

## **‘It’s like equality now; it’s not as if it’s the old days’: an investigation into gender identity development and football participation of adolescent girls.**

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## **‘It’s like equality now; it’s not as if it’s the old days’: an investigation into gender identity development and football participation of adolescent girls.**

This article explores the influence participating in football has on the development of adolescent girls’ gender identity, an area which currently lacks academic attention. Data are taken from an ethnographic study with a group of adolescent girls and boys and compared to Jeanes’ [i]research. A social constructionist framework was deployed with links to both critical theory and feminist literature. Qualitative and participatory methods were used to fully engage with the complex issue of gender identity. The girls within this study were aware of the normative gender expectations linked to ‘being a female’ but did not find this restrictive. The girls moved between many changing identities and organised their ‘web of selves’[ii] accordingly. The apparent need to measure success by the parameters of male standards created a barrier to girls’ identity development.

Keywords: gender; girls; football; identity; adolescence

This research explores the construction and development of gender identity in adolescent girls who participate in football. In the past two decades there has been a noticeable increase in the number of girls and women participating in football, which now stands at 1.3million regular players[iii]. The FA have recently introduced the 2013-2018 strategy for women’s football in England entitled *Game Changer* which seeks to consolidate and improve on the progression the women’s game has seemingly made so far[iv]. It is still questionable to what extent these positive changes are mirrored by evolving cultural ideologies surrounding female football participation. This paper shall address the on-going challenges faced by girls who play football and pose a ‘direct threat to masculine identity’[v] when they do so.

Caudwell[vi] suggests that even though there has been a publicly visible increased involvement of females engaging with football, this remains to be ‘highly contingent on gender’ and continues to be a male sport. This study considers the differences and similarities between Jeanes’[vii] preadolescent girls’ perception and development of gender identity compared to those adolescent girls in the current study. Unlike Jeanes’ research boys have been used in the present study as femininities and masculinities cannot be understood fully in isolation from one another[viii].

### **A constructed female**

**For the purpose of this research the term** identity shall be likened to the concept of self-understanding in order to avoid ambiguity surrounding the word[ix]. Therefore, constructing a female identity relates to understanding the self as a gendered being. Past research claims that ‘the internal conviction regarding one’s gender classification – is no longer positioned as a fixed essence at the core of a person’[x]. This definition shares similarities with poststructuralists’ views on gender identity as being fluid, changing and multiple[xi], an important viewpoint for this article. This implies that gender identity is no longer situated at the core of a person and instead lies beyond the core and is influenced by social and cultural valuations of gender. Individuals are not ‘passive dupes’ but rather active people creating their own gender within social systems[xii].

Cockburn[xiii] suggests that there are two counter-posed concepts of female gender identity those girls or women who adhere to ‘traditionally prescribed standards of femininity’ and

those opposed to the traditional, rigid societal assumptions of the typical feminine identity. This first concept can be linked to the category of 'girlie girl' and the second description links to the category of tomboy; concepts that have been used frequently in past literature exploring girlhood[xiv]. The categories of both tomboy and 'girlie girl' can be seen as deviant identities[xv].

The girls in Jeanes' [xvi] study initially felt that the deviant identities of 'girly girl' and tomboy were polar opposites; however, by using visual prompts such as magazines and participatory activities, further discussion showed that the 'girlie girl'/tomboy dichotomy was not so clear-cut and the girls moved between a number of shifting feminine identities. More recently Jeanes[xvii] maintained that the girls' 'gender performances were much more fluid and complex and involved drawing on multiple positions in different contexts.' Gender is confusing and the various barriers to prescribing to typically 'male' or 'female' traits prevent individuals from seeing the 'full range of diversity' that exists[xviii].

The social experiences of young people help to facilitate their own gender identity development; experiences include playing football, attending school, making friends, romance and family life. Connell[xix] provides support for the view that gender is developed through social constructions in which children actively participate. Research is available to support the notion that gender identity can shift in social situations and highlight the transformation from 'girly girl' to tomboy in middle childhood[xx] as significant.

