

WOMEN, FOOTBALL AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION. AIMS AND QUESTIONS, METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to introduce a new research topic and provide information about a European research project focusing on football as a means of European integration. Using the results of available studies of the author and other scholars, it is to be discussed whether and how women can participate in football cultures and contribute to a European identity. Based on theoretical approaches to national identity, gender and socialization, as well as and on the analysis of various intersections between gender, football and fandom, it can be concluded that women are still outsiders in the world of football and that it is doubtful whether female players and fans will contribute decisively to Europeanization processes.

Keywords: Football, Fans, Gender, Women, Identification, European Integration

ŽENSKÉ, NOGOMET IN EVROPSKA INTEGRACIJA. CILJI IN VPRAŠANJA, METODOLOŠKI IN TEORETIČNI PRISTOPI

IZVLEČEK

Cilj tega članka je uvesti novo raziskovalno temo in priskrbeti informacije o evropskem raziskovalnem projektu, ki se osredotoča na nogomet kot sredstvo evropske integracije. Članek z uporabo rezultatov razpoložljivih avtorskih študij in drugih raziskovalcev obravnava vprašanja če in kako lahko ženske sodelujejo v kulturi nogometa ter prispevajo k evropski identiteti. Na podlagi teoretičnih pristopov k nacionalni identiteti, spolu in socializaciji ter analiz stičnih točk spola, nogometa in navijaštva lahko zaključimo, da so ženske v svetu nogometa še vedno zunanje opazovalke in da

ostaja odprto vprašanje, če bodo igralkе in navijačice odločilno prispevale k postopku evropeizacije.

Ključne besede: nogomet, podporniki, spol, ženske, identifikacija, evropska integracija

INTRODUCTION

Since its “invention” in the 19th century in England, football has developed from a boys’ game into one of the most popular sports which is played and watched all over the world. In recent years, football fever has gained new dimensions, in particular in Europe, as football supporters and fans follow the game not only in the stadiums or via newspapers and TV, but also via the new media, e.g. the internet, where numerous websites offer the latest football news.¹

Before the internet era and the globalization of football news, the game was in the foreground of both local and national spectators and it triggered emotional attachment as well as identification with clubs and national teams. Football provided – and it still provides – the opportunity to demonstrate and act out nationalist leanings and emotions.²

Sportification processes, in particular the striving for a permanent increase in performance, not only led to continuous advancements in training, technique, and tactics, but also influenced the transfers of players. Clubs buy and sell players in order to improve the performances of their teams, and football stars negotiate salaries which may endanger a club’s financial standing. However, before 1995 the hiring of foreign players was restricted.

European integration after WWII and the emergence of the European Union as a political and economic community as well as a common labour market had a large impact on sport, in particular on football. The “Bosman ruling” in 1995 allowed the free movement of professional footballers in Europe, and Europeans who moved from one European club/country to another were no longer considered “foreigners” (e.g. Penn, 2006). This rule opened up the market and increased the influx of non-European players. At the same time, large European clubs like Real Madrid, Manchester United and Bayern München attract an international fan community that follows its teams via the new media. Currently, numerous fans “split” their loyalty between their local club and one of the legendary clubs abroad such as Real Madrid or Manchester United.

Women’s football, which was banned by football federations until 1970, experienced a considerable upswing in this period, in particular in Western countries but later also worldwide. In the 1990s famous football clubs such as Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea FC or Bayern München established women’s teams. In addition, independent

¹ See the literature on football consumption and fans in the references.

² On the history of football fandom see Hargrave (2007).

women's clubs were founded, for example, the highly successful German club Turbine Potsdam, which is still one of the leading clubs in the country today. In 2001, the UEFA cup for women was established, a competition which became the UEFA Women's Champions League in 2009. However, the growing popularity of women's football did not put the game and its players in the "limelight". Women are still a small minority among the players and women's games are seldom in the covered by the mass media.

