Introduction

Arthur Hopcraft’s *The Football Man* (1968) was a series of essays and interviews with people within the game, and was intended to construct a social history. Yet the first paragraph of its introduction indicated falsely that football’s importance to everyone in the UK would be assessed: ‘It is inherent in the people. It is built into the urban psyche, as much a common experience to our children as are uncles and schools’ (1968: 9). The second paragraph showed more clearly who is classed as ‘people’: ‘No player, manager, director or fan who understands football, either through his intellect or his nerve-ends, ever repeats that piece of nonsense trotted out mindlessly by the fearful every now and again which pleads, “After all, it’s only a game”’ (1968: 9). The first line reads: ‘Sport can be cruel to men’, and throughout ‘men’ and ‘people’ were used interchangeably.

This idea that ‘male’ or ‘masculine’ is ‘normal’ and anything ‘female’ or ‘feminine’ is deviant or ‘Other’ is, of course, not a new concept. In football, though, women have played the game for almost the same length of time as men have, but it has historically been ignored and denigrated. Happily, this is now changing as elite women’s football competition gains a higher profile in academic study, in the media and among football fans in general. In this chapter, we set the scene by assessing why football has been traditionally positioned as something ‘male’ and ‘masculine’, introduce some theoretical approaches and go on to explore the development of elite women’s football. We focus here mostly on elite women’s football in England, concluding with the establishment of the FA Women’s Super League, but also address issues of international governance and competition via the governing bodies UEFA and FIFA.

The ‘malestream’ of football

Running throughout the academic study of football is a thread that emphasises the masculinity of football discourse. This is shown in observations such as the links between football discourse and the male space of the pub in the earlier parts of the twentieth century (Redhead, 1995: 21), the attribution of football fanzines to ‘working-class lads’ (45), the aim of mainstream sports media to appeal to men (99), and the discussion of ‘disparity between men and women in their level of obsessiveness for football’ (113ff.). From the mid-1970s rise of hooliganism and the
work of Taylor through the stadium disasters of the 1980s, Haynes traced the idea of a unique football discourse, ‘male talk: a form of working-class “common sense”’. He introduced the idea of a working-class leisure-time gender division between public and private spaces, where men enter the public arena at the weekend to watch and participate in sporting events, and women perform domestic duties in the private setting (1995: 12). This exclusion of women, found in the print media and in television, continues today; academic research into football has typically focused on men, but even academic research into football media has written out women’s presence (see Chovanec, 2006, and his analysis of the Guardian’s online ‘minute-by-minute’ match reports on men’s football as a display of ‘male gossip’, ignoring female contributors and writers, and the albeit irregular minute-by-minute commentary on women’s matches), perpetuating women’s invisibility in football-related discourse.

Historically, the mainstream of academic literature about football has focused heavily on male experience. Men play football; male football fandom is the norm; men are entitled to go to football, and their fandom is an expression of their values – most typically working-class, community- or ‘tribe’-focused, with ritualistic displays, whether that is the chanting identified by Crawford (2004) or the aggression highlighted by Marsh et al. (1978).

However, female participation in football has largely been marginalised or omitted entirely from studies. This is despite the acknowledgement in newer work that (men’s) football has changed drastically since the mid 1980s, moving from an experience characterised as a working-class expression of masculinity to one characterised as more ‘commercial’ and ‘globalised’, as discussed by critics such as Giulianotti (1999), and as more ‘civilised’ and ‘gentrified’, i.e. middle class, as discussed by critics such as Robson (2000). Even when women’s presence or influence in men’s football is acknowledged, as it is in the later work of Williams et al. (1984), it is assessed according to how they affect the behaviour and experience of men, with ‘women’ being positioned as different by default.

Throughout the football experience, women and girls have historically been marginalised at all levels. A substantial body of work has highlighted the gendered inequalities inherent in physical education, which for many girls may be the first opportunity to experience football. Studies of adult female footballers exploring their entrance to the game found that major barriers can be experiences at school regarding access to structured opportunities (for example Harris, 2002; Scraton et al., 1999; Welford and Kay, 2007; Williams, 2003). However, despite an increase in attention on gender equity and the growth of football as a sport for girls, limitations remain (Griggs and Biscomb, 2010) and the implications of alignment with dominant discourses of femininity as in opposition to sport is that girls can remain distanced from football in a way that boys are not.