Stereotypical gender expectations of girls consist of having to be feminine in both appearance and character. Clayton and Harris[xxi] suggest that traditionally feminine women must be 'hetero-sexy', expressive and supportive, thereby taking on both a feminine exterior and adopting typically caring feminine characteristics. Other research[xxii] studied the differing perceptions of masculine and feminine values that boys and girls held in relation to various sports and appearance. They found that girls were more conscious about their appearance than boys and rated being slender, attractive and feminine as highly important.

Playing football is not a necessary component for girls' gender identity development[xxiii], whereas for boys, football is an integral part in forming a masculine identity and becoming a 'real man'[xxiv]. Renold[xxv] elaborates on this to state that 'the sense of hegemonic masculinity appeared to be constructed through the exclusion of female participation in the game.' Other contemporary literature maintains that girls and boys produce a 'gender performance' which aligns to a male standards and expectations through participation in football[xxvi].

Research suggests that female sports stars and athletes must negotiate their own sense of femininity in a way which incorporates their sports participation. Shakib[xxvii] claims that 'gender still seems to shape how 'female athlete' is constructed;' parallels can be drawn between this and the concept of 'counter-identity' prevalent in Mennesson's[xxviii] work. More recent work draws on the paradox of being a football girl[xxix] which conceptualises the two opposing gender binaries clashing. The term counter-identity is used to describe the situation of females who want to identify with both a feminine self and that of sports participator. The present research investigates whether the issue of counter-identities arise in adolescent girl's football.

Unlike other sports, when a girl plays football she poses a 'direct threat to masculine identity'[xxx] which concerns many associated issues revolving around gender clashes, the development of the girl's own identity and qualms over continued participation. It is acknowledged that 'the female can function in "masculine" manners... only with greater effort than is required for feminine operations'[xxxi]. Recent research by Eliasson[xxxii] supports ideas

that girls must relate to a male standard that exists in football. This implies that in order for a girl to pursue football, a sport which contradicts traditional feminine values, she must work harder to reach success.

However, the girls in Jeanes' [xxxiii] study did not seem to have too many troubles with balancing their playing with their chosen gender identity. The 'girlie girls' did not find playing football inhibiting and their football identity was placed alongside their other multiple identities in which they moved between. For the tomboy girls playing football reinforced their chosen gender identity which involved disregarding the typical normative mould of femininity. Concerns were raised by the girls about playing football in the future as by that time gender would be 'no longer open for negotiation,' as sacrifices for marriage and children would have to be made [xxxiv].

### **The adolescent footballer**

The present study explores the football experiences of adolescent girls with the view to understand how girls' experience of playing football develops as they get older. The step into adolescence is a pivotal stage in development and 'characterised by heightened social pressure to conform to gender expectations from peers and increased female sports attrition' [xxxv]. Moving onto secondary school represents a child's transition through to adolescence which can be known to temporarily disrupt a young person's organisation of their self-concept [xxxvi]. It can be suggested that these social transitions can be disruptive to the child's on-going construction of gender identity development. The move to secondary school is seen as a big social shift in a young person's life and has an affect on their sports participation [xxxvii]. Therefore adolescence can be perceived as a time for identity organisation, whereby the individual attempts to string together many varying personas of oneself in order to create a self-concept that they are comfortable with.

Some developmental psychologists, such as Erikson [xxxviii] would disagree with this in favour of a more dogmatic view proposing that identity formation only occurs in adolescence. However, other more recent academics [xxxix] disagree and believe that children continually strive to make sense of their own identities throughout their childhood. Much feminist literature also alludes to the idea of gender as continually shifting and changing in relation to social contexts and relations [xl].

Curry [xli] purports that,

'adolescents have been found to maintain a 'complex web of selves' to help accommodate the complexities of modern living – with different 'selves' featuring in the family, at school or with friends.'

This view is consistent with the feminist poststructuralist position which provides a theoretical framework more sympathetic to social research of this type. This strand of feminism advocates 'a shift away from a focus on a single material 'reality' to a position where there are many alternative versions or constructions of reality' [xlii]. This is in keeping with the adolescent's 'complex web of selves' in which there are many versions of the self that the individual may wish to promote.

