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1 ***“I don’t think women’s football, not in our lifetimes anyway, can be equal to***
2 ***men’s”***: Players’, coaches’, and managers’ perceptions on the economic
3 **future of women’s football in Europe.**

4
5 **Abstract**

6 In a globalisation era of women’s football, where there is increased media attention and rising
7 participation rates, gaining the perceptions of those involved in women’s football of how best
8 practices are being implemented to secure the development of the game, can be useful for
9 understanding future commercial viability. Using an interpretivist, qualitative approach,
10 interviews were conducted with 26 players, 17 coaches, 13 managers and five
11 administrators/referees from six European countries and evaluated thematically. Themes
12 included: ‘club financing’, ‘equality in football’, ‘club development’, ‘the footballer’s career’
13 and ‘implementing good practice’. Participants felt it was mainly the country’s football
14 federation that was responsible for funding, resources, youth development, pay equality and
15 player support, but that these were challenged by historically and socio-culturally rooted
16 perceptions of gender equality.

17 **Keywords:** Soccer; female; gender; sport; economy

18 **Word count:** 7223

1 **Introduction**

2 Between the 1920s and early 1970s, women were prevented from accessing all member
3 clubs' football (soccer) grounds due to a formal ban imposed by two-thirds of the ruling
4 national football associations worldwide (Cox & Pringle, 2012; Williams, 2009). When the
5 ban was rescinded, women's football entered a 'modern era' with institutional changes
6 occurring between the 1970s and 1990s (Valenti et al., 2018). These changes led gradually to
7 the start of a globalisation stage, with participation rates rising, international tournaments
8 attracting increasingly larger global audiences and the commercial value of the women's
9 game growing rapidly (FIFA, 2022; UEFA, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). In theory, if progress
10 continues at the same rate, women's football could parallel the economic infrastructure and
11 investment that is seen in the men's game, although several factors might collectively
12 contribute to (or prevent) its development.

13 Defining 'development' within the context of sport is challenging (Shilbury et al.,
14 2008)p. 218) argue that it is, "the need for sporting organisations to ensure a sustainable
15 future by attracting and nurturing participants likely to progress through the system and
16 represent a sport at the elite level" They also add that "clearly, not all participants are likely
17 to be semi-elite or elite athletes" (Shilbury et al., 2008, p. 218), and further indicate that
18 consumption of a given sport (e.g., attendance at or TV audience of sporting events, purchase
19 of memberships, merchandise) is a fundamental part of its development. Therefore, sport
20 stakeholders must combine simultaneous efforts at both elite and grassroots levels to facilitate
21 development. In other words, whilst sports necessitate a large pool of participants to ensure
22 that the system has a strong foundation, the product at the elite level must also be attractive
23 for spectators, media and sponsors to generate income and achieve financial viability.

24 The development and evolution in women's football have been examined from an
25 economic and behavioural perspective. Economically, success in women's football in

different countries has been gauged using game outcome in international matches, spectator numbers and world rankings (Klein, 2004; Lagaert & Roose, 2018; Valenti et al., 2020b). The relative contribution of macro- and meso-level factors to these economic markers in women's football have been debated (Hoffmann et al., 2006; Klein, 2004; Lagaert & Roose, 2018; Meier & von Uechtriz, 2020). For instance, at the macro level, a country's gross-domestic product, talent pool, climate and the men's football legacy have been found to be significant predictors of women's football performance (Valenti et al., 2020b), whereas others have found that the political system and gender equality in the work force have been more important in determining women's footballing success (Arrondel & Duhautois, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2006; Klein, 2004). These macro-level factors are often country specific. For instance, in terms of gender equality, macro-level factors have been found to, in part, explain sport event attendance, with differences in men's and women's attendance generally being smaller in countries of the European Union with higher levels of gender equality (Lagaert & Roose, 2018).

Meso-level factors, which refer to federations, clubs, schools and the media, are also important contributors to international success in women's football (De Bosscher et al., 2006; De Bosscher, 2018; Meier & von Uechtriz, 2020). Such factors include financial investment, implementation of effective policies, talent identification/development programmes, support for careers, provision of high-quality facilities and access to high-quality coaching and sport science support (Jacobs, 2014). These meso-level factors can also differ according to the country and the amount of investment in these factors by the country's governing body. At the micro-level, it is fundamental that the perceptions and beliefs of those working in women's football, concerning best practices, governance and sustainability, receive attention (Woodhouse et al., 2019). When compiling the thoughts and beliefs about women's football and its development, women's football has often been perceived to be existing in a gendered,

1 hegemonistic environment shaped by historical, social and cultural influences (Tate, 2013;
2 Williams, 2007, 2009). Gaining feedback from players, coaches and managers around best
3 policies, practices and strategies implemented from the top, can be useful for examining how
4 women's and girls' football is perceived to be developing.