There are various reasons for the "outsider status" of women in the world of football, ranging on one hand from the tradition and the image of the game to the activities and practices of players and fans. On the other hand, there are life circumstances of women which must be taken into consideration, along with the prevailing gender ideals, norms and rules. Playing football is not per se an activity which excludes females, as the growing numbers of female players clearly demonstrate.

The popularity of men's football is based on the spectators' identification with clubs and players, where multiple loyalties facilitate cross-border networks, trigger European football dialogues and create imagined communities of predominately male fans, who choose their favorite players and teams in Europe and worldwide (e.g. Sandvoss, 2006; Sonntag, 2008). In this way football audiences and fans are groups who, via their identification with foreign clubs or players and via cross-border communication, e.g. using the new social media, may contribute to the development of a European identity which cannot replace but may complement their identification with the nation state.

The impact of football on European dialogues and transnational identities is currently being explored by a group of scholars collaborating in an international and interdisciplinary research study. The "FREE project" (Football Research in an Enlarged Europe) "seeks to understand the impact of the most popular and most widely shared of all expressions of popular culture, football, on identity dynamics, perception patterns and cultural change in Europe. /.../ The overall objective of the FREE project is to develop a better understanding of football as a highly relevant social and cultural phenomenon in contemporary Europe."³

The scholars working on the FREE project are very well aware that football players as well as the consumers and fans are predominately men and that European dialogues with a focus on football exclude those women who are not interested in "football talk" (e.g. Pfister, in press).

One of the six "working packages" of the FREE project focuses on women. The aim of this research strand is "to study the extent to which football's strong tradition of discursive gender construction is being challenged today by what could be termed the 'feminisation' of football. This 'feminisation' finds its causes and expression in the growing number of female fans and increased interest in women's football" (<http://www.free-project.eu/research/Pages/Research.aspx>). The FREE project thus poses the question: How and to what extent do women actually participate in transnational football encounters and dialogues? The methods of this project will be a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, i.e. surveys and interviews in various European countries. The first results will be available in 2014.

³ <http://www.free-project.eu/> with more information on the project.

In this article insights into the opportunities and challenges of women in the world of football will be provided. In addition, the theoretical approaches used in the project, such as gender concepts, social constructivism or approaches to identification will be presented. Moreover, the backgrounds, developments and current issues of both women's football and women's fandom will be outlined. Some of these issues will be explored in the FREE project; others will become the topics of future research.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES, MAIN QUESTIONS AND METHODS

Football Research in an Enlarged Europe – the FREE Project with a Focus on Gender

Everyday knowledge and the available studies show that football is still a male domain. The overwhelming majority of the players and the fans are boys and men.

Drawing on constructivist approaches to gender and identity, football can be described as a bastion of manhood, an arena where diverse forms of masculinity and male identities are constructed, performed and re-produced, not only on the field but also on the stands (e.g. Lenneis & Pfister, in press). Men play in the stadium “serious games of men,” displaying and defending their masculinity (Bourdieu, 1997). From this perspective, men's football and male players' discourses and practices can be considered as gender presentations, where playing football is always also “doing gender”.

In the recent decades, women's football has gained a measure of acceptance in Europe and beyond. Particularly in countries with strong women's football teams, e.g. Germany or Scandinavia, the ‘important’ games and tournaments such as the Women's World Championship in 2011 or the European Championship in 2013 attract large audiences in the stadiums as well as in front of TV screens (Pfister, 2013).

At this point, several questions emerge: Does the attention paid to attractive international tournaments enhance interest in women's matches at local, regional, and national levels? Do fans, both men and women, follow and support women's teams? Is the number of women who join the ranks of football supporters increasing and are female supporters present in the stands of hardcore fans? Using the terms of the FREE project, the question must be asked: Are women participating in European football dialogues?

There is a considerable number of studies on fans, predominately the fans of male players and men's teams. However, little is known about the fans supporting women's football. All available information shows that female players and teams do not have many fans and do not receive much media attention. As women form a minority among football fans, it can be assumed that they experience and act out fandom in specific ways, that they have to deal with the sexism of fan groups dominated by men, and that they integrate their attachment to football in diverse “gender projects” (e.g. Lenneis & Pfister, in press).