## **Boys, masculinity and football**

Swain[xliiii] observed playground behaviour of schoolboys and depicted that school playgrounds were industrious masculinity making machines which taught boys to become men. Football was integral to this teaching and the girls within his observations were marginalised and pushed aside in order to make way for boy's football. This research epitomises the reasons as to why girls do feel separated from the game of football; unlike boys they do not feel that they must play football in order to be 'female'.

The girls in Swain's study complained that the boys 'wouldn't let us' play and 'they kept shouting at us and saying go away!'[xliv] The girls were viewed as disrupting the game in the playground and not taking it seriously enough and were therefore excluded from participation. Girls who tried to join in with boy's football complained of not being passed to which further demonstrates the dominance of power that football attributes to males[xlv]. Some girls felt that men would not accept them as valid housewives in the future if they continued to play football[xlvi]. These girls believed that boys would prefer to fancy a 'girlie girl' and implied that boys would not eventually want to marry a tomboy girl. The issues of masculinity, femininity and football will be discussed with the boys in this article.

## **Theoretical underpinning**

The different epistemological paradigms relevant to this study are that of constructionism and critical theory. Constructionism is a social approach to knowledge which purports that 'experience should be understood through the individuals living it'[xlvii]. Whereas, critical theory refers to knowledge and experience through the different power relations prevalent in society. Feminist research and information from childhood studies was also used to guide the present research methodology.

The social constructionist approach to identity is in keeping with feminist poststructuralists' views concerning gender identity development and the multiple identities that can operate simultaneously in each individual. Using feminist poststructuralist analysis for this article enables positions of participants to be continually constructed and reconstructed. An ethnographic approach to data collected was adopted which is considered an appropriate style of research to use in childhood studies. The researcher helped to run the girl's football training and then the research sessions were carried out in school lunch breaks.

## **Methods and data collection**

Data was collected from a comprehensive school in the East Midlands, which was attended by both males and females between the ages of 11 and 18 years old and is open to children from all kinds of demographics. This school varies to the private institute that Jeanes[xlviii] used in her study, but similarly, this study used a non-probability sampling system where participants were deliberately chosen to fit a certain research profile. The profile was for a female (or male for the other group); aged between 11 and 15 years old who attended the school and would be taking part in the district football competition. Within this study, 19 girls and seven boys participated, all of who were white and British in origin. All 19 girls participated in some observation sessions, however only 11 participated in the focus groups and interviews. The boys group were not part of the district competition but were all avid football players.

A mixed method approach was taken to allow the girls freedom to express their identities; which included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations and participatory activities. Qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, observations and photographic imagery were used within this research as they are more suitable to provide the in-depth information necessary for a study of this nature.

Group interaction that occurred within the focus groups and interviews provided insights into experiences of the participants that would have otherwise been inaccessible. This is particularly useful when combined with feminist theory as this type of qualitative research allows women's voices to be vocalised[xlix]. Focus groups are a common research method and were selected purposely to allow adolescent girls to feel comfortable to participate[l]. The focus groups were held in friendship groups as suggested by Jeanes[li] to ensure that all participants felt secure enough to voice their opinions in a safe environment.

The girls' views of gender and football were investigated using visual prompts such as newspapers and magazines to facilitate discussion about what was seen. Moss[lai] et al also advocates the use of "visual narratives" in research and believes that they are 'important sources of knowing that can contribute to the interpretation and re-interpretation of diverse cultures.' This type of methodology, which is driven by the social contexts of the participant combined with the integration of reflexive tools, is important to the present research.

## **Results and discussion**

The topic of girls and femininity in the twenty-first century is a complex and layered matter, which involves the unravelling and re-furnishing of old-fashioned gender dichotomies. The girls in this study were all astute, self-aware and assertive individuals who all showed clear knowledge of gender divides.

When asked to describe themselves the girls used words such as sporty, arty, girlie, fun, competitive, loud, friendly and intelligent. This overview of personality traits shows that these girls adopt characteristics from either end of the feminine/masculine dichotomy which is in-keeping with earlier work[laii]. The girlie, arty and friendly characteristics could be argued to subscribe to the traditionally feminine model of 'hetero-sexy' outlined by Clayton and Harris[laiii]. Whereas self descriptions such as competitive, sporty and loud relate to a more masculine persona, making a shift away from typically feminine qualities.