5 The aim of the present study, therefore, was to gather insights from stakeholders
6 involved in women's football, fostering a comprehensive exploration of perceptions and
7 beliefs regarding the development of the women's game. While data were distinctly sourced
8 from different regions of Europe, the primary objective was not a direct comparison of these
9 contexts, unless there were obvious differences that arose. Instead, the inclusion of multiple
10 countries served to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how women's
11 football is evolving in various parts of Europe. Overall, the purpose of the current study was
12 to explore players', coaches', managers' and administrators' experiences of financing,
13 resources and career support deployed around women's football practices.

16 **Materials and methods**

17 This research used an interpretivist, qualitative approach, supported by a relativist ontology in
18 which reality is viewed as a finite subjective experience, influenced by complex social
19 environments (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). The approach of this research is primarily
20 exploratory, and it aims to describe contexts and gain in-depth insights into perception and
21 beliefs regarding women's football development by stakeholders operating at various levels
22 in different countries. This approach was deemed an effective way of understanding the
23 perceptions and experiences of those involved in football and informed the choice of
24 interviews and the reflexive thematic analysis used for data interpretation.

1 Six countries, Bulgaria, England, Finland, France, Poland and Spain, were involved in
2 the study. Since this study was part of a larger study, covering a wider range of topics,
3 countries were pre-selected, primarily based on expertise of the researchers within each
4 country, but also acknowledging that there would be differences in stages of women's
5 football evolution, identified, for instance, by FIFA rankings (FIFA, 2023). All participants
6 were initially recruited via a survey, from which the interview participants were recruited.
7 The survey was disseminated via social and mass-media channels, and by direct email to each
8 country's respective football federation. The survey was completed by 1,129 participants. Of
9 these, 168 consented to being contacted for interviews and 61 gave their informed consent to
10 be interviewed. To be eligible, participants had to be ≥ 18 years of age, involved in women's
11 football (i.e., players, coaches, administrators, managers, officials involved at amateur, semi-
12 professional or professional level for at least one hour per week), and live and play football in
13 one of the six participating countries. Interviews were either with one individual or as a
14 group, depending on availability. In total, there were nine group interviews conducted with
15 21 participants, and 40 individual interviews. Demographic data of participants are given in
16 Figure 1. Ethics was approved by XXX (anonymised).

17
18 INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE
19

20 The interview guide covered topics on perceptions of best practices and future needs around
21 pay, sponsorship, resources, career support/progression and player development. Topics were
22 broad, but prompts about 'what', 'why', 'how' were used to incite conversation and debate.
23 The topic guide was developed by examining existing evidence on contributors to success in
24 women's football.

Interviews took place online between 7th June and 3rd December 2021 and were conducted in the country's official language. Group interviews comprised between two and eight participants, and individual interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. Mean duration of interviews was 34.33 min, with duration varying according to whether one-to-one or group interviews (longest was 1 hour 40 min). Recordings were transcribed, then translated into English (if needed), before being analysed. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was conducted using NVivo 12 Pro. Researchers (LS and NE) immersed themselves in the data, revisiting and refreshing codes and themes, and questioning each other's assumptions and positionings (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Any differences that arose were discussed and an agreement made. Themes were actively developed through patterns of shared meaning and were inductively derived. Participants were invited to comment and reflect on the data and its interpretation (none of the participants came back regarding transcripts, data and translations). Anonymised quotes were extracted from the data to support themes.

Results (with commentary)

Five themes were developed: 'Club financing', 'equality in football', 'club development', 'the footballer's career' and 'responsibility for implementing good practice'. Each theme is discussed and, where relevant, illustrated by participant quotes, which are coded to denote country (B=Bulgaria, E=England, F=Finland, FR=France, PO=Poland and Spain=S), participant number (#1...#170), gender (W=Woman, M=Man), and role at the club (A=Administrator, C=Coach, M=Manager, P=Player and R=Referee). For example, a code of FR#13WC denotes that the individual is from France, is participant 13, is a woman and a coach.

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Club financing

Several funding sources were highlighted, with clubs often accessing multiple sources to ensure sustainability. These sources included sponsorship, match fees and fundraising alongside marketing campaigns.

Securing funding

Several clubs were financed by local government or received subsidies linked to women’s sports. Other clubs received income through match days (e.g., entry fees, programmes and catering). Some teams supported themselves financially with money received by participating in competitions or by funds raised through friends and family. Most funding sources were not seen as secure: “If you depend exclusively on public money [and] something...happens...[like] an economic crisis...and the municipality runs out of funds, you are left without a team...it makes women’s sport a bit precarious” (S#7MM).