It is expected that the results of the FREE project will provide information on the issues raised above. A strong focus will be put on women's contribution to a European football dialogue, on their participation in Europeanization projects, and on European identity adoption via football. These questions must be discussed in the context of the "nation building" enterprises of both genders. The methods used in the FREE project are observations, online surveys, population research and various forms of qualitative interviews.

Gender, sport, and trans/national identities – theoretical considerations

Building and representing a nation or a continent as an "imagined community" seemed for a long time to be not only a male endeavor but also a focus for male scholars. This changed in the 1990s when Yuval Davies, among others, emphasized the crucial, complex, and contested interrelationships of doing gender and building a nation, highlighting women's contributions to not only the biological but also the cultural and symbolical reproduction of a society (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 1997).⁴

Currently, there is a consensus that gender and nation intersect and interact and that gender relations are key dimensions of nation-building projects (Sluga, 1998; Nagel, 1998). The same is true of projects of Europeanization, which refer to the development of common paradigms, norms, rules and practices based on and driven by dialogues and identification processes of both genders and resulting potentially in a redefinition and repositioning of national and regional identities within a European context.

Numerous studies indicate the importance of men's sport and men's football for national representation and identity formation, as well as for a common passion and a potential attachment to Europe (e.g. Sonntag, 2008). However, international events such as the Olympic Games and international tournaments such as the Champions League not only serve as demonstrations of the – imagined – strength of the participating nations but also enable transnational identification processes with outstanding athletes and players (see the contributions in Kreisky & Spitaler, 2006; Fritzsche, 2010). Up to now, little attention has been paid to the intersections of sport, gender, and national or regional identities and to the question whether and how sportswomen and female teams, as well as female fans, may foster identification, represent their nation and, at the same time, contribute to transnational dialogues and European integration.

The focus on gender and its impact on national or European identities/subjectivities raises the question as to the meaning of both concepts. From the perspective of cultural studies, identity is continuously created and re-defined in and through interactions within multiple discourses and practices (Davies, 2000). According to Eley and Suny (1996, p. 10) "the multiplicity, fluidity, contextual and contested qualities of identities that studies of gender have highlighted have undermined any notion of a single, all-embracing primary identity to which all others must be subordinated at all times and costs".

⁴ On theoretical approaches to nationalism see Day & Thompson 2004.

Gender theories, too, have “taken on the most naturalized of all categories, gender, and destabilized our understanding of the ‘natural’ roles and capacities of women and men” (Eley & Suny, 1996, p. 10). Lorber (2005, p. 6) emphasizes the importance of gender categories in societies and understands gender as “a binary system of social organization” which is embedded in subjectivities, presented in social encounters and “embodied.” Drawing on Connell, gender has to be considered as “social embodiment,” where bodies are both objects of and agents in social practice (Connell, 2002, p. 47). Gender researchers agree that gender is not something we are or we have but, according to Rakow (1986, p. 19), “something we do and something we think with, both a set of social practices and a system of cultural meaning.” By doing gender and thinking in terms of gender we re-produce gender differences in everyday life, and “once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the ‘essentialness’ of gender” (West & Zimmermann, 1991, p. 24). Sport is a concept and a practice which systematically identifies and “naturalizes” differences, including differences between women and men. Doing sport and/or acting as a fan is always also doing gender.

Fandom is acquired in lifelong gendered socialization processes which begin with the initiation of children, boys as a rule, into the brotherhood of predominately male fans (Pfister, 2007; Lenneis & Pfister, 2014 in press). Theoretical approaches to socialization can provide a framework for an understanding of fan biographies and fan behavior (Pfister, 2014 in press).