However, the girls in this research were still aware of the stereotypical views about femininity and masculinity in which previous research acknowledges[laiiv]. Jeanes'[laiv] study refers to the 'girlie girl' character, which possesses the ultimate features of femininity through both appearance and attitude. Whereas the girls in this study take 'girlie girls' to be synonymous with the term 'plastics' a phrase lifted from the teenage film *Mean Girls*.

**Researcher:** Plastics? Is that another 'type' you have at school?

**Hayley:** Yeah. Wear loads of make-up and they change their voices to sound really high pitched all the time.

**Researcher:** They have high pitched voices?

**Hayley:** Well they change them all the time. Like at home they will talk to their parents just how we're talking to you now but at school they're like 'yeah it's all right' (mimicking high pitched voice) and everything like that.

**Hayley:** Like Barbie. They can be like quite smart sometimes, but they just act stupid.

As shown above, extreme values of femininity are conveyed as being 'plastic' in both name and nature. The girls all agreed that this extreme type of girl does exist but not amongst themselves, all girls felt that they were 'in the middle' of the masculine/ feminine continuum. However, the girls did refer to other peers they knew who would be too self-conscious of their feminine appearance to play football.

During the semi-structured interviews girls were asked to bring in pictures of themselves it was found that *gender appropriate* photographs showed the girls in the colour pink, wearing dresses or going shopping. These are discourses which can be associated with stereotypical views of gender and therefore support the pre-conceptions of femininity[lvii].

However, photographs chosen to convey *gender inappropriate* behaviour and appearance showed girls receiving football awards, wearing oversized t-shirts and competing in sporting events. This is interesting as the girls believed that achieving success in sports and being active were associated with being more masculine; a view also supported by stereotypical notions of gender.

The girls thought that being a 'girlie girl' or a 'plastic' was solely about appearance and façade. Whereas being a tomboy was not just about the perceived exterior but also involved the girls behaving in a certain way and adopting a specific personality. However, the girls in this research demonstrate that the feminine and masculine divides are not clear-cut. For example, one photograph shown was described by Jane as adhering to masculine traits because she was pictured playing a sport and wearing baggy clothes. Whereas Simone and Claire felt that the image related to more feminine dispositions due to Jane's pink top in the photograph and the way she wore her hair.

Similarly to Jeanes' [lviii] findings the girls in this study were knowledgeable of the different 'types' of girl and were competent when asked to recite their related traits. It may also highlight her findings whereby femininity is described as diverse but still limited in how it is adopted. All girls felt that they related to many different traits which are drawn from both the typically feminine and masculine pool of characteristics.

### ***Participation and power***

Through football practice and tournament observations there was much evidence in support of an increased amount of participation in girl's football. When the girls were asked why they liked playing football they said that it was relaxing, energetic, a chance to tackle people and *take your anger out* on something. However, in accordance with Jeanes' [lix] findings, all the girls in this research also realised that the men held all the power in football.

Swain's [lx] research concerning hegemonic masculinities portrayed that playing football helps to sculpt a boy's gender identity construction. Whereas the findings of this study show that football is not a necessary component of identity development for girls and the essence of femininity does not stem from playing alone. However, the girls in this research all used football as an instrument to help them create one of their many changing identities.

These adolescent girls are self-assured and play football because they can and are confident in their own abilities. Hayley epitomises this view,

'When I go out and play with the boys they are like "oh no we don't want you to play," but once you go and play they pass to us. They sometimes are just joking, but then you think, well we're good enough to play, otherwise we wouldn't be playing.'

The girls in this study know that they are 'good enough to play' as well as being good enough to play netball, basketball, go shopping, take dance lessons and go to school discos. This is important as it defies the research by Swain[lxi] which does not consider gender restrictions to be dissolved through mere competency levels. It seems that the girls in this research can enter into masculine dominated realms if their playing abilities are 'good enough.'

The girls in this study see playing football as a platform which they can use in order to prove to others that they can play football of a high quality. Throughout the research process the girls refer to wanting to prove themselves to the *lads* and be accepted as good players. Samantha at one stage in the research was upset after losing some matches in the football tournament and tells the researcher that 'the lads are going to laugh at us, they always do.' Therefore, a big concern of the girls playing football is how they will be perceived by the boys.