Securing sponsorship in some clubs involved each player finding their own sponsorship. Other teams had sponsors, but mainly people contributing on an ad hoc basis, often people who had an existing association with the club. Some clubs had “never really had a lot of visibility in the community...so there’s never been any large companies saying, ‘I’ll back you. I’ll support you’” (E#29WC). It was felt that as women’s football is “not a media sport [and] hardly anyone watches it, it does not bring any income, hence the sponsors are not interested” (PO#3WC). It was felt that if women’s teams were to have more visibility, it would be more attractive to potential sponsors: “if there is no visibility, it is very difficult to get a sponsor because, in the end, the sponsor is making an altruistic investment...without any return” (S#7MM). The 2019 World Cup created enthusiasm resulting in more interest in sponsoring women’s football. A manager from France said that sponsors are really only

1 interested in the women's game because of the novelty aspect. At amateur level, this was
2 reinforced as a "selling point...that we are a women's only club...because we've got that
3 niche. That's how we've been able to pull in sponsorship and media coverage" (E#40MM).

4 5 *Marketing*

6 Marketing through advertising and promotion was seen as an important component for
7 securing funding from both fans and sponsors. It was felt that the increasing marketing of
8 national teams would help support the growth of the grassroots game. The positive trend in
9 seeing more female representation in televised football programmes was thought to help
10 improve visibility of the players. Matches were often broadcast on a pay-for-view TV
11 channel, which "has been really good that...league games can be seen...and reach the
12 viewers" (F#41FP). One club decided to pay for [TV] broadcasts, which both recompensed
13 current sponsors, but also helped to bring in new ones, making it a worthwhile economic
14 expenditure.

15 Several clubs commented on the growth of newspaper articles for marketing
16 purposes: "Double page spread article...made a difference [in the number of spectators]"
17 (F#37MC). Other teams were proactive and contacted local reporters to increase news
18 coverage. It was felt there was no real improvement in the newspaper media interest, but that
19 more targeted publication of match information and interviews was needed to bring in
20 sponsorship.

21 It was deemed important to choose the right channel for marketing: "Social
22 networks...are more targeted in terms of age groups...the old[er people] go on websites, even
23 newspapers; the younger people go on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat" (FR#42WP).
24 Images and videos were thought to play an integral element in social media posts as they

1 attract more viewers. The use of social media allowed clubs to increase visibility, which also
2 helped with sponsorship.

3 While some teams had shared social media channels with the men's teams, others felt
4 it was important to be separate. Some clubs collaborated with the men's team when
5 marketing on social media to reach bigger audiences: "We've recently just been promoted...I
6 did an interview for that and normally that would [just] go out on our women's account, but it
7 actually went out on the men's account [as well]" (E#15WP).

8 In the face of limited funding by football governing bodies, the search for private
9 sponsors has typically been a complementary resource for women's sport (Brunette &
10 O'Reilly, 2018). Not surprisingly, in the present research, examples were given of how
11 funding was attracted through sponsorship and private fundraising, since relying on state
12 funding was seen as "precarious". However, one of the common problems, as pointed out by
13 the participants, is that this sponsorship is often limited (Clarkson et al., 2020), being
14 intertwined with media representation and visibility of the game (Caple et al., 2011).
15 Resembling the findings of Allison (2016) in women's professional soccer in the United
16 States, there was consensus that often sponsorship was philanthropically motivated
17 ("altruistic" and "more than for the return") (Allison, 2016), perhaps driven by the desire to
18 be 'seen' as supporting gender equality. There is, however, little research to support more
19 altruistic or seemingly altruistic reasons underpinning sponsorship deals for women (Lough
20 & Irwin, 2001). It is possible, though, that egalitarian policies could improve the promotion
21 of women's sport in the media (Fink, 2015), and hence sponsorship.

22
23
24 *Equality in football*

1 This theme examined equality for women players and the progression over the years,
2 including issues such as the availability and accessibility of resources. In addition, it builds
3 on the theme ‘club financing’ by considering equality in club funding and pay for women
4 players.

6 *Current status of equality*

7 Participants felt there was still a perception amongst many that women should not play
8 football. There are “social barriers...[since] in a family it’s always seen as less [favourable]
9 when a girl plays football. It’s not the image people have of a young girl” (FR#58MM). It
10 was felt that these stereotypical images were still being passed onto young girls, despite some
11 progress being made with equality: “The women’s game is still overshadowed...with
12 [sexism]” (E#2WA). With men’s football (and sport generally) still being watched much
13 more than women’s, these stereotypes are reinforced. While it was acknowledged that there
14 are still big issues with equality, participants also recognised that some progress had been
15 made. There is no longer such a social issue of women playing football and that this has
16 resulted in “women [now] feeling like they are being taken seriously” (FR#55WP). While
17 participants recognised how much women’s football has changed, it was widely
18 acknowledged that there was still a long way to go, and some felt they would never get to the
19 same “level”.

20 It was felt that some of the challenges women faced in terms of equality were due to a
21 lack of equitable support from the authorities. One coach commented that, “being a woman in
22 a sport that is...historically more for men, is not easy...sometimes, I’m tired of having to
23 show and prove [equality]” (FR#54WC). This notion of needing to ‘prove’ or fight for
24 equality was common; however, in a small number of teams, participants felt that they were
25 being treated in the same way as the men’s team.

