

The Development of Women's Professional Soccer Globally

By Allison Aggarwal

ABSTRACT. This paper discusses the history of women's professional soccer around the world and the obstacles, political and cultural, women have had to face in their countries in order to participate in the sport. Despite its prosperous growth in recent years, women's professional soccer still struggles to be recognized as a legitimate sport deserving of support and respect. In order to avoid naively overlooking women's fight for representation in soccer, this paper will briefly summarize the history of New Zealand, India, and the Middle East, as well as each country's activist movements that have created a larger platform for women's professional soccer to grow. Lastly, it will conclude by calling us as a Western society to consider what we can learn from these histories in order to create a more equitable environment for female athletes around the world and engage in more transnational activist movements for greater gender equality.

Google "world's greatest soccer players." Immediately you will be bombarded with articles and images of the world's most exceptional athletes. As you begin sifting through all the information, you will realize that almost all of the highly acclaimed players are men. Players such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Landon Donovan, David Beckham, Lionel Messi, and Pelé commonly appear, and there is a good chance that you recognize some of these names. But if I list names such as Abby Wambach, Christine Sinclair, Homare Sawa, Marta, and Mia Hamm, how many of these names do you recognize? Was it more or less than the men? If you noticed a difference, have you ever stepped back to wonder why this global gender imbalance exists in the soccer world?

International women's soccer has been making progress in terms of their visibility and participation around the world. As of 2015, there are 25 professional women's soccer leagues and 138 countries with national teams spanning across the globe—a record high at any point in history (Worldwide Women's Football Leagues Map, 2015; Women's Ratings, 2015, p. 1). Despite this seemingly widespread acceptance, soccer has not always been so popular among many countries and some still struggle to attain the respect it deserves as a professional sport for women. Therefore, it is imperative that the progress made thus far does not diminish the journey many countries have made to overcome the cultural and political barriers that have moderated the status of women in regards to their right to express athleticism and interest in playing professional soccer. Furthermore, acknowledging the activist efforts of female athletes toward achieving greater gender equity within their sport exemplifies the framework of transnational solidarity that we need moving forward to generate more widespread movements for increased female representation in other aspects of life—thus making the issue of visibility of women's sports greater than just that.

History of International Play

New Zealand

Although New Zealand currently has a strong women's international soccer team and professional women's soccer league, this development happened over an extended period of time. In Cox and Thompson's (2003) article "From Heydays to Struggles: Women's Soccer in New Zealand," they discuss how the popularity of soccer among women dates back as early as the 1920s, but it surprisingly was not until the 1970s that it was even considered an organized sport for women. Starting in the 1980s to the present, a demand for organized women's soccer has reached an all-

time high and has become the fastest growing sport for girls and women in the nation despite the overwhelming prominence of other sports such as rugby, golf, cricket, polo, and horseracing. Due to this increase in popularity, the New Zealand Women's Football Association (NZWFA) was created as the nation's first all women's professional soccer league. Associations continued to emerge throughout the country and escalated to being invited to participate in international tournaments (p. 205-206).

The creation of these leagues was not always so easy; New Zealand women faced many obstacles when trying to create platforms for professional women's soccer to thrive. Of these obstacles, a number of them came from political issues. For example, in 1999, the NZWFA that was previously a self-run organization was taken over by the men's national association (New Zealand Soccer). Some of the problems that surfaced from this change in management, as discussed through the personal statement of Barbara Cox (2003) in the article "From Heydays to Struggles: Women's Soccer in New Zealand," were the games being scheduled only on Sundays as to not conflict with the men's games on Saturdays. What made this especially problematic was that Regional Council by-laws closed many fields in honor of Sunday being a day for worship, leaving the women's professional teams with limited access to facilities. To compound the problem, the Auckland Referee's Association would not officially provide referees for the women's games due to the NZWFA's lack of association with the men's Auckland Football Association. With management officials being focused on the men's side of the sport, New Zealand women professional soccer players usually had to take on the responsibility of fundraising for their teams in order to get better equipment and have the financial means to go to international tournaments (p. 210-212). It is typically the responsibility of the league administrators to acquire the necessary funding from sponsors and clubs, but lack of initiative and passion left these female soccer players to fend for

themselves—something that is not an issue for their male counterparts.