Doing sport is always presenting oneself as a man or as a woman; it is always doing gender. Although in most sports men and women do not compete with each other, gendered hierarchies emerge. There is ‘real’ football and women’s football, which is often portrayed as a less attractive copy of the men’s game. ‘Real football’ is still a masculinity display staged for a male audience. It is an open question whether the increasing interest of women in playing and consuming football will change the gender order on and off the football field. Although women’s football has experienced a considerable increase in public attention in the context of international tournaments, studies have revealed that this enthusiasm has not necessarily been transferred to women’s football league matches, which still receive little public attention and very little media coverage. Football is still a man’s affair.

RESULTS OF AND APPROACHES IN AVAILABLE STUDIES

Football and gendered fan communities

As stated above, men’s football has developed from a pastime of English school-boys into a spectacle which has an unequalled capacity for mobilizing the masses throughout Europe. The game promotes commonly shared symbols and values, addresses and triggers various forms of involvement ranging from active participation to consumption and from slight interest to fan-atic identification. Studies indicate that

identification with clubs, men's teams and male players is one of the main motives for watching football and joining a fan community or a "neo-tribe" in the sense given to the term by Maffesoli (1996; see also Pfister, 2007). The discursive establishment of emblematic in- and out-groups, as well as the overlapping of "tribal" affiliations, provide opportunities for demarcations and multi-layered identification processes, where loyalties to intersecting communities such as clubs, regions or nations are negotiated and displayed. Kreisky and Spitaler (2006, p. 33) describe football communities as fraternities with hierarchic structures, specific rules and rituals, inclusion and exclusion processes, as well as anti-feminist, sexist, and homophobic orientations.

Football is a combat sport, where fighting for possession of the ball and powerful and aggressive actions among players – and also among fans – are appreciated. Marschik (2003) claims that football is staged and perceived as a surrogate war and an arena for acting out men's (the players' and the fans') alliances and conflicts. Players and fans participate in the "serious games" of men, who display masculinities in their fights for hegemony (Bourdieu, 1997). Gender studies also provide insights into masculinity constructions on the football pitch and in the fan stands (e.g. Connell, 2002). They draw attention to the fact that "men's serious games" only make sense when women represent the "other sex", using the terminology of Bourdieu (1997), and act as "flattering mirrors".

Scholars agree that football is a demonstration and celebration of hegemonic masculinity – on and off the field – although the members of the different fan cultures, e.g. ultras or hooligans, may use different scripts for their performances and present different forms of masculinities (see the articles in Kreisky & Spitaler, 2006).

Whether and, if so, how male and female fans react to and identify with female players has not (yet) been an issue of football research, although it must be emphasized that most football studies are gender blind: football scholars describe football and fan cultures as "gender neutral," i.e. without noticing that they deal with a homosocial world of men.

Transnational fandom

Some decades ago sport was an important arena for staging and re-producing national, regional, and local identities. This may still be the case, but football is today a common topic of men in Europe which triggers multiple loyalties and complex identification processes. The rising power of UEFA, the popularity of the Champions League, migrating players and transnational markets are causes and effects of the Europeanization of men's football. Football matches are multicultural events which reach transnational fan communities via old and new communication technologies. The media provide narratives about players, matches, teams, and clubs which gain increasing attention and meaning outside their national or local contexts (e.g. Ranc, 2012).

However, players and teams convey different images in their own country and abroad, and provide different identification patterns for local supporters and for transnational fans who identify with their local clubs and national teams. In addition, a large

number of fans develop an attachment to foreign clubs not because of national/local ties but because of the charisma of players and teams. Today, multiple and intersecting loyalties of fans are the rule and not the exception.

Fans communicate and interact in a virtual multi-national arena and construct virtual “tribes” of Bayern München or Manchester United fans (Maffesoli, 1996). These tribes are transnational as their members live in different countries and environments. They are connected by their love of a specific team. Can football thus be used as material for constructing a European sense of belonging? In addition, the question arises whether and how women can and want to be part of these transnational fan communities.

Female fans in a men’s world

Relatively few studies focus on female fans, who are clearly a minority among football audiences. A representative survey of the German population revealed that around 5 % of the female and 21 % of the male population had watched at least one football match in the stadium in the last 12 months. 15 % of the women and 55 % of the men are intensely interested in football (Hansen, 2010; see also Pfister, in press). Studies in other countries indicate similar or even larger gender differences among football supporters and fans (see, for example, the articles in Kreisky & Spitaler, 2006).