The notion that football remains a male preserve, and how this is translated into school cultures, may however be more significant in restricting girls’ access to the sport than a lack of formal opportunities. Spaces to play informal football in schools remain dominated by boys, with girls excluded unless they could prove their ability and therefore their ‘sameness’ to boys (Epstein et al., 2001). However, proof of ability, although opening up opportunities for girls, allows male-defined standards of ability to remain dominant. Football within schools, particularly as part of the playground culture, is both constitutive of and constituted by performances of a hegemonic form of masculinity that positions girls (and non-conforming boys) as ‘the Other’. Football is used as a model for boys to construct and negotiate their masculinity in relation to marginalised masculinities and femininities (Skelton, 2000; Swain, 2000). This culture can prove very difficult for girls to enter, with female footballers interviewed by both Scraton et al. (1999) and Williams (2003) reporting that male support and acceptance are vital to provide an access route to this male-dominated culture.
Football is a significant example of an activity that demands the portrayal of those behaviours typically associated with masculinity, and girls can find it necessary to conform to those behaviours to be accepted by male football peers (Scraton et al., 1999). Research on the lives of young footballers found that many understood that they were not conforming to femininity, and as a result their gendered identities were often in conflict with those of their friends (Cox and Thompson, 2000; Harris, 2002; Scraton et al., 1999). The ‘tomboy’ identity is particularly significant, and although considered a term that views girls as ‘deviant’ (Hall, 1996), in relation to football, research concurs with findings by Thorne (1993), that this identity is nevertheless tolerated (Harris, 2002) and even recalled by adult female footballers as pleasurable (Scraton et al., 1999). However, girls engaging in this behaviour can ‘reinforce and reproduce, rather than challenge, the power relations between male/female and the binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and men’s sport/women’s sport’ (Scraton et al., 1999: 105).

As well as limited opportunities and acceptance for girls at school age, research has explored how gender, sexuality and identity intersect within football, and have highlighted the prevalence of masculine/butch/lesbian stereotypes that female footballers must negotiate, regardless of their own sexuality (e.g., Caudwell, 1999, 2004, 2006; Cox and Thompson, 2000; Harris, 2005; Mennesson and Clement, 2003). Scraton et al. (1999: 100) state how ‘normative ideals about female bodies and “ideal” femininity have become seriously disrupted as women have moved into traditional male-only sports’, which disturbs the ideological equation of physical power solely with masculinity. The stereotype of the female athlete and the lesbian share masculine traits so an association is made between the two (Theberge and Birrell, 1994), and the butch or manly lesbian is a common stereotype that women in ‘traditionally male’ sports must overcome (Hargreaves, 1994; Krane, 2001) as characteristics often required by these sports such as aggression, physicality and power are normatively associated with men. The ‘butch lesbian’ is one of the most popular stereotypes for women who play football in the UK, and one that is ‘an inscription marking all players’ sexuality indiscriminately’ (Caudwell, 1999: 401). Female footballers have expressed frustration at the stereotypes they feel they have to overcome in order to continue their participation. Cox and Thompson (2000) discuss how footballers experience conflict between athletic and feminine statuses, with being physical and athletic perceived as deviating from the norm. With heterosexuality as an organising principle, female footballers therefore must negotiate this conflict in a way that allows them to develop a muscular athletic body while maintaining a distance from both men and the lesbian stereotype.

### Theoretical considerations: feminist theory and women’s football

This chapter so far has discussed how women’s football cannot be understood away from men’s football: it has developed within its shadow, and men’s football continues to be the benchmark against which women’s football is judged. Early developments in feminist thought were particularly significant in debates surrounding how women could be understood and wish to be treated as either the same or different to men (Bacchi, 1990). These debates are however, still pertinent to the role women play within the traditionally male-dominated sport of football. Williams (2003: 104) states that women’s football ‘is at once similar to men’s football and different’, which is supported by widely contrasting views of women footballers in her research as to whether women and men play the same sport. Gains women and girls have made in traditionally male sports such as football have been as a result of liberal advances. Liberal ideals challenge discourses of inherent biological difference that are so often associated with female inferiority, in an attempt to open up spaces for women to be given equal access. In terms of women’s football, the equality of opportunity discourse has been strongly evident throughout its
development as women have fought, both individually and collectively, to be given ‘the same’ rights as men to participate in football (see for example Lopez, 1997; Williams, 2003; Williams and Woodhouse, 1991). Policy changes that have recognised this, such as the lifting of the 1921 ban by the FA, could be perceived from this perspective as breaking down barriers that have prevented women and girls from playing football. The liberal agenda, based upon discourses of sameness, has been considered successful therefore in opening football up to women and girls.