Although political barriers are prominent in the development of women's professional soccer, some of the obstacles women had to face came in the form of negative cultural ideologies about gender and sports. For example, Sandra Coney commented that "New Zealand has been called a man's country and nowhere has this been more true than in sport. Sporting contest has been a male proving ground, sport a source of national identity and pride." The beliefs about masculinity and sports confined women's athletic exposure to only non-contact, controlled, clean, low-energy, feminine outfit sports like netball. In addition, New Zealand sports such as rugby and polo are more associated with prestige and athleticism while soccer was seen as "the whimp's" sport (p. 208). In order for women's professional soccer to be recognized and respected by the greater New Zealand community, women had to, and still continue to, battle the belief that sports were exclusively made for men and that soccer is the inferior sport. Although not an easy task, women have been slowly chipping away at the stubborn male-centered ideology that has maintained their stories as the inferior narratives in New Zealand. As bell hooks discusses in her theory of Sociological Feminist Thought, those in positions of privilege should use their advantage as insiders in the system to create collaborations with marginalized groups in order to challenge Eurocentric Androcentric situated knowledge (2015). Therefore, men must also be involved in the deconstruction of patriarchal thinking that upholds beliefs about female inferiority by challenging norms and creating new sources of knowledge that will effectively break down the unquestioned systems of privilege and oppression that are embedded at all levels of society in New Zealand.

India

New Zealand is not the only country that has struggled with trying to overcome the sexist mindsets of their people. In a similar light, the (2003) article “Forwards and Backwards: Women's Soccer in Twentieth-Century India” discusses how soccer in India is considered a men’s sport, and those women who do play it are usually of the lower class because they see no other viable career options available. Therefore, women who play soccer in India are not only scrutinized and disgraced by men but also by other women who belong to the middle and upper classes (Majumdar, p. 81). This relates to the Janet Conway’s article “Activist knowledge on the anti-globalization terrain: transnational feminisms at the World Social Forum.” In the article, Conway shows that despite the commonalities between feminist knowledges, their conflicts between economic justice can cause them to clash and lose sight of their shared overarching goal (2011). In a similar way, women in India function under shared gender oppression, but their class differences and strict adherence to the caste system can blind them from uniting to fight for their rights as women. Failure to acknowledge their positionality and intersectionality as women within the greater class hierarchy becomes a rather significant internal obstacle to being able to create a united platform advocating for women’s representation. Consequently, this creates a very difficult situation for female soccer players in India because they lack allies in their fight for greater visibility and respect in their sport.

Middle East

Montague (2008) stresses in his article, “Kicking Tradition,” that women’s soccer is starting to become more popular in Jordan, where the women have worked to create their own domestic professional league that features eight teams. Previously, countries in the Middle East and central Asia

generally did not support women's soccer. In fact, some of these countries' conservative religious lawmakers banned the formation of a women's national soccer teams altogether (p. 20). With political power in the hands of men, countries like Jordan faced major cultural, religious, and political barriers that intersect with each other to create a strong system of oppression that prevents women's soccer from achieving prosperity.

