visible representation of all women in the structures of football and wider sport, leaders must ask themselves the questions opposite.

Visible success stories of all kinds of women are critical to creating a future generation of female success not only on the field of play but in the boardrooms of power. The leaders of sport would supercharge their efforts if they took their lead from the action and activism of the athlete pioneers of the Marta’s, Rapinoe’s and Dunn’s of football. Now that would be the ultimate winning shot in my book.

The questions that leaders need to ask themselves to increase representation:

INDIVIDUALLY

Do I understand my own privileges and how do I feel about them?

Do I challenge gender and intersectional discrimination when I see it?

How well do I understand the intersecting barriers of oppression that affect women?

ORGANISATIONALLY

How do we recruit? (Does everyone look like me in the workplace? Does our board include a minimum of three women, all from different marginalised identities?)

Do we have specific targeted programmes of engagement beyond gender? (How are transparency and accountability built into these interventions?)

How do we value and support all women to develop in their roles and into leadership positions?

Michelle Moore is a multi-award-winning leadership coach, consultant, speaker, advisor and former athlete with over a decade of experience leading initiatives at the intersection of sport and social change.

@HelloMoore  michellemoore.me
From Spain to Japan: a coach’s perspective

MILAGROS MARTINEZ talks to us about being one of the only women in the world to be a head coach of a men’s team.

Milagros Martinez is a UEFA Pro licensed coach and the first woman to coach a men’s team in Japan, having previously played for and coached Fundacion Albacete women’s team in Spain, leading them to promotion to Spain’s top division.

Milagros, you played for Albacete for four years before becoming a coach. Why did coaching appeal to you?

I started coaching children when I was 23 years old. I played and studied, and coaching was a way to earn extra money. I liked the world of the coach and when I stopped playing football, I managed to train the B team of the club where I had played.

I think it was a great decision. I trained a team of very young girls and we managed to compete against senior teams. Currently one of those girls plays for the Spanish national team. I am very happy about it.

Why do you think there are so few women managers, particularly in men’s leagues?

It is a difficult question to answer. Women have been in football for a few years, but we have always had to study, work and play football at the same time. We could not dedicate ourselves professionally to the game. This is now changing. Women are more supported and every day we teach our passion and knowledge about soccer.

I hope that in a few years there will be more equality in clubs, federations and high positions.
What more can be done to support women’s progression through the game?

From my point of view, mentoring is a great idea. I know that some federations are developing it, but it is still difficult to access professional coaches and clubs. I would like these clubs to facilitate practices, participation in training and meetings. Many women coaches could expand our experience and demonstrate our knowledge about soccer.

WE RESPECT EACH OTHER A LOT AND IT IS EASY TO WORK WITH THEM. IN MY CLUB AT THE BEGINNING, THEY HAD DOUBTS. THEY DID NOT KNOW IF I WOULD BE ABLE TO CARRY THE TEAM, BUT THREE SEASONS HAVE ALREADY PASSED. I THINK NOW THEY HAVE NO DOUBT.

The head of Tokyo 2020 Olympics recently had to resign after saying women talked too much in meetings. What has your experience in Japan been like so far as a woman in sport?

It is true that Japanese society is very traditional. The comment [by the Tokyo 2020 chief] is completely off the mark. Yet my personal experience in Japan has been very good. I have a good professional relationship with all the players. We respect each other a lot and it is easy to work with them. In my club at the beginning, they had doubts. They did not know if I would be able to carry the team, but three seasons have already passed. I think now they have no doubt.

You previously managed women’s teams in Spain, what do you make of the recent development of women’s clubs in the country?

In recent years, women’s football in Spain has improved a lot. More clubs, more national teams, more professional staff … I think there are countries
A magazine for International Women’s Day

[Image: A woman in a football uniform standing on a field]

that are working very well to improve women’s football. I really like the visibility they give the Women’s Super League in England.

What are the main differences you have found between coaching women’s teams and coaching men’s teams?