This need for reassurance links to the girls' desires to relate to typical notions of femininity in which they seek male approval. Therefore playing football for the girls is not an activity that can be performed in total isolation from stereotypical gender beliefs. This may influence future participation rates in two ways. Firstly, girls may cease from playing due to failing to prove themselves successfully to the boys and not being able to endure more taunting. Or, girls may continue to participate in order to prove the boys wrong by striving to reach success.

### **'Web of Selves'**

The girls in this research have all been affected by their surroundings at the local level. Claire noted that moving to secondary school was 'a massive change' which brought with it new friends, more homework and hard lessons. Constructing a feminine identity for the girls can be viewed as being a social task performed unaware at home, in school and out with friends. The girls show evidence of having to negotiate their own sense of femininity in a way which incorporates their sports participation. Although, negotiation here is not a negative manoeuvre involving limitations and restrictions. Negotiation for these girls merely means to rearrange their ever-shifting identities around playing football.

Mennesson[lxii] assumes that female sports players will experience a counter-identity, whereby the girls must compromise between being both a woman and a sports participator. However, a counter-identity implies the presence of two identities antagonising with one another, a description which is not relevant to the girls in this research. Not at any point in the research did the girls imply that they have concerns with being both a female and an athlete, a finding which also contrasts to Jeanes[lxiii] research which views football and femininity as being 'competing discourses.'

**Researcher:** Is there anything in which it is not known for a girl to do?

**Kate:** Not really

**Researcher:** So you think girls now will not get judged for doing anything?

**Hayley:** Well they may judge you, but they might not tell you openly about it.

**Researcher:** So you think that judging goes on still but now it is more discrete?

**Hayley:** Because now they know it is equal, it's like equality now; it's not as if it's the old days now.

Hayley refers to equality and having more freedom to choose what she does and who she does it with. Kate supports this notion and believes that twentieth century girls are not restricted by



social barriers as severely as they once were. This exchange conveys that the girls have no qualms with being both a female and an athlete. The equal society in which they believe they are part of does not wish to constrict these girls from having both of these identities. In this research the two personas of female and footballer are not *counter-identities* but rather *transferable identities* which change and adapt to every situation.

In keeping with Nash[lxiv] this research finds that it is harder for the girls to play football than boys as they have to challenge the dominant normative gender expectations placed upon them. Both practical and sociological restrictions burden the girls and make it more difficult for them to compete in the sport. Sociological restrictions include the rigid views held by both the boys and girls that play about girl's football. Girls describe boys as excluding them in some instances from the game and by 'showing off' in their presence.

However, these adolescent girls did not find it difficult to add football to their current *web of selves*[lxv]. Identities are not seen as fixed for the girls, Claire says that 'when I want to be I can be girly, but when I want to be I can be a tomboy as well.' Therefore the rigid 'types' of girls shown in the media are not accurate portrayals of girls' real identities. Hayley states that 'I don't really have a type, we're all just our own people, and we all do what we want to do and not to please anybody else.' All the girls in this research felt that they could shift between many changing identities; showing that even though they are affected by certain constraints they also experience a great deal of opportunity and freedom through their multiple identities.

The majority of girls in this research describe themselves as being 'in the middle' of the rigid 'girly girl'/tomboy dichotomy. However, a better description for the dichotomy could be a multi-faceted paradigm as all girls agreed that they have many identity options available to them which they can move fluidly between. For these girls playing football was seen as an added bonus to the other activities and events that occurred in their everyday lives. Playing football did not threaten their gender identities, but in fact accompanied their many other identities which they flittered between.

Jane described herself as a tomboy and she took football more seriously than the rest of the girls in the research. She is a member of a football club outside of school and football was an activity for her which dominated other sports in her life. Her chosen gender identity, similarly to the tomboys in Jeanes' [lxvi] study, was reinforced and complimented by her playing football. However, Jane engaged with the other girls about music and other discussion topics and enjoyed going to the school disco also. It can be depicted that Jane's football identity is a large part of her life but not the only part, leaving enough space to incorporate her other identities.