However, the radical feminist perspective would criticise the liberal gains made by women in football as superficial and failing to fundamentally challenge the deeply gendered structure and culture of the sport. Affirmative action policies have been problematic in the highly masculinised context of English football as they fail to address discourses underlying organisational definitions and practices (Fielding-Lloyd and Meán, 2008). Williams (2003: 13) questions the appropriateness of the liberal agenda for the development of women’s football, stating that ‘the story of recent expansion is unthreatening to the football authorities because an increase in the number of players has yet to alter the essentially amateur nature of women’s football’. In the football context, it is apparent that there exists a conflicting and at times contradictory relationship between understandings of sameness and difference. Expressions of gender difference in approaches to the sport are combined with the desire for wanting to be taken seriously in the same way as men and boys are (Welford, 2011; Williams, 2003). Cox and Thompson (2000) demonstrated how women used their bodies to accentuate gender difference in certain contexts, but also used physicality while playing the sport. Scraton et al. (1999) found that female footballers used positive differentiation in assigning different values to their football experiences, such as participation and enjoyment. However, ‘alternative’ values such as these are often used to trivialise women’s sports as inferior versions of ‘real’ (men’s) sports (see for example Theberge (2002) in relation to women’s ice hockey). It is important therefore to acknowledge both liberal and radical perspectives in analysing the complex position(s) that women hold within football and the wider structures that they are a part of.

The history of elite women’s football

Women’s football as an entity has typically been treated as ‘similar but different’ to the men’s game, and discussed across comparative axes. Although elite players such as Sue Lopez (1997) and Wendy Owen (2005) have written their autobiographies, often discussions of women’s football have primarily focused on how it compares to the men’s game, for players, for fans, for governance and for the media. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a detailed overview of the historical development of women’s football in Europe – readers are urged to visit Jean Williams’s excellent and in-depth work (2003, 2007, 2013; see also Chapter 4, this volume) that has given a history to the sport that has long been silenced.

Anne Coddington (1997) highlighted the need for women to be given the opportunity to play the game from an early age so that girls can develop a knowledge of football through participation as well as observation, allowing them to develop a kind of ‘credibility’, or ‘authentic’ knowledge. She observed that men grow up ‘playing football, swapping Panini stickers in the playground and developing some knowledge of the game’ while women simply do not have the same ‘multi-faceted, lifelong relationship with the game’ (1997: 10). However, this is somewhat of a generalisation. Women have indeed had long-standing, lifelong involvements with football, as players and as fans, but admittedly this has often been strongly resisted by the status quo. The movement of women into the ‘time-honoured male preserve’ of football (Williamson, 1991: 72) has traditionally been resisted in the majority of football nations, and with particular strength in the UK. In 1894, a British Ladies Football Club was
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founded, and a crowd of around 7,000 is reported to have attended their first match under FA rules the following year; to put this in context, the previous season’s FA Cup Final and Amateur Cup final drew crowds of 37,000 and 3,500 respectively (Williams, 2007). It is thought that the FA took a rather ambivalent attitude to the very early involvement of women in football, which Williams (2007) considers reflective of their apparent predicament: the FA did not want to oversee the women’s game, but neither did they wish to allow it to continue outside of their governance. This tension between the governing body and women’s football has continued throughout the game’s history.

Women were playing football in large numbers during the First World War, while the men’s competitions were in abeyance, with thousands of spectators paying to watch the matches and thus raising funds for war charities. With this kind of support and the game’s evident popularity, women’s football grew as they proved that they could function perfectly well within the spheres from which they had been excluded by traditional views and enforced gender stereotyping (Melling, 1999). The movement of women into traditionally masculine roles during the war, such as munitions factory workers gave a sense of credibility to their football participation; alongside the wider political struggle for female emancipation at the time, the context seemed ripe for an unimaginable growth in the popularity of women’s football. Importantly, due to the suspension of male football, women were not competing with the established male game for the football audience – they were not perceived as serious footballers, and therefore did not pose a direct threat to the masculine hegemony of the sport (Williams and Woodhouse, 1991). At the same time, the charity focus allowed their participation to be perceived as evidence of patriotism rather than an attempt at ‘liberation’ or anything more politically or morally disturbing (Pfister et al., 2002). This cultural and structural separation from men’s football seemed to create a space for women’s football to flourish.

