

The Predicament of Women in Soccer: Strategies to Gain Community Support

T. M. Muswazi

Zimbabwe Open University, Senior Lecturer, Physical Education and Sport, Faculty of Science and Technology,
Department of Health Sciences, Physical Education and Sport, Box MP 1119, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe

***Corresponding Author:**

T. M. Muswazi

Email: tmmuswazi@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: Although it was originally predominately a male sport, soccer has recently become popular among women. It provides opportunity for exercise and potential benefits as a result of participation, ranging from physiological, social to psychological. People of various ages and skill levels participate in soccer, with individuals of various body sizes being able to do comparatively well. This qualitative research, conducted through a case study involved twenty women from the Zimbabwe National Women's Soccer team and it aimed at exposing the dilemma that the players found themselves in. Its intention was to explore ways of how the community could be convinced to support women in sport. Dependable sources revealed that generally, women in sport encountered more negative feelings than positive; which are largely due to society's failure to quickly change its stereotypes and that for many years, sport was seen as a tool for the development of masculinity. Masculine qualities such as courage, strength, aggression, and teamwork were emphasized. Data was generated through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. This study found that women were negatively affected by their matches which were characterised by lack of adequate media coverage, lack of access to proper facilities, and low spectatorship. Some athletes reported feeling that they did not enjoy the same status as their male counterparts, were sometimes forced into relationships to prove femininity and even drawn into substance abuse. The study recommends social education for women, girls and men to accept women in soccer and while maintaining culture, allow women meaningful playing time.

Keywords: Soccer; masculinity; community support; equal opportunity; participation; women in soccer

INTRODUCTION

Soccer is a sport which can boast of being the most popular if not in the world, but in Africa and indeed Zimbabwe. Although its popularity cannot be doubted, Malliris [1] says that as a sport, soccer achieved superstardom in the twentieth century, after many decades. It has the highest spectatorship and the most players. Soccer, a non contact game, is played by people of various ages and skill levels and individuals of various body sizes play comparatively well. Soccer requires very little equipment so it can be played in the backyard, playground or park. It is relatively easy to learn, so beginners can easily join in on the fun and play basic soccer for recreation. Soccer is an international sport and has become very highly competitive.

The nature of the game means that players may shift from sprinting, running fast or running slowly to sometimes even standing around; a combination of which can improve health in a variety of ways. There are many benefits associated with participation in soccer. They include increased aerobic capacity and cardiovascular health, lower body fat and improved muscle tone. It increases strength, flexibility and

endurance. Soccer teaches coordination, promotes teamwork and sharing. It teaches one to think on-the-go and helps to increase skills in concentration, persistence and self-discipline. It is a great way to meet people and exercise with friends and it provides an opportunity to increase one's confidence and self-esteem. Soccer helps to reduce anxiety. It teaches determination, responsibility, and patience. Studies have shown that soccer training for 2-3 hours per week can cause significant improvements in health, fitness, strength and endurance independent of gender, age or lack of experience with soccer. It improves muscle strength, bone strength, coordination, agility and balance and Taori [2] adds that while acting as a stress buster, it also improves social skills. Everyone should have an opportunity to participate if they so wish.

Background

Like many sporting disciplines, soccer is experiencing a variety of innovations which include new rules, modification of old rules and rules pertaining to the kit. Whereas the offside rule has always been that a player is offside if he is the last man between the ball and the opponent's goal, recently, Federation for

International Football Association (FIFA) [3] has modified it and it stipulates that a player is in an offside position if; he is nearer to his opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second – last opponent and that a player is not in an offside position if:

- he is in his own half of the field of play or
- he is level with the second – last opponent or he is level with the last two opponents

Another example of innovation is that every time the ball goes out of bounds, an infraction is called or a goal is scored, the clock stops and whenever the clock does stop, both teams can introduce a substitute (only one player per stoppage per team) [4]. Previously, FIFA allowed players to represent any national team as long as the player held citizenship of that country, but of late, FIFA has required a player to demonstrate a clear connection to any country they wish to represent. This rule is what has allowed even siblings, to play for different countries as was evident in the 2014 Soccer World Cup. A case in point are Jerome and Kevin Boateng whose father is Ghanaian and who (the players) played for Germany and Ghana respectively [5].

Originally a male sport, soccer is now accommodating people from other sexes including women. Today, there are twenty nine million women and girls who play soccer all over the world [1]. This is by no means a small achievement considering the patriarchal nature of the sport. Cultural constraints are instrumental in the perpetuation of inhibitions that women encounter in their endeavours to play soccer. Women's participation in sport is affected by cultural and socio-economic factors, resulting in social inequalities, gender discrimination and exclusion [6]. Manyonganise [7] espouses that while Zimbabwe has achieved equality and equity in education, employment, health and business for both men and women, the strong cultural and traditional practices are still evident and they restrict women from free participation in sport. Citing Kuyel [8], Daimon [6] says that women are only accepted begrudgingly in sport even as supporters. For many years, sport was seen as a tool for the development of masculinity [9]. As such, 'masculine' qualities such as courage, strength, aggression, and teamwork were emphasized.

