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# Football Follies: Featuring the Struggles of Female Soccer Players Internationally

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Passionate fans crowd the stadium, and the constant buzz of excited people cannot be quieted. The anticipation builds with every passing minute, and the atmosphere is electric. The World Cup, one of the most widely viewed sporting events, is an event that has been bringing soccer fans together since 1930; however, until 1991 only professional men's teams could enjoy this atmosphere and the glory that surrounds it. It took sixty-one years to include women's teams in the World Cup, and female soccer players still struggle daily to gain the recognition they deserve. Soccer is considered the world's game, and in almost every country soccer is a lifestyle. Despite this universal popularity, though, the sport still exhibits disparities. Male players are cheered and all but worshipped within the sports community, while female players are often under-rated or in some cases even prohibited from playing. This phenomenon is produced by deeply-rooted cultural norms and ideologies, and causes a worrisome trickle-down effect for future generations of athletes.

### **Cultural Stereotypes Lead to Discrimination**

Pelé, Maradona, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, and Messi are names that have become synonymous with soccer, and these athletes' accomplishments have re-defined the game. However, female athletes are still in the process of receiving the same status despite comparable accomplishments. Many countries did not even have women's soccer teams until the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) issued a mandate for their creation (Stewart, 2012). The Israeli national soccer association, for example, did not create a women's league until 1998, and did so mainly in order to comply with FIFA's mandate (Stewart, 2012). Another notable example illustrating the struggle of female soccer players can be seen in Brazilian culture, where the people live and breathe soccer (da Costa, 2014). The men's team has celebrity status with Pelé, the soccer king, leading the way (da

Costa, 2014). However, women's soccer was not given official recognition until the 1980s, and queen Marta did not take her hard-earned place on the soccer stage until the early 2000s when the national team started winning championships (da Costa, 2014). Despite the Brazilian national team's success then, its players still face a myriad of problems now, as do women's teams in many other countries (da Costa, 2014). These glaring differences between men's and women's programs can be attributed to masculine stereotypes often surrounding soccer (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). In countries like Brazil, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Israeli, and even the United States, it is commonly accepted that soccer is a man's sport (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015; Pelak, 2010; Lacheb, 2016; Stewart, 2012; da Costa, 2014; Isard, 2013). This ideology and the cultural beliefs behind it often lead to both social and economic discrimination against female soccer players.

### **Social Discrimination**

Social discrimination has many forms, and each one can impact women's soccer teams in a variety of ways. The most common forms of social discrimination stem from religion, dress restriction, and negative connotations surrounding femininity (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). Some religions have extremely sexist views, and think that women should play a subordinate role in society (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). Muslim countries are especially susceptible to this ideology; Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, India, Israel, and Afghanistan are just a few countries where women face religious barriers when playing soccer (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015; Isard, 2013; Stewart, 2012). The ramifications for female soccer players in these societies can vary in severity (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). In Egypt, for instance, female players claim that family members are responsible for dissuading them from the game, claiming that

soccer is forbidden in Islam (Ackerman and Asquith, 2015). Whether or not this philosophy aligns with the Islamic religion, it is a deeply-rooted opinion throughout the Middle East. Afghani women report receiving extremely threatening text messages, while Indian women were forced off the field because a cleric issued a fatwa, or religious opinion, against women playing soccer: elsewhere, Saudi Arabian women faced extremely harsh criticism when a local cleric claimed that soccer for women was the equivalent of “steps to the devil” (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). According to Stewart (2012), the Banat Sakhnin soccer team is the only Palestinian Arab squad in the Israeli national league. Their coach claims to personally make phone calls and house visits to his players’ families to convince them that their daughters’ reputations will not be tarnished from playing soccer (Stewart, 2012).

An additional form of discrimination can be found in the way that many women, in order to play soccer at all, must treat or market it as a hobby and not a career, as otherwise they face harsher criticism (Stewart, 2012). Women in Turkey certainly face this issue; one coach reported that he had more men coming to practice asking his players, “What are you doing here? You should be home cooking,” than actual fans (Scheifer, 2009). In addition, the same coach reported having to go door to door to convince players and their families that soccer is an acceptable pastime for women (Isard, 2013).