I think there is not much difference between training men or women. What I really think is that the culture of each country determines the way we train, but not if we train men or women. The tactical work depends on the characteristics of each league and players. I have learned a lot coming to such a different country. I think I have improved as a coach.

If you could share one bit of advice to women and girls in football on International Women’s Day, what would it be?

I think it would be to enjoy and celebrate your passions. I love what I do and I keep training and trying to see many styles of play. I see very defensive coaches and I analyse; I see offensive coaches and I analyse ... it is important to be prepared. As a personal experience I would say never doubt yourself. Football is a very complicated sport and you need self-confidence.
A meditation on working in Africa with young women
JEAN SSENINDE

The story is like none I have ever been involved with before. It’s about forgetting everything and remembering everything that you dream of. It’s about the future. It’s about changing perceptions and creating a better world.

A lot of people’s lives have been changed because of football, playing this game has improved the mental health of so many young people. My focus is on Africa and in particular South Sudan, a country where some women are abused while at home with their families by being forced to get married. When those same women get to play football there is joy. And the togetherness that comes with learning to work with other people every single day.

When young, we underestimate how much sport can make us better people for the future. When young, I believe it’s the best time to learn. Football mobilises communities, contributes to healthy child development, builds self-esteem. Football helps us prepare for the future; it helps teach us how to interact with people who are not from the same place; it helps us learn how to negotiate and it helps teach us lessons about respect and leadership.

The reality of football for women in Africa

Even though there are a lot of organisations and individuals who are shining a light on women’s football in Africa every single day, the reality in my opinion is SILENCE. There is a perception that staying silent and not speaking up about issues is being respectful. There is still a societal perception that it’s a game for men. Women who play are labelled as rebellious and they are viewed as eroding culture.

There is a lack of unity and a lot of learning to do. Many girls in South Sudan have been married off as a way of stopping them from playing. Can you believe that? We need to do so much more to change mindsets.

But there is also hope and passion. There is a lot of commitment and desire to do the right thing. There is a need to create opportunities. And a growing recognition of the need to involve women in the game. A need to invest financially in football in Africa and to bring the right people on board in the continent.
When I speak of football in South Sudan I see a raw land where everything has started from scratch; a country filled with a lot of hope; with supportive people; a country waiting for opportunity. Despite the financial challenges, despite the fact that we need to change a lot of mindsets, I see women's football in South Sudan being at the top; at the top of Africa and contesting with the best in the world. For me South Sudan defines football in Africa: a place where opportunities are limited yet filled with hope and determination.

I am filled with hope that we can be the leadership generation who will change policies to include everyone and empower others to unleash their potential. We need to include all walks of life in the game so that we change the perspective, so that we create genuine inclusion. Because when we include everyone, we're going to get a result that will paint pictures of the kind we never thought possible.

Jean Sseninde is the Women's Football Consultant for the South Sudan FA, overseeing the national Women's Football Strategy and launch of the country's inaugural Women's Football League. She is also a member of CAF's Women's Football Committee, CEO of the Sseninde Foundation and champion of women and girls' football across Africa.

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In October 2016 a group of girls gathered for the first time to play football in Semizovac (Bosnia and Herzegovina) when we organised a football match at a local stadium. It was a big day; the start of a journey of hope for us.

Women’s football in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not particularly attractive to girls, nor is it supported by institutions or government bodies. The reasons are multiple, and include the economic underdevelopment of the country, the high level of crime and corruption in sports (as well quite honestly in all other spheres), and the overwhelmingly patriarchal environment, especially in small communities.

But, even in such circumstances, with enough enthusiasm, we believed you can change society. And proof of that is the amateur women’s football team that grew out of that day. We call it Nova Žena, ‘New Woman’ in English. Yes we are happy to be named after the feminist movement of the same name and happy to be fighting for change.

When we gathered that October in 2016 as an assorted group of girls, we wanted to join a global movement and took part in the Football People campaign. It was a step into the world of women’s football.