Equality of club funding

It was considered that the women's teams have a very small budget compared to that of the men's. This discrepancy in funding was evident "in the lower clubs...[where] if they have a little bit of funding, they usually focus on the male side of the club than the females" (E#3WP). It was also noted that women have fewer spectators (and therefore revenue). For some clubs, the budget had increased, although it was still below that of the men's. For a small number, participants felt they were on a par with (or close to) that of the men's teams.

Some clubs had integrated with men's teams as it was felt that this strengthened their financial position. Other clubs liked the independence of managing their own budget:

...only way to regain power is to finance ourselves...it's up to us to take back control of this and stop waiting for subsidies or the distribution of money...we have to generate it ourselves and... [to be] effective, we have to have a few more women decision-makers (FR#13WC).

Resources

There were contrasting views about equal access to facilities, with some clubs reporting that they had the same opportunities for training as the men and they had "reached a position of equality between the male and female first teams" (F#40FC). Some clubs described themselves as lucky to be able to share the facilities with the men's teams. Other clubs did not have access to the grounds and sports facilities of the men's teams and felt the men had priority over the best pitches and access for training and matches. One manager commented that, "it can be difficult to have access to the ground if...men scheduled to play...even if we play at a higher level" (FR#44WM). For some, the problem of equality went beyond pitch

1 access, extending to support services, as it was said to be “difficult to obtain time
2 slots...when you...share the weight rooms, the medical services, the catering” (FR#52WM).

3
4 *Pay for women players*

5 The issue of salary discrepancy was seen as “an age-old problem” (PO#4WP). There was a
6 substantial difference in pay between men and women footballers and reported instances
7 where women competing and winning at an international level are still not being paid. “There
8 is no equality...a second division team for men and a second division team for women... [are
9 not seen] as equal, so they don’t live equally” (S#2MC). There was a suggestion that a
10 minimum salary is needed for women players, but it was felt that many clubs were not
11 financially able to pay players. It is commonplace for women not to be able to make a living
12 from football and often need to supplement their income with another job. As players move
13 into professional leagues they may be “disadvantaged by the fact that the league is now
14 professional” (E#41WA), as they are expected to focus on playing football and not
15 supplementing their income through other employment.

16 On a positive note, “the evolution [in pay for women] has been growing and...[some]
17 players can live from their [football]” (FR#51WP), but the differences were felt to still be
18 large. It was accepted by most that it is the men’s football that generates most of the money.
19 Television rights played some role in this, especially for those playing at the higher levels,
20 with the men bringing in much more. Therefore, “if you look at it from a business
21 perspective...you can’t justify equal pay” (E#15WP).

22 It’s quite evident that there isn’t...equality...I don’t think women’s football, not in
23 our lifetimes anyway, can be equal to men’s...the ladies at the top level get paid quite
24 a decent wage...unlike the men who get paid ridiculous amounts of money to play

1 football...[but] they don't get the same airtime as the guys. They don't have the same
2 sponsorship...we're still building (E#2WA).

3
4 Gaining equality in pay was seen as being "impossible because there is no equality in the rest
5 of the conditions, nor in visibility...nor on the issue of aid, or the issue of sponsorship...if
6 there is no equality in this, it is very difficult to have salary equality" (S#7MM). Some clubs
7 were able to offer support with things like transport, meals, rent, equipment or other bonuses
8 because they know that the women players are often unpaid or not able to support themselves
9 just through football.

10 Based on this theme, it was apparent that there was a gender inequality in football,
11 especially with regards to pay, but also access to facilities and support, and equality was
12 identified by all groups as a requirement for future improvement. This theme of gender
13 inequality was generated from the data even though the intention of the interviews was to
14 search for good practices. Participation and competition opportunities for women athletes are
15 strongly linked to the socio-cultural, religious traditions, law and political contexts in which
16 they live, with gender equality and empowerment being instrumental (Bredtmann et al., 2016;
17 Cho, 2013; Klein, 2004; Leeds & Leeds, 2013). In this regard, the progress of women's sport
18 depends on the influence of state policies (macro-level factors) on gender equality, an issue
19 that was highlighted by the participants in the present research, which can be developed at
20 three levels: By inserting the right to equal sport in the global discourse of human rights
21 (Knijnik & Horton, 2013); at the structural level by modifying legislative frameworks that
22 restrict women's participation in sport (Patel, 2015); and at the executive level through
23 specific measures that seek to promote sport equality (Soler et al., 2017). Furthermore, as
24 societies develop and accumulate physical and human capital, women become more

1 productive, which drives social norms towards gender equality (Damjanovic & Selvaretnam,
2 2020).