At the peak of its popularity, 53,000 people watched Dick, Kerr Ladies – indisputably the most successful women’s team in the history of the sport (see Newsham, 1997) – beat St Helens at Goodison Park, the home of Everton FC, on Boxing Day 1920. However, when the war ended and men’s competition resumed along with the gendered division of labour, women’s football lost some of its popular support, leading to press calls for a return to normality in the gender order (Pfister et al., 2002). On 5 December 1921, the FA passed a unanimous resolution stating their opinion on the unsuitability of football for women, and ruling that clubs forbid women from playing on their grounds. With hindsight, there is little doubt that the football authorities saw the rise of women’s football as a threat to the men’s game (Giulianotti, 1999), and the FA’s ban highlighted a resistance to women’s involvement within the structures of football that has persistently impacted the development of the sport. The implications of the 1921 ban remain central concerns to the current status of women’s football, even almost a century on; the sport was socially, culturally and economically marginalised (Williams, 2004), and without official recognition and support, the public’s interest, trust and credibility also disappeared (Williamson, 1991). The development of football as a male preserve was protected, strengthening discourses of female unsuitability for physical contact sports.

Although our focus here is on England, it is not to say that women’s football in other countries has historically received much more support from the governing bodies or from the media. For example, charity matches between men and women in Sweden had just started to grow into more organised regular female matches when the 1921 FA ban in England was implemented – and the Swedish media used this to support the feeling that ‘football is no sport for ladies’ (Hjelm and Olofsson, 2006). In France, women’s football matches had grown in popularity by the 1920s, but saw a similar decline follow. This coincided with the development of the medical myth that football could have a negative effect on the female body (Prudhomme-
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Poncet, 2007), and although there was no official ban on women playing, interest was so low by 1932 that the French governing body stopped organising the women’s championship (Senaux, 2011). In Germany, the first recorded women’s team was forced to close in 1931 only a year after forming due to public outcry (Pfister, 2004).

In an attempt to reposition women within the history of football, and provide a context within which to understand the current position of women in the sport, a number of writers have provided an insight into the development of women’s football from both a structural and individual perspective (Lopez, 1997; Melling, 1999; Newsham, 1997; Tate, 2013; Williams, 2003, 2004, 2007; Williams and Woodhouse, 1991), giving the sport a historical identity. An understanding of how this has shaped the identity of football for women provides a valuable lens through which to view the current state of the game.

‘Unsanctioned’ competitions and the move towards respectability

Yet despite the indifference and in some cases outright opposition to women’s football, women continued to play, organise themselves and compete during the twentieth century, defying bans and in most cases funding their own playing careers even at the most elite of levels. Despite this exclusion and separation, women’s football continued in a more or less ‘underground fashion’ (Williams and Woodhouse, 1991), growing independently without assistance from male football structures. Forty-eight member clubs formed the Women’s Football Association (WFA) in 1969, with no formal sanction from the FA, and the WFA formed an England national team in 1972 – after the FA finally lifted the ban on women playing on licensed pitches.1 Tensions over the direction the women’s game should take were, however, central throughout the history of the WFA, with ideals of grass roots and participation conflicting with a more competitive, professional approach (Williams and Woodhouse, 1991). These tensions are closely linked to the integration–separation debate: to establish a competitive, pyramid model taken seriously, advocates were pushing for integration with existing male football structures, reflecting a liberal approach; those who preferred a participatory discourse were more aligned with radical feminist ideals of separation.

Former player Sue Lopez (1997) notes that the standard of football in England in the 1970s, under the auspices of the WFA, was relatively low, and she took the opportunity to play professionally in Italy when the chance was offered. The WFA, who were organising a representative national team, were clamping down on players who were compromising their amateur status, and so Lopez was receiving just living and travelling expenses from her new club Roma (1997: 48). Eventually Lopez made the choice to return to England in 1972 in order to be considered for the national team as she feared she would be banned for receiving money for playing, even on a semi-professional basis (1997: 54).