The girls in our municipality loved it and wanted more. So we started looking for funding and within a year had received support from the Mediterranean Women Fund in Paris. With this grant we formed our team, organised regular trainings and played matches with women’s and men’s football clubs from our local and neighbouring areas. During 2018-2019, we were supported by the UNDP, then the German...
Six years later, there is still no support from domestic funding sources. We have faced many instances of ignorance and discrimination from local government and local men’s football clubs. For example, in the local authority budget there is 5000 Euros reserved for “grants for gender equality”. However, we, despite being the only organisation that deals with gender equality in the region, receive only 250-500 Euros from that grant, and not every year. Where does the rest go? You might well ask…

Despite being state-owned, the local stadiums and sports infrastructure are controlled by the two leading men’s football clubs. While they train for free, these clubs charged us 30% more than the market price for renting the stadium. But those were the early days. Now they do not allow us to train at the stadium at all because “football is not for women”. We had exactly the same experience at the state sports centre, where we were not even allowed to place our publicity.

But despite these barriers, we continue to grow and develop, even in the face of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Last year, with the support of organisations including Fare, we started promoting the inclusion of Roma girls and now have five Roma players in our team. This is the first Roma-inclusion activity of its kind in our region, and yet our local government continues to ignore our actions to build gender, social and ethnic equality in society through football.

Women’s football in Bosnia and Herzegovina faces many challenges, as the country’s main club holds a monopoly on domestic funding and talent. Small informal teams do not have much space to develop into real clubs, and very few players get the chance to flourish. The development of players and clubs remain dependent on donations and membership fees from parents. A new idea is needed, innovation is required.

Nova Žena is committed to breaking down some of these barriers. We do not charge the girls membership fees or any other costs, and we provide them with free sports equipment every year. With the inclusion of Roma girls, we have become even more motivated. Our dream is that one day we will become a professional football club or at least that some of our players will go on to have football careers.

On International Women’s Day, as on every other day of the year, we stay true to our motto: “We play for equality”.

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facebook.com/timnovazena/
instagram.com/timnovazena/
“In France Muslim women are effectively banned from playing football.”

In France, a ban on the wearing of a hijab effectively bans most Muslim women from playing football. Elies Ben Azib explains why.

“We are running a project to address the ongoing issue of Islamophobia in France. We have seen how the country has been affected by the rise of the far-right, the weakening of the rule of law (the state of emergency we have, restriction on civil liberties, etc) and the worrying normalisation of xenophobic rhetoric at all levels.

Taking this into account, Les Hijabeeses, a group of Muslim women partnered Alliance Citoyenne who want to play football, will hold a panel discussion which speaks about the rules which have been enforced by the French Football Federation (FFF) that sadly exclude women who wear hijabs from football. The ban is on wearing the hijab while playing football but may as well be a ban on Muslim women as a whole.

We will also run a tournament with local teams that helps to raise awareness and helps to lobby and pressure the French Football Federation to consider changing these rules, making it possible for Muslim women to practise football.

Separately we will organise a roundtable with a sociologist, Haifa Tili, that looks at discrimination in sport towards Muslim women that live in the Banlieue (Paris suburbs).

We also organised a match in Echirolles last October, which has been an opportunity for us to engage women in football and become involved with Les Hijabeeses, and then Lyon, which is sadly well known to be a stronghold for far-right organisations. Organising a match there shows a strong message that we are fighting for equality.

“In France Muslim women are effectively banned from playing football.”

Elies Ben Azib

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WE TOOK PART OF THE #FOOTBALLPEOPLE WEEKS WHICH ALLOWED OUR CAMPAIGN TO BE PART OF AN INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVE, AND FIND MORE WAYS TO FIGHT ISLAMOPHOBIA WITHIN SPORT.

We took part of the #FootballPeople weeks which allowed our campaign to be part of an international initiative, and find more ways to fight islamophobia within sport.