3 In previous studies, it has been shown that the promotion of gender equity is one of
4 the best platforms for promoting women's sporting excellence (Berdahl et al., 2015; Lowen
5 et al., 2016). Thus, when there is a predisposition to create a socio-cultural environment that
6 favours equality between men and women, the likelihood of women playing sport and
7 reaching the sporting elite is significantly increased (Berdahl et al., 2015). More specifically,
8 women athletes from countries where there is gender equality in all social spheres, including
9 in the workplace and in positions of political power, as well as a similar support system for
10 athletes regardless of their gender, are more likely to achieve success in major sporting
11 competitions (Klein, 2004; Leiva-Arcas, Vaquero-Cristóbal, Abenza-Cano et al., 2021). In
12 the current study, participants were mindful that inequality was a "problem all over the
13 world" (B#9WR) and "in every profession" (PO#10FP), and that stereotypes persisted
14 regarding girls being discouraged from playing football, which was believed to be reinforced
15 by the lack of media coverage.

16 The global socio-cultural and historical context of gender inequality and
17 discrimination in women's football, owing to its complex and checkered history (Tate, 2013;
18 Williams, 2007, 2009), was recognised by participants as being an "age-old problem".
19 Women's football was perceived to be "secondary" to men's football, less prioritised, less
20 supported, with girls discouraged from participation. The cited "gulf" between the salaries of
21 men and women footballers, despite, for instance, winning international games, was
22 particularly highlighted, but this was also accepted and perceived to be justified, because of
23 the vast amounts of money generated from men's football. Participants felt it was "right" that
24 there were differences, and felt "lucky", at the same time feeling that women constantly
25 needed to prove themselves to be worthy of equal pay. This feeling of acceptance and of

1 feeling grateful despite the inequality has been reported in previous literature with such
2 feelings thought to arise because of the patriarchal professionalisation of the women's game
3 (Culvin et al., 2021; Pavlidis, 2020). These moral grounds of pay inequality have been
4 debated in the literature regarding their cause (Archer & Prange, 2019), but participants
5 expressed how this was something that the national governing bodies of sport needed to
6 implement rather than the individual being able to control.

7 The issue of whether the women's team should be integrated with that of the men's,
8 or whether it should exist independently, arose in this theme of equality but also in the
9 subtheme of 'marketing for promotion', with participants expressing advantages and
10 disadvantages in both options (e.g., when discussing sponsorship and marketing). Integration
11 may be seen as desirable for enhancing professionalism, visibility and commercialisation of
12 the women's game (Valenti et al., 2018, 2020a), although there are also disadvantages, such
13 as being dependent on the financial decision-making powers, as well as the success/failure of
14 the men's team (Caudwell, 2011; Clarkson et al., 2020; Welford, 2018; Woodhouse et al.,
15 2019). In the current study, it was felt that a separate budget might allow women to "regain
16 power", and that the "niche" of women's-only clubs could be attractive to sponsors. Perhaps
17 though, as observed in the current study, companies might not be "ready to invest only in
18 women", and so integration becomes the preferred option.

21 ***Club development***

22 This theme considered how clubs have developed, including women's teams within clubs and
23 includes issues such as attracting players, the use of marketing to bring in new players, and
24 training adaptations.

1 *General club development*

2 Participants noticed the growth of women's football and its increase in popularity.

3 Participants from Bulgaria and Poland highlighted regulations that meant they were required
4 to have a women's team within clubs, helping to improve the quality and level of competition
5 within women's football. There were several reasons expressed for the growth in number of
6 women players, such as offering women's only training sessions, financial support, marketing
7 (advertising on social media, using a website): "[media] reports and realised that [the club]
8 was open to everyone...it encouraged women to come...and play football (FR#56WP). Some
9 clubs had turned players down as they were overwhelmed and lacked the infrastructure, such
10 as appropriate facilities and resources, to support larger numbers of players, preventing them
11 from developing further. There were some inconsistencies, with reports of numbers declining,
12 despite increasing media coverage.

13

14 *Attracting and maintaining players*

15 To attract and ultimately maintain new players, it was felt that the clubs were constantly
16 developing and adapting to meet player demand. One way of developing involved
17 strengthening connections with youth football, as clubs did not have enough young players.
18 Asking local professional clubs to talk to and motivate the youth groups gave them something
19 to aspire to. Additionally, improving relationships with schools and giving children the
20 opportunity to experience playing football was seen as important. Programmes such as
21 "Football at School" (E#36WM) and "School Games" (S#7MM) were successful, as was
22 establishing a "partnership [where girls] ...do their school sports section within the
23 framework of the club" (FR#55WP), in the hope of attracting them as players. Some schools
24 also reciprocated support for young players with "timetables that are adapted to allow them to
25 continue their studies and to have a sufficient number of [football] sessions" (FR#13WC).

1 Needing to adapt the timings of training was common amongst clubs. Changing
2 training times, for some, involved reducing the training hours so less commitment was
3 required, giving the women more time with families, especially for those travelling longer
4 distances to train. For other clubs, introducing more week-day training helped: “At the
5 weekend, women look after the kids, go shopping....so it was a question of allowing women
6 to meet for at least two hours during the week, to be able to play, to train, to play a match”
7 (FR#52WM); this was sometimes adapted depending on the season. These approaches helped
8 with maintaining players, increasing their loyalty to the club and the quality of their training.
9 Some coaches also reported being able to meet individual player needs: “if at any time their
10 schedule doesn’t allow them to be present at this session...individual sessions were offered to
11 them during the week” (FR#57WC).