Zimbabwe is slowly following international trends where women and girls are becoming more and more acceptable in the sporting arena, but countries like the United States of America (USA) have taken it by the stride. The introduction of Title IX in 1972 came as a great relief for female sporting enthusiasts. Title IX is an American policy targeting female students in universities. It aims at achieving equity between male and female students in as far as opportunities in sport were concerned. Where once women were expected to be spectators or in the extreme cases to participate in 'non-masculine' sports [10], they would now enjoy the

opportunity to participate in a wide range of sporting activities. However, the situation was not without problems. It is reported that the reception of the occurrence by the female students was mixed.

In Zimbabwe, reports in the media reveal that violation of human rights is rampant. The New Zimbabwe [11] reports that the women's soccer team was rocked by sex, drug and abuse scandal. It is further reported that some players have fallen pregnant after the drug-crazed sex romps during camping, alleging that coaching staff were involved. Jonathan Mashingaidze, the then acting Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA) wrote,

"I have received numerous complains from parents and members of the public where the above cases have been mentioned. Some national team players are said to have been impregnated by certain technical staff members. What has been done about it? I hereby request your esteemed office to furnish me with information pertaining to the alleged rampant cases of girl child abuse by the members of the technical staff in 2003."

In an interview with the Bulawayo Chronicle, Mashingaidze commented,

"It is a serious issue and we have instituted investigations. We also got reports that there is lesbianism and drug abuse among the players. We also have to get to the root of this problem," [11].

Homosexuality is not condoned in Zimbabwe.

Dilemma

While there are advantages from participation in soccer, women also realize challenges. Women stand to gain more as they develop team-spirit more through playing soccer than through other activities such as running. They train more easily through soccer than through running [12]. Sohn [13] reports that women's soccer games are more honest than those for men. Only 7% of 890 injuries from 89 men's matches were honest injuries as opposed to 6 out of 47 in women's games [14]. Based on the first World Cup for women in 1991, Rosenbaum [14] reports that women soccer is smoother, purer and shows more integrity as there are fewer stoppages in their game than in men's, fewer faked injuries, fewer falls and referees are more tired after refereeing women's matches than men's.

As a result of the introduction of Title IX, women who were for a long time expected to be spectators or in the extreme cases to participate in 'non-masculine' sports [10], would now enjoy the opportunity to participate in a wide range of sporting activities. However, the situation was not smooth sailing. The reception of this supposedly good news by the female students was mixed. There was excitement,

fear, frustration and scorn as the students imagined the reaction of the society which had been socialized to perceive sport as a tool for the development of masculinity [9]. There was a danger that women participating in these activities would be perceived as masculine and less feminine. Society was conditioned to believing that physical attractiveness was a good indicator of personality, intelligence, and even political persuasion [15]. Some athletes receive confusing societal input regarding their participation in these sports [16]. The fear of developing a 'non-feminine' physique is too overwhelming and it induced the fear among some female of being labelled as lesbians. As a result, there is an element of overcompensating in some of them in the area of appearance by using extra cosmetic equipment. Another big fear among female athletes is the fear of intimidating their male classmates. It has been observed that female students have the tendency to "play dumb" in the classroom [17].

The feelings of the 80s where women were oriented to be more assertive brought even more confusion. Observers note that women seem to be going to extremes in their attempt to demonstrate their ability to do what men can do, including playing soccer. They also have to continue working hard to impress society to be accepted as women. It leaves women with limited options.

Much of this conflict can be dealt with by an athlete who redefines the masculine/feminine stereotype of sport participation [16] or limits her social interaction to athletic idiocultures [18], but true resolution can only be reached when society as a whole adopts more humane views, but it should be noted that some habits die hard.

Myths Regarding Women and Sport

Many myths are associated with women's participation in sport. In cultural Zimbabwe, girls are not encouraged to take part in sports like soccer and other such activities which demand that they exert themselves. They are schooled to believe that sport is for the stronger and more competent and as female, they do not belong to this group of people, only men do [7]. As in other African countries, it is very important for a girl in Zimbabwe to be married a virgin as she might bring shame and disgrace to her family and humiliation to herself if it is otherwise [7]. It is therefore important for the girl to stay away from sport since it is believed that involvement may cause her to lose her precious possession of virginity. It is also believed that women are a bad omen to sport and as such, they should not be allowed to come into close proximity with those (men) playing sport or come anywhere near sporting activities. Superstition among some cultures in Zimbabwe dictates that allowing women into the arena should at all cost be avoided as it brings misfortune to either the team or even other spectators [7]. It is believed that the team