The girls in this research all believed that they would continue to play football in the future. However, further discussions lead to findings about future limitations.

**Researcher:** What problems, if any, do you think may arise if you wanted to carry on playing football in the future?

**Beverly:** We probably wouldn't get boyfriends and we probably wouldn't get picked to join a team because I don't know any adult teams.

**Researcher:** Why do you think you wouldn't get a boyfriend?

**Beverly:** Because boys aren't interested in girls that like to play men's sports.

**Claire:** I think they are.

**Hannah:** Also, because boys don't like it when you're better than them.

Beverly, Claire and Hannah are young girls from the sample group and express varying opinions. Claire's views complement the views of the older girls mentioned later in the dissertation all of

which are optimistic about relationships coinciding with football playing. Whereas Beverly and Hannah's opinions are similar to the girls in Jeanes' [lxvii] study who believed that playing football will be problematic in adult life. It is interesting that the girls all still want to play in the future despite acknowledging possible problems in terms of opportunity to play and relationship troubles. It can be suggested that these girls are all willing to maintain their fluid identities in the future, sliding between playing football, being a mother and wife and a career women.

### **Adolescence**

The younger girls in this study were 11 and 12 years old and the majority of them held similar opinions to girls in previous research [lxviii]. Whereas, the older girls aged between 13 and 15 years held more considered and mature opinions on the topics of femininity and football. It does seem that these girls experienced a great deal of continuous *identity organisation* in which they attempt to structure their many changing personas which they adopt. Beverly is an extremely sporty girl and plays football alongside many other activities, although she struggled to balance her sport playing with homework. It seems that increased opportunity for school sports participation ties in with increased levels of responsibility to maintain high grades. Alongside making new friends and sustaining a happy family life, adolescents who are both sporty and academic do have many *selves* to organise.

The *complex web of selves* [lxix] has much relevance to these findings. The girls had an after-school football tournament in which they played for two hours; however their evenings did not end immediately after. One girl had netball training after the tournament and the rest of the girls had a school disco to attend. This is interesting as football during adolescence appears to be another activity to be part of, sitting alongside school dances and other sports. This finding is similar to Jeanes' [lxx] work in which girls did not prioritise football above all other activities. The complex web of multiple identities that these girls weave is mirrored by the increased opportunities available to them since growing older.

The girls in Jeanes' [lxxi] research all state that they will not carry on playing football in the future as continual participation may jeopardise their chances of marriage and relationships. However the majority of girls in this research saw no problems with carrying on playing football in the future. A reason for this may be because all the girls in this study have been playing football for many years and were in a team prior to the research being held. Whereas the girls in Jeanes' study were asked to join football training to form part of the study; this may have effected the girls' commitment and dedication to the sport.

**Researcher:** Do you think playing football in the future will affect your chances of having relationships or getting married?

**Kate:** It won't affect our chances because they might like football.

**Charlotte:** Yeah, but it's manly; they might think you're like a man.

**Hope:** If you have something in common to talk about and play and you can have a kick about in your back garden. You've got something in common.

**Hayley:** I think the men would appreciate it if they could sit down with their wives or girlfriends and watch the game together and discuss it together.

Charlotte and Hope are the youngest girls in the above discussion, but both held different opinions

about the issue. It seems that Charlotte's thoughts were similar to the girls in Jeanes' research, whereas Hope's opinions were more in line with those of the older girls in the discussion. Therefore identity development can be seen as being an individual, personal and unique process which is not wholly dependent upon age.

### **The boys**

Overall, the boys in this study conveyed sincere support for females to play football but believed that the gender separation of the game should continue in schools. Furthermore, boys' and girls' opinions differ on many issues and occasionally stereotypical beliefs held by the girls cloud the reality of the situation.

These findings support previous research findings[lxxii] which proposed that females are marginalised and discounted from the game of football due to their gender. Some of the girls in this study have experienced a great deal of animosity when wanting to play football with the boys, Jane said that she enjoys playing with the boys but 'they got all angry and wouldn't let me play.' Kate suggested a reason for this could be because 'they think they're the best and they're not.' These reflections of inequality on the football pitch reinforce Swain's idea that the school playground is an arena promoting notions of hegemonic masculinities.