12 The importance of youth development and attracting young players, which included
13 access to facilities and resources, were discussed by participants as relevant factors for the
14 growth of the game. The identification and development of sporting talent have been
15 recognised as important factors for achieving a successful approach through the Attraction,
16 Retention/Transition, Nurturing (ARTN) framework (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). This model
17 relies on the creation of sports programmes at local level for the early detection of talent
18 (highlighted in the current study by discussions on the importance of football in schools), to
19 then get the athlete rooted and committed to their sport and club (participants talked about
20 creating “loyalty” through e.g., adapting training), and finally for the political authorities to
21 promote the athlete’s sporting career towards the elite level (which is highlighted in the next
22 theme of ‘the footballer’s career’). There was a sense, though, that the player pathway could
23 be better defined. Another key point for success, according to the ARTN framework, is that
24 elite athletes need to have sufficient sports facilities to develop their sporting careers, both in
25 training and competition (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Access to and availability of well-

1 equipped, specific, and well-maintained sport facilities have been identified as essential
2 prerequisites in the development of successful national sport systems (Green & Oakley,
3 2001). Indeed, this was a further concern found in the present study within earlier themes
4 ('club development' and 'equality of resources'), as the participants pointed to a lack of
5 investment in infrastructure and a lack of priority over access. Investment in the player
6 pathway and in good-quality facilities and equipment is undoubtedly one of the ways in
7 which women's football can develop in the future.

9 *The footballer's career*

10 This theme considered the career opportunities available to players and includes
11 mobility/transfers between clubs and changes in roles to continue working in football after
12 retiring from play.

14 *Mobility/transfers*

15 Some players and coaches were unaware of any policy for career progression with some
16 suggesting there were no or very limited opportunities for career progression as a player. For
17 those playing at a higher level, the only option for career progression was seen as securing a
18 contract abroad. The introduction of contracts within some clubs made the transfer process
19 easier. Club finances were considered important when bringing in players "with top
20 teams...starting to bring in the better players...from...different countries...so they're
21 obviously putting more money into bringing in those players across" (E#39WP), which was
22 felt to ultimately raise the level of the football being played.

23 Some players felt that they needed to take charge of their own transfers or seek
24 opportunities themselves. It was felt that the process for transfers generally in women's
25 football is hard: Players felt they had "to make a statement...[as] a lot of people don't know

women players, so move[ment] between clubs is probably a bit more difficult than...[for] a male” (E#3WP). Because of the lack of players, some clubs tried to keep players, rather than allow them to transfer. This was considered “selfish for the clubs, because there are young players out there that could progress” (E#2WA).

Retirement/transition

Career opportunities after retiring as a player were generally not discussed within clubs. Some players reported they had “never even talked about the fact that such a thing is possible...it feels like everything should basically be taken care of by yourself” (F#39WP). It was felt there was insufficient support for women:

[There is a] bad...exit route...within the women's game for players who get released...in the men's game...the first thing they'll do with you is make sure you get your coaching badges or that you've got something after your playing career...that doesn't exist within the women's game (E#22MC).

However, some players were supported in planning for their future such as being encouraged into journalism, coaching, officiating or studying for a university degree, and some clubs offered support and advice through their trade union. Some players were supported financially to gain qualifications. This financial support was felt to be important due to the lack of financial stability for women players. However, there was felt to be a need for improvement because “if [women players] want to become a coach...it's still very difficult for them to break through...in a male-dominated area” (E#22MC). Some clubs started this process early by encouraging younger players to undertake training and qualifications. In addition, it was apparent that players supported each other in enhancing careers, as a player from France commented that:

1 *There are...[first team women players] who come to share their knowledge...and their*
2 *skills...it's always interesting because they have a player profile, so that means that*
3 *they know perfectly well what we feel and what we are going through...[it is]*
4 *interesting to have a mix of coaches and players who come from time-to-time to*
5 *support us (FR#56WP).*

6
7 Based on this theme of 'the footballer's career', there was a sense that support was in place
8 for career development, through increased opportunities for education and coaching when
9 transitioning out of football. The opportunity to transfer to other clubs was not deemed as
10 easy for women as it is for men in football, meaning players were often left to negotiate their
11 own contracts. Players, however, might feel obliged to move around clubs or play for more
12 than one club to sustain a viable income, especially since most professional contracts for
13 women are short-term (FIFPRO, 2020). Early career termination may occur if the player is
14 unable to support themselves financially or is not able to negotiate competing demands
15 (Grygorowicz et al., 2019; McGreary et al., 2021). Educational training, in particular coach
16 education, alongside playing football seemed to be encouraged. Indeed, it has been reported
17 that elite footballers might be more attracted to clubs that are associated with an educational
18 setting (Harrison et al., 2020). However, as acknowledged in the current study, opportunities
19 for coaching in a "male-dominated area" were felt to be limited, supporting previous
20 literature on negative stereotypes, discrimination, and isolation of women coaches (Burton et
21 al., 2012; De Haan et al., 2020; Madsen et al., 2017; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).
22 Support for careers and support for women coaches is, therefore, important to consider so that
23 women are kept in the game for as long as possible, and so that consideration is given to the
24 transition out of football, when applicable.