may lose or violence may erupt in the arena due to the presence of women. Confirmation of this came through a report from the media [19] that Abigail Munikwa (female), the physiotherapist for a popular soccer outfit in Zimbabwe, Dynamos, was fired on the 6th of October 2009 by the club's leadership and representatives of the fans because they believed that her presence was causing the team to lose. Munikwa who had previously worked with the national rugby Under-19, the Old Hararians teams and the Sport and Recreation Commission said she had been humiliated by the unpleasant incident. Coincidentally, subsequent to Munikwa's dismissal, the team won the match they played. However, Dynamos' two losses prior to firing Munikwa had been against Monomotapa FC and Lengthens FC, teams whose physiotherapists were women [19]. Similarly, in 2008 an attempt to stop Henrietta Rushwaya, former CEO of the ZIFA, from entering the stadium to watch a match between Dynamos FC and Zamalek of Egypt was made because Dynamos had lost two home matches where she had been present. However, in her absence, Dynamos won that match [19].

When juju is used in soccer, and incidentally, the media reports it quite often, it is believed that for it to be effective, women should not be anywhere around and this is part of the reason why male players are removed from their families, wives in particular, a couple of days before a match.

Purpose

The aim of the study was to expose the dilemma that women playing soccer find themselves in with the intention of exploring strategies of how they can gain community support.

Statement of the Problem

Growing up in a society which observes cultural norms and values and where women are expected to remain in their place, women find it difficult to venture into areas traditionally perceived as a male domain. Soccer is one domain perceived by society as such. It is known that by participating in soccer, women can realize their human rights and gain some advantages and yet in this attempt, their rights and dignity continue to be undermined. They are deprived of equity in the field of soccer. The main problem is that the society is rather slow in assisting the women to move forward to achieve full participation and acceptance in soccer.

Limitation

The fact that there was a long time between the time data was collected (2011) and the time this report was made becomes a limitation. However, there does not seem to be much change within society.

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative research, twenty players from the Zimbabwe National Women's Soccer team were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule in a case study. Snowball sampling was used as the women preferred to come at their convenience and since those who were willing and able to give information could only be identified by their colleagues. Data was also generated from document analysis of publications relating to women in sport and in particular women in soccer as well as the media.

FINDINGS

- Many of the athletes participating in this study reported feeling that they did not enjoy the same status as their male counterparts in the association and in society. For instance, there is nothing like Soccer Star of the Year Award for women yet it is held yearly for men. In the streets, women just appear like any other ordinary people whereas male soccer players get acknowledgement in the form of greetings, or praise.
- They noticed that media coverage was limited for their matches, access to facilities was restricted, and match attendance was low. [At the time of this study, all the Zimbabwe women soccer matches were played in the Rufaro Stadium, a venue of a lesser quality and prestige than the state of the art Zimbabwe National Sports Stadium where most men's games were played].
- It is unclear whether this problem is caused by the non-revenue status of their matches or the gender of its participants, but they pointed out that male players were paid much more and more regularly too. When the men were not paid on time and were involved in industrial action, they were taken seriously. Out of fear of being humiliated by being given no attention, the women did not even contemplate going into industrial action (strike or demonstration).
- The women tried hard to look like men in their appearance and dress in order to be accepted in soccer (Nomsa 'Boys' Moyo although immaculate, still looked like a man, no wonder the nickname and most of the women were always scruffy).
- There are no real opportunities for women such as you would find in men's soccer e. g. clubs to transfer to. (Marta, the woman considered the world's best woman soccer player has not found it easy to get a job, [1])
- The women said that they did not feel good enough to seek greener pastures out of the country as their male counterparts did (low self esteem).
- They did not report abuse and harassment because no action would be taken, if anything,

they might suffer more consequences such as more abuse, exclusion and deprivation of various forms.

- Their families did not expect much from them as bread winners.
- Their career was short, while their male counterparts played for a much longer period.
- While there is substance abuse, only a selected few are given the drugs
- They were often selected on merit, although occasionally one could be included on the team through unorthodox means. (They could not be explicit and the researcher could only believe that the selection criteria was not consistent.
- They learnt about some of the allegations of what was happening within the women soccer sorority through the media as crimes were not committed openly and publicly.
- Not many boys approach them for courtship and they were depressed.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that as a male dominated sport, men have played soccer longer than women and that it is more acceptable for men to play soccer than it is for women. While countries like the United States of America have put policies in place to encourage and ensure that women have similar opportunities to play sports like soccer, the women in those countries have not always found the going easy. The study found that women enjoy playing and watching soccer as much as men do and although more and more women are playing soccer today than before their number is still low. Women face many challenges in soccer especially of a social nature, but it is agreed that it is more enjoyable to watch women soccer than men's as it is more honest and purer.