Although UEFA affiliates had voted in 1971 to recommend all member states take control of women’s football under their respective governing bodies, FIFA, on the other hand, were reluctant to relax their regulations. Williams (2007) details correspondence between the WFA and the FA concerning a Women’s World Cup proposal, to be hosted by England and supported by (male) World Cup winners including Bobby Moore, in which the FA merely reiterated FIFA’s stance on sanctioning competitions for non-affiliate members: it would not and could not happen. Ten years later, the 1981 FIFA technical meeting discussed the development of women’s football in member states; despite reiterating its lack of desire to sanction a Women’s World Cup, members did agree that the women’s game should come under the jurisdiction of governing bodies – although this should be kept separate to women’s football in case they should benefit from (male) coaching and training facilities (cited in Williams, 2007: 144).
The Football Association takeover: the integration of men’s and women’s football structures

In 1993, the English FA formally took control of the women’s game from the WFA, representing a watershed moment in terms of integration between the male and female football structures. As a voluntary organisation, the WFA had encountered problems in attempting to accommodate the growth of the sport, with a weak infrastructure compounded by financial difficulties (Lopez, 1997). To highlight the relative timing of this takeover, women were accommodated in their respective governing bodies in Germany, Norway, Denmark and Sweden in the early 1970s, after UEFA encouraged national football associations to take responsibility for the development of the women’s game (Brus and Trangbaek 2004; Hjelm and Olofsson 2004; Pfister, 2004).

From this takeover, women’s football moved from regional competitions to a pyramid league system, reflecting the organisational structure of the male game. Interestingly, around this time, Doncaster Belles, inarguably the most successful women’s club at the time (see Davies, 1997), began to see their domination challenged by Fulham, Charlton and later Arsenal: teams affiliated with male football clubs. The FA stance on club links is clear – administrators see independent women’s clubs as ‘extremely low priority’ as in the case of Doncaster Belles, financial support was withheld as they were not linked to a male football club despite their unrivalled success in the sport (Williams, 2004: 120). Yet alongside the FA drive for integration is the alarmingly frequent withdrawal of funding from men’s clubs; there is little stability in this type of relationship and the support female clubs receive (discussed further in relation to the FAWSL below). Despite the importance of the football club as representing a highly visible site for examining integration of male and female sports, little is known about how or the extent to which integration is achieved. In rugby, research has highlighted the tensions and inequities that can result from women being ‘integrated’ to varying extents into both club and organisational structures such as unequal access and the limited potential for resistance to male norms (Carle and Nauright, 1999).

Since the FA takeover, female participation figures in England, especially for girls, have increased greatly. To what extent this is a direct impact of the FA’s management is however much debated. It is undeniable that association with the FA has increased exposure, provided better access to resources and effectively centralised administration. Yet these benefits can be considered as largely cosmetic, as little has been done to alter the provision of football. Integration has involved the acceptance of an institution that historically dismissed the sport and has been traditionally, at best, hostile to the involvement of women (Williams, 2003).

The development of international competitions

UEFA were slow to put in place a new international continent-wide competition for women’s representative teams after their recommendation for member bodies to take control of the sport (Lopez, 1997). They were still almost a decade quicker off the mark than FIFA – the first European-wide tournament was held in 1982 (then in an expanded form five years later), and the first World Cup in 1991. Both were a long time coming. Indeed, it was after the success of the 1991 World Cup that FIFA Secretary General Sepp Blatter reflected that ‘the future is feminine’ (cited in Lopez, 1997). It is perhaps worth noting here that the coaches of the European national teams were concerned after the 1999 World Cup that their continent was falling behind, and held a round-table discussion to discuss the ways in which UEFA could support and promote women’s football more effectively (Williams, 2013). International women’s football tournaments have grown in size and scrutiny since then; as
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Williams (2013) notes, the 2011 Women’s World Cup in Germany (a country which has long invested time, money and attention into the sport, with on-pitch dividends domestically and internationally) broke all previous attendance records for a tournament featuring only female players.

The launch of the FA Women’s Super League: the first semi-professional football league for women in England

This growth of international women’s football provides an interesting and significant backdrop to the launch of the FA Women’s Super League in 2011 (see Football Association, 2009, 2010, 2012). Rapidly increasing participation levels sat uncomfortably alongside very real struggles faced by women and girls wishing to play football and the obstacles placed in their way by governing bodies, sports clubs and society more generally. Attitudes around women in sport – particularly traditionally male sports such as football – continued to reflect dominant gendered discourses of appropriate female behaviour. More and more players, a healthy participation base at junior level, including much improved formal opportunities at school, and increased visibility of the top level of the sport were having little effect on this. Undoubtedly, deep-rooted cultural attitudes are incredibly difficult to shift, and changes in this respect were not expected overnight. This lack of progress in the early days of FA governance was the context in which the FAWSL was conceived.