1 *Implementing good practice*

2 Participants suggested that good practice needed to be implemented from the ‘top-down’. For
3 example: “[The] Bulgarian Football Union...should encourage clubs to hire women coaches”
4 (B#3WC) and “develop a comprehensive policy towards the Bulgarian Football Union, but
5 also at the club level. It is necessary to follow the strategy for the development of women’s
6 football outlined by UEFA” (B#8WC). A manager from Spain felt that, “if the constitutional
7 law tells you that there must be equality, I think that the...manager must advocate for there to
8 be equality” (S#7MM), highlighting the need for equality to be written into
9 national/international policies. Without this higher-level support, participants felt they had
10 little control over developing women’s football. Similarly, “...until the important people in
11 football...start acknowledging...valuing and respecting the women’s game...we’ve got a
12 long way to go” (E#29WC). Although “UEFA and FIFA put emphasis on state unions so that
13 women are noticed and that they are treated equally with men...I do not think that it will ever
14 happen” (PO#10FP).

15 It was felt that the football federations needed to provide financial support through
16 grants, allowing clubs to build a team and increase media coverage. If “the Federation does
17 not give you that help, then few companies are going to [offer financial support]” (S#1MM).
18 Similarly, in England, it was believed that the responsibility lies with the Football
19 Association as support must “come from the top...without that...it is very detrimental to
20 opportunities for sponsorship, branding, awareness” (E#29WC).

21 In the quest for gender equality in sport, macro- and meso-level factors have been
22 analysed regarding their relative contribution to sporting success (De Bosscher et al., 2006;
23 Hoffmann et al., 2006; Klein, 2004; Lagaert & Roose, 2018; Meier & von Uechtriz, 2020).
24 Based on this final theme, meso-level factors that were perceived to be important, therefore,
25 included support (financial and otherwise) from the governing bodies or federations of sport

1 in their countries, supporting previous research that progress of women's sport depends on
2 the existence of support programmes promoted at the state level (Valenti et al., 2020b). A
3 direct link has been found between the resources invested at the state level in sport and
4 success achieved (Hogan & Norton, 2000; Leiva-Arcas, Vaquero-Cristóbal, Sánchez-Pato et
5 al., 2021). The state budget allocated to sport is deemed more important than the Gross
6 Domestic Product (GDP) of the country (a macro-level factor) (Blais-Morisset et al., 2017;
7 Houlihan & Zheng, 2015; Leiva-Arcas, Vaquero-Cristóbal, Abenza-Cano et al., 2021), since
8 the more financial funding available, the greater the chances that athletes can train in better
9 conditions and can devote more time to their sport (De Bosscher et al., 2012). Participants in
10 the current study seemed, therefore, aware of the importance of state intervention to achieve
11 economic success.

14 **Discussion**

15 The purpose of the study was to gather perceptions and experiences of those working in
16 women's football, specific to finance, resources and careers, with a view to considering the
17 sustainability and growth of women's football. Themes arising from the data centred around
18 club finances, club development and the footballer's career, but often, positivity in terms of
19 future development of women's football seemed to be undermined by perceptions of gender
20 inequality.

21 While the objective was not a direct comparison of data collected from stakeholders
22 operating across countries, a strength of the present study was that differences between
23 countries in terms of macro-level factors could be examined. Different political systems,
24 differences in gender equality and differences in terms of history and development of
25 women's football in each of the six countries might have influenced the perceptions of

1 participants involved. For instance, greater gender equality, as determined using a gender
2 inequality index (GEI), has been evidenced to predict Olympic success (Lowen et al., 2016).
3 In the current study, based on 2021 data, Finland had the highest GEI (86.1%), followed by
4 Spain (78.8%), France (78.4%), the UK (77.1%), Bulgaria (74.6%), and lastly, Poland
5 (71.5%) (World Economic Forum, 2021). There was a sense, that participants from Finland
6 (the country with the highest GEI) seemed to be more positive regarding equal allocation of
7 resources (e.g., “we have exactly the same opportunities to train in the same places as men”
8 (F#33WP), “help and resources are provided” (F#34WP) and “budget...pretty close to the
9 same” (F#40FC), but there was generally consensus on inequality regarding pay and media
10 coverage across all countries and between the different participants. Perhaps because the GEI
11 of all countries included in this study were all greater than the global average of 68%,
12 differences were not particularly discernible.