Despite large political barriers, Middle Eastern women have made progress in creating national soccer teams in spite of restrictions on their existence in the Middle East. One country that experienced success in developing a new women's national team is Afghanistan. Walizada, a former Afghan men's international player, launched a competition to find the country's best female soccer players. Despite having to train at Kabul's Olympic stadium where the Taliban executed hundreds of women, the unguaranteed safety of players, and the criticism Afghan women face when publicly partaking in sports, women and girls were more than eager for a chance to play on the team and change the belief system of their culture about female soccer players. The creator of the Afghanistan women's national team, Walizada, said, "For women in Afghanistan, this shows there is freedom and there is a chance for peace" (Montague, 2008, p. 20). With a similar message, the 2009 article "National Palestinian Women's Soccer Team Takes Field" quoted the captain of the Palestinian national team, Honey Thaljih, when she expressed her opinion on the intersection of women's soccer in Palestine, war, and women's emancipation. She said,

The Palestinian society is still struggling with women's liberation, so for me, soccer challenges that. We live in a difficult reality and as a Palestinian woman living under occupation I want to use this to communicate the message that we all just want to live. For me, soccer is a message of life, love and peace (Shaked, p. 1).

The mere courage it took for women in their region to publically support and participate in soccer was an activist act in itself to change the perceptions of their nation, and the same can be said about the actions of their global sisters despite the more political approach.

Activism

Women have clearly overcome some of the obstacles set before them in order to create and improve the professional leagues and national teams that are available around the world today. For example, in order to counteract the unwillingness of the Auckland Referee's Association to provide referee's for women's games in New Zealand, Cox and Thompson discussed how FIFA's insistence that the Women's World Cup be officiated by females has created a push by New Zealand's professional soccer players to train more women for the job. This is creating a more female-run soccer organization in which management and voice is being directed back to the women who are directly affected by the decisions made. The New Zealand women's professional soccer players also host marathons, car washes, and bake sales in order to get enough money to market themselves as serious athletes that should be considered international competitors (2003, p. 212).

In colonial India, the development of women's soccer was closely related to the women's suffrage movements and emancipation. As stated in Majumdar's (2003) article, when India created their All Women's Congress in 1918, a power shift occurred in favor of the nation's female population. Women were, for the first time, in a formal position of power to demand that female-focused issues be addressed. With this new power, they insisted on better facilities for professional women's soccer players as well as more respect for the women's soccer program because of its potential to simulate more movements for women's rights (p. 84). Political

representation for women was key to improving the environment of women's soccer in India and provided the opening for more discussion on women's representation in office.

Conclusion

Although great advances have been made in women's professional soccer across the globe, there is a lot more to be done. By bringing to light the problems women have had to face in terms of their ability to participate in soccer and their solutions to these obstacles, we can begin to develop a powerful plan of solidarity for creating a movement that counteracts gender discrimination in sports. If you think the United States has been more progressive in their cultural acceptance of women's soccer, think again. Despite the overwhelming amount of sports coverage available in the United States via television, the 1991 Women's World Cup final was blacked out by ESPN in order to show fishing and hunting competitions—and the United States Women's National Team was even in the final (Barnes, 1991, p. 1). Therefore, it is imperative that as people of privilege in the United States, we make a conscious effort to support women's sports globally as it will create a higher demand for more athletic opportunities for women in other countries and in our own. This could mean putting more women in positions of political power, supporting more women-run organizations, creating more literature on the subject, or simply choosing to watch or participate in women's sports to mend the gap between national efforts for an overall global goal of gender equality. All of these actions are, in their own way, forms of activism that can change the status quo of gender roles in sports.

The strides made toward leveling the playing field for women pursuing professional athletic careers is about more than just greater sports visibility. It is a call for the greater empowerment of women across the globe to breakdown the barriers that can dismantle their solidarity.

Acknowledging their intersections while simultaneously uniting as an oppressed group of individuals deserving of equal representation creates greater potential for strong transnational and cross-cultural bonds to be formed, effectively strengthening our ability to initiate change. This includes breaking down gendered assumptions that feminism is only for women so that men start getting involved in the push for widespread women's equality. Although soccer is just one example, it represents the desire for change and the lengths to which passionate individuals are willing to go to ensure their fair treatment. Now we just need to emphasize the intersectional, transnational call to action and we will see more effective feminist activism.

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