The FAWSL has a number of features that set it apart from other elite football leagues in Europe. First, the league runs in the summer months. The justification for this is primarily to give the league the best chance of succeeding commercially by playing matches at a time where it has as little competition from elsewhere in football as possible, but is also designed to help players prepare for international tournaments. One of the major hurdles to women’s football development across its history has been competition with men’s football for resources, supporters, media space and attention (Williams, 2003, 2004). But while a high-quality domestic league may improve the playing quality of England players, the summer league actually clashes with international tournaments and so takes a lengthy mid-season break every two years for these to be played.

Second, one of the main defining features of the FAWSL – that separates it from the vast majority of football leagues in Europe – is the club licensing system. Clubs must apply for a place in the FAWSL, and licences are granted for limited term cycles (currently four years) and must then be renewed with a new application. Clubs must meet minimum requirements in four areas: financial and business management, commercial and marketing, facilities and playing and support staff. For the first three seasons the FAWSL ran as an eight-team closed league, with no promotion or relegation. In 2014 a second division was added, again requiring applications, with ten clubs to allow for promotion and relegation between the two FAWSL divisions. In 2016 the FAWSL will become open to teams in divisions below, now known as the ‘winter pyramid’, with one club being promoted from the current third tier to FAWSL2 – providing they meet the off-field requirements of the application process.

Third, there is a growing emphasis on the development of links between men’s and women’s football clubs at the elite level. While building relationships with male football clubs allows female teams access to greater resources, this has had limited success in England in the past and for some women’s clubs it has been to their detriment (Welford, 2013). The infancy and amateur status of women’s football means that most women’s clubs become affiliated with male clubs to gain access to the required facilities and resources (Williams, 2003). The DCMS, in their report into women’s football in 2006, questioned this trend, highlighting that although there were some
positive examples of support provided to female clubs by male professional clubs – such as Arsenal – there were equally examples of where this relationship had failed completely. The most high profile is that of Charlton FC, who ended the funding to their successful women’s section after being relegated from the Premier League in 2007 (Kessel, 2007). The previous year, Fulham saw their funding from the men’s club withdrawn, funding which had seen them become the first professional women’s team in the country. Despite this, male–female club relationships look set to continue having a major influence on the elite women’s game, with 2014 FAWSL newcomers Manchester City and Notts County both supported by male football clubs and Liverpool winning two titles in a row following full-time professionalisation of the women’s team with the support of Liverpool FC.

The FAWSL has been celebrated as a success by the FA due to increased exposure and awareness of elite women’s football (Football Association, 2013), but this has not resulted in any broad change in the way women’s football is perceived by the public in general. The FAWSL is indisputably a much more high-profile competition than any other elite women’s football league in England – but we have previously argued (Dunn and Welford, 2014) that its profile and coverage needs improvement. Independent journalism about the FAWSL is very limited indeed; there is a heavy reliance and emphasis on features that focus on the personal lives of players, the coverage provided by official ‘broadcast partners’, and the PR output of clubs and the FA, leading to homogeneous, uncritical media coverage. There needs to be some long-term consideration of how the FAWSL and elite women’s football in England can and should be covered across all media platforms, not simply arranging live broadcasts of matches.

Although very few female players can now earn a living from playing football without needing to work, the opportunity of semi-professionalism across the WSL structure is definitely a progression (although we would warn against accepting this step as an end point, but merely a step on the way to full professionalisation). Perhaps the biggest and most notable success of the WSL’s introduction is the increase in competition, without one single club dominating. The initial success of the eight-team WSL led to the introduction of a second tier to the set-up, but even that – which may seem like a positive move – has been problematic. Clubs and observers alike were stunned by two particular incidents: the failure to award a licence for WSL1 to Doncaster Rovers Belles, a club with an impressive and lengthy history in elite women’s football, and the acquiescence to a plan to move Lincoln Ladies across the Midlands to become Notts County Ladies. It is perhaps worth noting here that although the very top tier of elite women’s football in England may have benefited from the introduction of the WSL, the rest of the pyramid would be forgiven for having much more mixed feelings. Women’s Premier League clubs (previously the top flight of elite women’s competition before the WSL superseded it) whose applications for a WSL place failed saw their top players move to WSL clubs; and Blackburn Rovers, Leeds Carnegie and Nottingham Forest all experienced significant off-field problems after the WSL launch after effectively being demoted to the second tier of the game. The rest of the women’s football pyramid – all clubs save the chosen eight in the initial WSL – have questioned how the changes at the top of the game were going to be of benefit to everyone else. Now, with the introduction of WSL2, another ten teams have effectively been creamed off from the top of the pyramid, with no guarantee that there will be any attention paid to the rest of the women’s football structure. Indeed, recent participation figures indicate that there has been a recent drop in the numbers of women playing football after the age of 16.3 This may point towards problems in diverting the FA’s funding only towards the elite players and clubs, ignoring the rest of the women’s football set-up.