We have to put international pressure on the FFF regarding its intolerant rules, especially the hijab ban. As long as the debate remains inside our borders, our argument is weak. Putting France under the spotlight as an outlier, because the hijab is not banned in any other country, and using the #FootballPeople weeks helps to take this issue to a mainstream audience.

Partners, such as Fare will help women to spread this fight for equality and add further weight to this struggle for acceptance.

The campaign launched was the result of a collaboration between Les Hijabeuses, Alliance Citoyenne, Women Win, and the researcher Haifa Tili.

In January 2021, in a webinar, Les Hijabeuses met Pierre Samsonoff, deputy Director -General at the FFF. He said that the prohibition of the hijab was not intangible and that he was open for discussion.

We wait in hope, expectation, and some fear for the future.

Elies Ben Azib is from Alliance Citoyenne, a group of community organisations that gives voice to people from minority backgrounds in France.
Making history for the fourth time: in December 2020, French referee Stéphanie Frappart became the first woman to referee a UEFA Champions League men’s game (Juventus - Dynamo Kiev). Frappart is used to making history: in 2019, she was the first woman to ever officiate in a major men’s European game (Super Cup final) and the first woman to referee in a Ligue 1 men’s game. In 2011, she was the first woman to referee a second division men’s game in France.

Symbol of hope: December 2020 saw Mara Gomez become the first transgender footballer to play professionally in Argentina’s top women’s division. In a country where 95% of transgender people do not have formal employment and life expectancy for trans women is 35 compared to a national average of 77, Mara’s achievement is an amazing symbol of hope.

Denouncing discrimination: “Every young person, and especially youth who are transgender, or intersex, should be able to participate fully in sport alongside their peers and gain the benefits that sports participation brings.” With these words, 175 athletes, among them Megan Rapinoe, Billie Jean King and WNBA legend Candace Parker urged a Court of Appeals to throw out a law effectively prohibiting transgender girls from participating in sport.

First trio of women referees: in December 2020, for the first time in a UEFA men’s game, all three officials – the referee and two assistant referees – were women. Kateryna Monzul (Ukraine), Oleksandra Ardsheva and Maryna Striletska oversaw the men’s Europa League game between La Gantoise and Liberec.

Role model: Canadian Women’s National Team player Quinn publicly came out as transgender last September, becoming the highest level professional footballer to do so. Quinn has called on football stakeholders to do more to break gender binaries and aims to compete in the Tokyo Olympics this year: “I want to be visible, and I think the Olympics is a massive platform to have that visibility”.

Supporting the Polish Women’s Strike: Players of AZS UJ Kraków supported Poland’s pro-choice protests by carrying banners of support on to the pitch before kick-off in front of national TV cameras.
Beyond the football pitch

The year of exceptional women

Naomi Osaka’s ongoing powerful and high-profile support for Black Lives Matter has been an example to athletes worldwide. Osaka is now showing her support for women’s football too, becoming a co-owner of the NSWL club, North Carolina Courage.

Kim Ng: appointed General Manager of the Miami Marlins, Kim became the first ever woman to serve as a GM in the four major American professional men’s league (NFL, NBA, MLB and MLS) and the first person of East Asian descent to hold this position in the MLB.

Caster Semenya: the athlete Caster Semenya is taking her fight to participate in women’s sports to the European Court of Human Rights to “put an end to the longstanding human rights violations by World Athletics against women athletes”.

Our spring reading list

Trailblazer
Lily Parr, the Unstoppable Star of Women’s Football (for kids) By Elizabeth Dale

Loving Sports When They Don’t Love You Back
By Jessica Luther and Kavitha Davidson

Futbolera
A History of Women and Sports in Latin America
By Brenda Elsey and Joshua H. Nadel

They Don’t Teach This
Eni Aluko

One Life
Megan Rapinoe

WNBA: Leaders in activism and social justice movements, the players of the WNBA show us all how to organise, mobilise and affect change.
Thank you to all of our brilliant contributors.
Thank you to all women doing what they do in fighting for equality.

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