Numerous questions are waiting for answers: How do female fans deal with the male fan cultures? Do women play specific roles among fans and behave differently than men? How do female fans react to the sexism and homophobia in football stadiums?⁵ Several studies reveal that there are various groups of female fans, as well as diverse motives for and many ways of engaging in fandom. Some women watch the game because they enjoy the company of their husbands or friends; the “groupies” attend a game because they admire an attractive player; and many women are “serious fans” who love the game. The atmosphere in the fan community and the loyalty among fans may be further incentives to watch football for men and women alike. According to Fritzsche (2010) and others, football does not only convey traditional gender ideals and practices but also provides the opportunity to make fun of or even reverse the gender order (Selmer, 2004; Sülzle, 2005; Selmer & Sülzle, 2006; Pope, 2010).

We do not know whether women are fans of foreign players and teams and whether or how they engage in a transnational fan community. Are they “travelling” fans who identify with teams and players in other countries? Do they use websites and the internet to gain information about foreign players and matches abroad? Is football a topic of cross-cultural dialogues among women?

It may be assumed that the answers to these questions depend, among other things, on the football and fan cultures, as well as on the situation of women’s football, in various countries. The “feminization” of football (including fandom) may have the best chance of success in countries with a long tradition and strong support of women’s football, such as the Scandinavian countries, as well as Germany and France.

⁵ See the literature on female fans in Pfister (in press).

Women's football still a contested issue?

As stated above, football was “invented” by men for men, who used the game as a homosocial arena for re-producing masculinity or, as Dunning (1986) phrased it, as an enclave where men could still be men. In some European countries such as England women already began to found football clubs at the beginning of the 20th century, but they had to face the resistance of men and, in particular, of the football associations. In other countries, for example Germany, there were very few (and unsuccessful) attempts by women to play football (Pfister, Fastig, Scraton, & Vázquez, 1998). However, in the 1950s several professional women's football teams emerged in Europe and even competed in international matches organized by businessmen with a view to exploit the voyeurism of male spectators (Pfister, 2011). Despite the increasing quality of the games, professional women's football disappeared when the interest of both the media and audiences waned. In Germany and other European countries football federations completely ignored women's football and even forbade men's football clubs to give female players access to their fields and resources (Hong & Mangan, 2004; Pfister, 2006). Opponents of women's football put forward numerous arguments relating to a dichotomous gender order based on biologist discourses. Female bodies and minds, as well as women's “destiny”, were used as arguments to prevent them from participating in an exhausting and rough game which was reserved for men to display their physical and mental superiority. In addition, until quite recently women were considered and treated as the “other sex.” Their roles and duties, in particular their responsibilities for home and children, impeded their involvement in numerous activities ranging from politics to employment and, last but not least, to sport.

As stated above, the ban on women's football was lifted in 1970, which marked the beginning of a steadily increasing women's football movement. In 1984, women competed for the first time at the European level in a first European competition; in 1991, the first world championship for women's teams was held; and in 1996, women's football even became an Olympic event. In 2000/2001, a UEFA Women's Cup was introduced which responded to the growing interest in and importance of women's football in Europe. In 2009/2010, this event was re-branded as the UEFA Women's Champions League.

Today, girls and women play football in all European countries; however, percentages vary depending on the country. Among all members of football clubs, girls and women represent 22 % in Norway, 21 % in Denmark, 15 % in Germany, 5 % in England and France, 2 % in Italy and 1 % in Greece (Pfister, 2011a). In many countries, for example in Norway and the UK, football is among the most popular women's sports (Pfister, 2011).

Currently, women are increasingly accepted and even appreciated by national football federations and also by the UEFA, which finances studies on women's football and supports women's games at the European level. The reason for this interest may be self-serving, among other things aiming at an increase in members and fans. But this does not matter: the federations' support has contributed to the rise of a European

women's football movement which includes – besides players and fans – journalists and administrators, as well as scholars conducting research on women's football. However, women's football is still the “other” game.