Religiously-based discrimination is also an issue. Recently, Turkey established a women’s national league; however, their players must still be extremely careful. When traveling, they must stay in the hotel and are not allowed to go out because it is seen as improper (Isard, 2013). As a result of religious discrimination, the number of women playing soccer is drastically reduced. For example, in Turkey for a population of 70 million there are only 798 registered female soccer players: this number pales in comparison to the 230,000 registered male soccer players (Stewart, 2012).

Religious views also create problems for women who face required dress codes, although dress restrictions are not purely religious. For example, Ackerman and Asquith (2015) cite inadequate access to sanitary napkins and sports bras as one of the reasons many women are prohibited from playing the sport. On Israel's Banat Sakhnin soccer team, for instance, menstruating players are seen by the doctor and subsequently not allowed to play in the next game (Stewart, 2012). This "red flag" is seen as the ultimate separation of power and seen as an unbreakable link to femininity (Stewart, 2012 p. 749). In addition to basic feminine necessities, though, women who wear a hijab are often discriminated against in westernized societies, despite the hijab's religious significance (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). France, Singapore, and Iran are cited for adopting this belief, and FIFA contributed to dress discrimination by outlawing players with headscarves until 2012 (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). Yet in Muslim countries such as Turkey it is seen as improper for women to be wearing shorts and t-shirts, and older members of society believe female soccer players should cover up their arms and legs to preserve their modesty (Isard, 2013).

A final form of social discrimination involves negative connotations of femininity, which take their toll on female athletes internationally. This discrimination takes place in both the East and the West. In westernized countries, the negative connotation of femininity is less severe, but still a definite hindrance for female players. In Brazil and the United States, for instance, female soccer players are sexualized and emphasized for their bodies instead of their athletic accomplishments (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015; Kristiansen, Broch, & Penderson, 2014). In addition, female players are expected to embody traditional feminine characteristics, which are rarely conducive to soccer as a sport that requires wit, endurance, and aggressiveness (Kristiansen et al., 2014). Interviewed players claimed that the more feminine they were, the more their so-called "masculine"

traits were accepted (Kristiansen et al., 2014). Athletes also believe that soccer is considered more of a women's sport in the United States because American football is the dominant men's sport of the country, making gendered discrimination in American soccer less severe (Kristiansen et al., 2014).

In addition to these insights, Kristiansen, Broch, and Pederson (2014) also cite homophobia as a reason for the decreased popularity of the women's national team, observing the common thought that soccer and the close teams it requires often convey a sense of overt female companionship. This view is not restricted to the United States: in Brazil, Marta was questioned on her sexuality in several interviews (da Costa, 2014). This line of questioning is a unique trend because these homophobic stereotypes are not present in Brazilian gymnastics, volleyball, or basketball – largely because these sports are seen as more traditionally feminine (da Costa, 2014).

The Brazilian women's team has also been adversely affected by the belief that only men are good at soccer. As a result of lesser resources stemming from this belief, the women's national team is extremely disorganized and does not practice on a regular basis (da Costa, 2014). For Brazilian women, their best chance of achieving their dream to play soccer is often to play on foreign teams because there are so few female clubs in Brazil (da Costa, 2014). The Brazilian women's teams are lucky if they play a few scrimmages per year while the men's team is a fully-functioning, fully-paid entity with sponsors, a technical commission, and a full season schedule (da Costa, 2014). In addition to Brazil and the United States, Tunisian women also face extremely harsh criticism in a world that sees soccer as a men's game: female players are not allowed to wear makeup and any presentation of feminism is prohibited (Lacheb, 2016). As in Turkey, this ideology of soccer as a man's sport greatly harms participation: as of 2011, only 899 female athletes were registered, three percent of the country's total number of soccer players (Lacheb, 2016). In South Africa, soccer was seen as such a men's

game that the original generation of players often experienced acts of outright violence; today, however, their hardships are more associated with economic discrimination (Pelak, 2010).