13 The size of the country’s population and its GDP per capita are two macro-level
14 factors that have been found to explain a country’s sporting success, as measured by Olympic
15 medal tally (Lui & Suen, 2008). Countries with larger populations provide larger critical
16 mass from which to find talented players (Bredtmann et al., 2016; Cho, 2013; Hoffmann et
17 al., 2006; Klein, 2004; Leeds & Leeds, 2013). Additionally, the wealth factor, expressed in
18 GDP per capita, classically used as an indicator of the quality of infrastructure or leisure time
19 available to potential athletes (Hoffmann et al., 2006), may enable women to develop their
20 careers in a more sustained way (Leeds & Leeds, 2012). In the current study, the larger
21 country sizes, in combination with GDP, of England, Spain and France may have dictated the
22 move to professionalism in these countries, although only Spain and England, out of the
23 countries included, had a fully professional women’s league at the time of data collection.
24 Division 1 Féminine (D1F) in France, the Bulgarian women’s league (Bulgarian: Българска
25 женска лига) in Bulgaria, Kansallinen Liiga in Finland and the Ekstraliga in Poland had, at

the time, a mix of professional and semi-professional women's teams in their top leagues. It was interesting that the comment on women players feeling "disadvantaged" owing to the professionalisation of the leagues came from England, one of the countries that has experienced professionalisation. As has been reported previously, professionalisation of women's football, within a traditionally patriarchal organisation, has drawbacks (Williams, 2009), such as exploitation of players in terms of pay (Culvin & Bowes, 2021), exclusion of teams that are not aligned to men's teams or that are unable to have the finances or success contributors (namely spectator numbers) (Woodhouse et al., 2019), as well as obligatory change without consultation (Kjær & Agergaard, 2013; Woodhouse et al., 2019). Using England as an example, the Football Association has a total monopoly over the women's game, with stakeholders marginalised, leading to the coaching environment becoming overly competitive, results-driven and uncaring (Lewis et al., 2022). At the semi-professional level and even at fully professional level, many women football players need to supplement their sporting income with other paid jobs to achieve financial stability, which affects the development of their professional sporting careers and even their identity as a player (Ando et al., 2022). As one Polish woman coach in the current study explained, salaries were insufficient to "live with dignity" (PO#3WC). Population size, GDP, and professional organisation may, therefore, have led to slightly different perceptions of the current situation and of the future sustainability of women's football.

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, the aspects highlighted may be interconnected rather than independent. Researchers should, therefore, focus on the specific ways in which these aspects are related and mediate to enhance the economic and egalitarian development of women's football. Secondly, the information gathered through the qualitative technique, using interviews, could have been complemented with other information-gathering techniques such as questionnaires, so that results could have been obtained from a larger

1 population. Themes may have been diluted due to having collected data from six different
2 countries in Europe, and across the spectrum of players, coaches and managers. For instance,
3 a more focused examination of the experiences of just players, comparing two distinct
4 countries, could be undertaken to elicit a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of
5 cultural or structural differences in football. To gain a broader, global perspective,
6 comparisons between countries of different wealth and gender equality could have been
7 included.

8 There has been no previous study, in which a large sample of stakeholders who span
9 different countries have been comprehensively interviewed on their perceptions and beliefs
10 about the development of women's football. The breadth of geographical contexts enabled a
11 richer, more layered perspective on the dynamics shaping women's football across Europe.
12 Although there were minor differences due to the country's population size, wealth, GEI and
13 professionalisation, there were similar perceptions between participants, regardless of country
14 or role in the club, about what was required for the successful development of women's
15 football. For instance, there were very similar viewpoints expressed about the lack of gender
16 equality in funding, pay, resources, and about how opportunities for a career in football were
17 "few and far between" (E#29WC) for women. Possibly reflecting the country's social-
18 cultural and historical contexts, there were slight discrepancies in how the participants felt
19 about the extent of state input and how women's and men's clubs were and should be
20 organised locally (such as being integrated or not).

21 The present qualitative approach, based on the experiences of managers, coaches and
22 players in women's football in different European countries, led to the identification of areas
23 of development and future economic perspectives, which could be considered in the coming
24 years for a sustainable and gender-equal development of football. Areas perceived to be
25 important included the need for football federation investment in resources, player

development and equality of pay, at the same time as teams and clubs attempting to attract private sponsorship through increased visibility, club integration and promoting the women's game as a "niche". Gender inequality, mainly defined by macro-level historical and sociocultural contexts globally and nationally, but also how women's football has been hindered by a 50-year ban, was perceived to be a barrier to development, disappointingly leaving participants feeling that women's football will never "get to the level that men have". Despite the apparent surge of women's football on the global stage, and despite minor differences between the European countries investigated in the study in terms of the contribution of macro- and meso-level factors, the perceptions of key stakeholders, from all levels of football, are that gender inequality in women's football remains pervasive and inhibitory.

Figure caption

Figure 1. Characteristics of interview participants according to identified gender, role and country.

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