Jeanes and Kay (2007, p. 109) claim that “femininity in football continues to be constructed as subordinated, stigmatized and marginalized /.../ Research offers compelling evidence of the power of football to retain its masculine status.” Female players seem to challenge notions of male hegemony, but as Harris (2005, p. 1) states, “their acceptance of the male game as being more important, and their adopting of discourse and ideologies emanating from the male model of the sport, means that they are also colluding in the (re)production of masculine hegemony” (Harris, 2005, p. 1).

As stated above, migrating players may contribute to the globalization of the game. Research in labor migration of athletes which has emerged in recent decades focuses almost entirely on men, mostly male football players. According to current studies, among others the studies conducted in Scandinavia, female players, too, travel to foreign countries and find jobs in clubs; but their salaries are low, and only very few players are offered a long-term perspective. The “migrants” come with various motives, among others to get better training and living conditions. In particular, clubs in Scandinavia and Germany are transnational organizations with international women's football teams (see, for example, Botelho & Agergaard, 2011). Nevertheless, it is an open question whether the foreign players and the multi-national teams contribute to an international or even European identification of the spectators.⁶ The lack of interest in female players and teams may restrict the impact of women's football internationalization.

Women's teams and their fans

As it has been pointed out above, women are still the “second sex” in football – not only with regard to spectators, public attention and media coverage but also with regard to sponsors and financial resources (Pfister, 2006). With few exceptions, female teams attract only small numbers of spectators. In Germany, the average number of fans attending a women's game is less than 1,000. Even female football stars do not earn enough to make a living. Observations during the last women's world championship showed that although there was considerable media interest in the games, football was also accompanied by gendering and sexualization processes. Journalists even discussed whether women's football could be considered “real” football. The defeat of the German team in the 2011 World Championship had a negative impact on public attention and enthusiasm in Germany. This impeded the development of women's football in one of the most important “football countries.”

The question arises as to whether – and when – women's clubs and female players attract fans from abroad, become an issue in European football discourses, and provoke transnational identification processes. This is still to be explored.

CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Currently, men's football seems to be one of the few activities that addresses and attracts transnational communities. Football grounds and football matches can be interpreted as activities and spaces which have an impact on perceptions, experiences, embodiments, and identities of various populations in Europe and beyond. Football may contribute to European integration based on cross-cultural interests and dialogues. The question arises as to whether – and how – women, both female players and female fans, participate in these transnational communication and identification processes.

To answer these questions we must explore the role of women's football in European football discourses, investigate the potential of women's games and female players to attract female and male fans and trigger transnational communication. In addition, we need to ask to what degree and in which way migrating players, both men and women, can contribute to these integration processes as ambassadors of their respective countries.

A major area of the research will be the relatively unexplored field of female fans. What are their backgrounds, motives, and behavior patterns, as well as their roles in fan cultures dominated by men? How do female fans adapt to and/or resist men's supremacy? How do they use fandom for their gender projects and how do they position themselves in the European football scene? Female fans of women's teams will be an important issue since it can be assumed that identification with players of the same gender provides specific opportunities to enjoy football and participate in the creation of transnational football spaces.

It may be assumed that the increasing number of women among football crowds and their consumption of football as mass entertainment have an impact on gender constructions, relations, and negotiations on and off the football ground. This also raises questions not only about men's and women's patterns of identification and emotional investment, but also about the impact of women engaged in football on the existing gender order. A comparative analysis of football cultures will provide an insight into the involvement of women and show similarities and differences in various countries. The FREE project and its research groups will explore these questions by conducting surveys and interviews in seven countries.

A special focus will be placed on general populations in the participating countries and their interest in and attachment to football – not only to “their own” but also to foreign clubs, teams and players. Do they, i.e. both the men and the women, take part in the European football discourses and do these discourses trigger “Europeanization” processes.

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