### **Economic Discrimination**

Economic discrimination often occurs as a result of social discrimination. Its vast effects make it almost impossible for women to make an honest living playing the game they love. Economic discrimination can be broken down into two categories: salaries and media.

Salaries are obviously imperative to the viability of professional women's soccer, and unfortunately, constitute an area where female athletes suffer the most discrimination within the game. In Brazil Marta, one of the world's best female soccer players, was forced to live on the grounds of her club soccer facility because she did not make enough to support herself outside the sport (da Costa, 2014). Palestinian Israel doesn't even provide its players with a salary for playing soccer. Instead, they are given a scholarship to go to school; however, players who do not pursue this option are not paid at all (Stewart, 2012). Moreover, a plethora of other countries have also cited discrepancies in wages. Studies conducted in the United States are perhaps the most revealing. Both the men's and women's teams play twenty "friendlies" games a year; however, women make \$3,600 dollars per game with a \$1,350 bonus per win, while men make \$5,000 per game with a \$8,166 bonus per win (Ward, 2016). To provide a better perspective, a total winning season would yield \$99,000 for the women and \$263,320 for the men (Ward, 2016). The World Cup disparities are even greater, with the women earning \$20,000 for third place, \$32,500 for second place, and \$75,000 for first place (Ward, 2016). On the other hand, the men's team would earn \$52,803 for

third, \$260,417 for a second place finish, and a whopping \$390,625 for a first place finish (Ward, 2016). In addition, men also earn \$750 more than women for every sponsorship appearance (Ward, 2016). In addition to these discrepancies, though, female soccer players also receive less media attention than their male counterparts, which further reduces the opportunities for such sponsorship in the first place (Allison, 2016).

Media has a tremendous impact on society, influencing cultural norms at rates and scales that cannot be overlooked. The media, however, has not been accommodating to women's soccer on an international scale, with a plethora of countries claiming that sponsorships and air time are limited (Allison, 2016; da Costa, 2014; Stewart, 2012; Pelak, 2010). In the United States, sponsorships and the media drive soccer, as is especially evident for the men's teams, which have always been able to adapt to a corporate approach (Allison, 2016). Men are also more likely to say that money will yield success versus skill and talent (Allison, 2016). Interviewed athletes claimed that the media sees women as a less profitable investment, not only for television broadcasts, but for sponsorships as well (Kristiansen et al., 2014): players also contended that soccer needs role models in order to challenge and ultimately change this perception (Kristiansen et al., 2014). Notable examples include Mia Hamm and Brandi Chastain, who were so popular that the media went against common practice to advertise with them (Kristiansen et al., 2014).

The women's soccer team in South Africa suffered a more extreme illustration of how media and franchise ownership can collude to hinder female soccer players. As the South African women's team gained popularity, the men's team rebelled, and after three years of clashes, the women's team was absorbed under the men's leadership (Pelak, 2010). Consequently, the female players were taken less seriously and sponsorship dwindled as the new leadership let opportunities for media coverage expire. This vicious and harmful pattern greatly reduced



growth at the professional level, and that growth has continued to decline ever since (Pelak, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

As a result of both social and economic discrimination, female soccer players are kept out of the spotlight, hidden within society, and in some cases are forced to suffer professional and personal inequalities, or even violent treatment, in silence. Having the power of speech is imperative for change, yet the majority of female soccer players lack a credible, attention-drawing voice, which is why these issues remain unchallenged. In many Muslim countries, for instance, the only voice that female athletes have is through the men who run their programs, who may not have the women's best sport or career interests in mind (Stewart, 2012). Even internationally, women in current sports leadership comprise only seven percent of the total coaching and administrative roles, hardly enough to inspire change (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). Female leadership is so low that FIFA has issued an initiative to level the playing field, promoting funding for female coaches, administrators, and licensed players (Ackerman & Asquith, 2015). Although no timetable was set on this initiative, it still provides a glimmer of hope that women's professional soccer is changing. Maybe one day women of all nationalities, sexualities, and races will be able to enjoy the beautiful game as it was meant to be: an equal opportunity for both men and women to excel.

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