However, the girls in this research believed that boys excluded them from the game because of biased opinions and physical power. Charlotte stated that 'they are bigger and think they can rule,' and the boys also looked upon their physicality as the main isolating factor for the gender divide.

**Researcher:** Do you think football is a sport that girls and boys can play equally?

**Steve:** Boys with boys, and girls with girls but not mixed up.

**Researcher:** Why not?

**Steve:** I think more arguments happen when it's like that.

**Vince:** I think it's because of the physical side.

**Researcher:** Because females are not as physically strong?

**Vince:** No, I think some are but sometimes boys are a bit more physical and go in harder.

**Steve:** Some girls are actually quite good at football.

**Vince:** Some girls are better than boys but I'm just saying about the physical side.

Here, the boys recognise that some girls are competent football players, but the boys themselves feel that they cannot play to their most physical level when playing with or against females. This is contradictory to the girls who note that 'you can tackle people' as one of the best things about playing the sport. In keeping with this Hayley, a competent player, attacks the boys' views,

'If they're playing against you and treat you differently, like they don't go in and tackle you or anything, then you feel like, I've not come here just to play and look good in front of all you boys, I've come to play football.'

It seems that when the boys did not tackle the girls and avoided using strength against them the girls found this insulting. The girls want to be taken seriously when playing and treated equally and therefore tackling and physical strength would be part of that. However, the boys do not want to go in too strongly or be overtly physical with the females because it seems like an *unnatural* prospect for them to do so. Playing football beside and against females involves accepting the female as a team mate, comrade and opponent. Accepting the female as a comrade

on the pitch involves allowing that female to step over the invisible barrier of patriarchal hegemony which restricts the male's actions as much as the female's.

### **Concluding remarks**

The relationship between boys, girls and football is an intricate one. The present research has established that both girls and boys are constrained to some extent by persistent gender stereotypes. These gender stereotypes are important markers for the way in which girls and boys judge their own participation in football and the opposite gender's participation alike. However, freedom also appears in the girls' experiences through their ability to shift from one desirable identity to the next.

Unlike other research the girls' identities in this article of being both footballer and female did not antagonise one another, rather they sat happily next to each other, amongst their other identities. The adolescent girls in this study were more comfortable with the idea of playing football in the future. It is possible that the adolescent girls were more competent in *organising* their *web of selves* so that the competing discourses of potential wife and footballer did not interfere.

This research acknowledges that the young girls do have greater opportunity to negotiate their identities through football but similarly to Jeanes[lxxiii] it is noted that 'participating in football did not provide the girls involved in the research with a space to resist dominant gender norms.'

The game of football is typically associated with male dominance, masculine pride and competitive spirit. Whereas the new found popularity of the female game looks to assert women's football as being of equal importance and worth as the men's game. The girls in this study show feisty ambition and want to continue to play football even though they are aware of the lack of power females hold in the game. However, they also continually seek male attention, approval and support. Beverly announced the possible benefits of being a professional footballer would be to 'show the lads.' Throughout this research the girls continuously reverted back to wanting to prove themselves to the boys and show that they were talented players. This need to reach masculine standards will only hinder the future growth of the women's game; female players should aspire to only reach their own targets.

This research has brought together many key issues concerning girl's football, gender identity and the future of the sport. The girls in this study were aware that dominant normative gender expectations affect them in everyday life. However, their awareness of this issue did not entirely restrict them in any way; they continued to reach out to both feminine and masculine traits associated with the supposed gender binary. The girls moved between many changing identities which continually adapted and changed depending on the social stimuli present. Some of these different identities could be viewed as being competing; however the way in which the girls *organised* their identities ensured that a balance could be kept between them all.

### **Notes**

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**1. Jeanes, 'Girls, Football Participation and Gender Identity'; Jeanes, "I'm into heels and make up"**.

2. Curry, 'Adolescence'.
3. Football Association, 'Women and Girls',  
<http://www.thefa.com/GetIntoFootball/Players/PlayersPages/WomensAndGirls>.
4. Football Association, 'Game Changer'.
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