Although numbers of female football coaches and referees may well be increasing, there is an unsurprising indication that women and girls in these roles still struggle to be accepted, and
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often qualify in male-dominated environments (Fielding-Lloyd and Meân, 2011; Norman, 2014), with particularly worrying reports of sexism faced by female referees (Forbes et al., 2014). Quoting increased participation figures gives only a partial view of the reality, because simply involving more people does not guarantee integration or tell us anything about how they actually experience football.

We argue, then, that to focus only on the FAWSL as a representative of elite women’s football is problematic. Indeed, the biggest impact of the FAWSL might not be at the top level of domestic competition and in improving the quality of the national side, but in its impact throughout the rest of the pyramid. Fundamentally, the FAWSL at this stage is still an experiment.

In the wider context of European women’s football, the FA is not alone in piloting experimental formats in order to increase the profile, competitiveness and commercial appeal of the game. In 2012, the experimental BeNe League was launched, a transnational league comprising the top women’s teams from Belgium and the Netherlands (Prange, 2014). The league was launched with a three-year term, but financial difficulties saw several clubs withdraw and the league is set to close at the end of the 2014–15 season with teams returning to their respective country leagues (Kunti, 2015). In Denmark and Sweden, a licensing system for female football clubs has been in place since 2012, representing a move towards professionalisation of the game in Scandinavia. However, Kjær and Agergaard (2013: 829) question whether this will be successful in a context where ‘social cohesion and voluntarism provide an important rationale for clubs and soccer federations’. This tension between discourses of participation and professionalisation continues to impact how women are positioned in the football sphere. Sustained evaluation of and reflection on developments in women’s football across Europe is vital at such an unstable time for the sport.

Conclusion

The FAWSL is the most recent development in women’s football in England, a sport which has a historically turbulent relationship with and has consistently remained in the shadow of men’s football. The expansion of the FAWSL to two divisions, with promotion and relegation between the two, represents its first major structural change. While this is happening, though, the world more widely is also seeing an increase in the professionalisation of women’s football – of players, clubs, leagues and competitions – but, as yet, without extensive critical reflection on these significant changes. Even the USA – a country that is commonly thought of as being incredibly supportive of women’s football – has struggled to keep a professional league for women up and running and financially viable: and without analysis and critical assessment of the decisions made, we would suggest that instability will likely continue to afflict any attempts to increase professionalisation of women’s football. In a constantly changing field, it is imperative that changes are monitored, successes are evaluated, and failures are exposed as women’s football grows.

Domestic, continental and global governing bodies have committed themselves to the aim of increasing the profile of elite women’s football, and thus subjecting it to increased scrutiny. We have argued previously (Dunn and Welford, 2014) – and continue to hold the view – that the emphasis on promoting women’s football as a sport in its own right, as pleasingly and appropriately different to the men’s game, means it is likely to remain on the margins, outside the mainstream, ‘malestream’, sporting discourse, ‘outside’ real football.
Notes

1 There had been England teams prior to the establishment of the WFA, although not selected or organised in the representative way that the international set-up is understood today; as Williams (2013) points out, in some of these cases they were simply works’ teams adopting the country’s name in order to create a sense of partisanship and loyalty around their games.

2 Williams (2013) points out that there had been international invitationals prior to the creation of the tournaments.

3 Sport England ‘Active People’ Survey, conducted quarterly (http://activepeople.sportengland.org).

4 UEFA describe the BeNe League as a ‘unique experiment’ (www.uefa.com/women/news/newsid=1913112.html).

References


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