Recommendations and Strategies for Community Support

- Getting qualifications in more aspects of the game: refereeing, coaching, commentators, analysts, will increase the number of women in soccer.
- Women should try to attain high qualifications because any form of education will bring respect to one than to one without any.
- Without taking the suggestion by Sepp Blatter to dress them in tighter shorts [1], authorities should avoid making women look like men. They should dress them up in comfortable womanly sporty attire and not like men.
- Women should be encouraged to feel comfortable about being good at soccer (others pretend to be stupid in conversations so that they do not scare men away).
- When women play, their supporters especially women, must wear replica jerseys for women as they do for men.

- Clubs, sports organisations, tertiary institutions should be encouraged to develop more youth programmes and co-educational activities that encourage co-existence of boys and girls in soccer.
- There should be increased provision of social education for women, girls and men by local, national and international soccer bodies to assist in to acceptance of women in soccer
- Demonstrate olympism in soccer- no discrimination, equal opportunity, tolerance and respect for all.
- While nationalities should maintain culture/tradition, they should be mindful of the fact that culture is dynamic and therefore move with the times and allow women time to play soccer.
- Because there are so many myths about women's capacity in sport, it is important for authorities to ensure that before women start playing, their muscles and joints are sufficiently warmed up, that they have plenty of fluids on hand and rehydrate regularly, that they do not overdo it – depending on their age and physical condition women should be allowed to play. Be scientific [20] to avoid attributing injuries or other mishaps to gender.

REFERENCES

1. The Female Pele and the Growing pains of Women's Soccer.
<http://sites.duke.edu/wcwp/2013/10/30the-female-pele-and-the-growing-.....>
2. Health Benefits of Playing Soccer.
<http://www.lifemojo.com/lifestyle/health-benefits-of-playing-soccer-26455123>
3. Football Development
www.fifa.com/aboutfifa/footballdevelopment/technicalsupport/refereeing/laws-of-the-game/law/nwsid=1290
4. New Soccer Rules
<http://www.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20130617074401AA5DoSG>
5. Germany vs Ghana: The Boateng Brothers; World Cup Duel
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/germany-vs-ghana-the-boateng-brothers-world-cup-duel-a-689431.htm>
6. Daimon A; The Most Beautiful game or the Most Gender Violent Sport? Exploring the Interface Between soccer, Gender and Violence in Zimbabwe. In *Gender, Sport and Development in Africa: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Patterns of Representations and Marginalisation*. Shehu J, Google Books, Dakar CODESRIA 2010; 1-12
7. From 'Safety Zones to Public Spaces: Women's Participation in Sport in Zimbabwe. In *Gender, Sport and Development in Africa: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Patterns of Representations and Marginalisation*. Shehu J, Google Books, Dakar CODESRIA, 2010: 13-26
8. Kuyel M; *The Spirit of Sportsmanship Among Women*, Toronto. The Women Press. 1999
9. Whitson D; Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity. In *Sport Men and the Gender Order*. Ed by Messner and Sabo. Champaign: Edwards Brothers Inc, 1999; pp33-45
10. Hoferek M, Hanick P; Woman and Athlete: Toward Role Consistency. *Journal of Sex Roles*, 1985 ; 12 (7/8):687-695
11. Medical expert reveals startling statistics on drug abuse in Zim
www.newsday.co.zw/2011/09/18/2011-09-18-medical-expert-reveals-startling-statistics-on-drug-abuse-in-zim
12. Ottesen L; Sports participation, gender and the welfare state. *Sportwissenschaft* 2002; 34(3):311-327
13. Soccer: How Women Play Differently From Men
<http://news.discovery.com/adventure/extreme-sports-soccer-sports-110713.htm>
14. Rosenbaum DA, Sanghani RR, Woolen T, Davis SW; Estimation of Injury Simulation in International women's Football. *Research in Sport Medicine: An International Journal*, 2011; 19 (3).
15. Johnson R, MacEachen T; Attributes of Physical Attractiveness: Test of the Social Deviance and Social Identity Hypothesis. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1985; 125(2):221-232
16. Desertrain GS, Weiss MR; Being Female and Athletic: A cause for conflict? *Journal of Sex Roles*, 1988;18(9/10):567-582
17. Gove W, Hughes M, Geerken M; Playing Dumb A Form of Impression Management with Undesirable Side Effects. *Social Psychology Quarterly*. 1980; 43(1):89-102
18. Rice AA; Division I Female Soccer Players : Development of the Self Across Time and Interactional Groups. The Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, USA, 1998: 567-582
19. Sharuko R, Mafa M; DeMbare fire female medic.
<http://www.nehandaradio.com/2009/10/07/dembare-fire-female-medic/> Accessed 20.8.2014
20. <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcs/titles/nsf.....>