

Future Game Changers: How Women's Football Can Fulfill Its Full Potential

*Strategies and Benefits for Engaging the Female Section of Society More
Successfully and Attracting Young Athletes to Grow the Industry*

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*Dedicated to my family,
to their successes, limitless support, and faith in my abilities.*

*To my parents,
to their miraculous and effortless contribution in making me a better man daily.*

*To my brother,
to his acting as a perpetual flame in the dark, lighting on otherwise obscure life paths.*

*To my grandparents,
to their spontaneous love, rich in smiles, hugs, and laughter, and their crucial contribution to a priceless
childhood.*

*Lastly, to myself,
to the innate belief in infinite possibilities, to the harmony between talent,
balance, and the dreams of a kid.*

To the dreams of that kid.

Arte et Labore.

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1. Abstract

This thesis project unfolds as an expansive exploration of how women's football can move from its historical marginalization to achieve its full potential of sporting, social, and economic promise. The research opens with a study of the sport's past, demonstrating how early prohibitions, systemic underfunding, and rooted gender norms successfully confined its potential for decades. This historical narrative serves as the foundation for the contextual basis needed for further chapters delving into the modern and future possibilities. In this sense serves as a vital lens through which to understand the persistence of today's participation gaps and complicated challenges faced by the industry.

Turning to the present, the work offers a detailed portrait of the women's game as it stands on the verge of unprecedented opportunity. Building on a specific focus on stakeholders of the movement, as for young players, families, club executives, sponsors, and federation managers, the thesis brings to light the complex web of factors, ranging from membership fees and long-distance travel requirements to gendered social expectations and safety, that still dissuade many girls from embracing the sport. The attention is then drawn to the importance of limiting frictions in the industry and supply chain to foster true and tangible growth.

At the same time, it celebrates the remarkable advances of recent seasons: global tournaments shattering viewership records, groundbreaking broadcast and sponsorship deals, and a newfound media attention that increasingly frames women's football as a compelling, high-value product. This dual analysis has the intention to highlight both the scale of the untapped market and the urgency of translating increasing interest into sustained investment and participation.

A central strand of the argument interrogates the prevailing dependence of women's teams on men's club infrastructures. By contrasting integrated models, where women's squads operate within the administrative and financial frameworks of their established male counterparts, with fully autonomous entities, the thesis uncovers how organizational design deeply influences brand management, revenue diversification, and strategic flexibility. In this context, case studies of Olympique Lyonnais Féminin and Saudi Arabia's movement illustrate various pathways to success. The intent is to highlight the importance of governance autonomy and stakeholder alignment, combined with a solid managerial structure, in driving both on-field excellence and commercial impact. Additionally, the choice of an extensive study on a reality such as Saudi Arabia represents one of the pillars of this thesis: the emphasis not solely on

economic factors, but also on the crucial cultural impact that sports, in this case football, can have on society as a whole.

Through this, a literature review is conducted to validate the findings and contextualize the project, understanding the leading academic studies on the matter. In this phase, the scrutiny is placed on the deficiency of contemporary and in-depth research focused specifically on female athletes. While cultural and commercial analyses often privilege the men's game, it is in the medical and safety domain that this academic neglect proves most damaging. The difference in injury patterns underscores the urgent need for female-specific studies. Without this critical research, practitioners lack the evidence base to tailor medical care and safety standards to women footballers, perpetuating a gap that compromises player welfare and limits the sport's full development.

In its final chapter, the study transitions from an analysis to a strategy-based approach, articulating various marketing and managerial possibilities designed to unlock the game's full potential. It advocates for community-centric engagement initiatives that leverage school partnerships, local leagues, and social-media storytelling to normalize and celebrate female participation. It proposes innovative sponsorship architectures and encourages modern marketing strategies such as 'athlete-influencer' or leveraging men's club branding for faster and localized growth.

Through the information obtained in an on-field research at AS Roma Women, the paper outlines youth-development frameworks combining scholarship funding, mentorship programs, and collaborations, inspired by the North American athletic-academic symbiosis.

Finally, it casts a forward-looking vision of digital and experiential innovation, immersive match-day platforms and e-sports focus, that can generate fresh revenue streams and deepen fan loyalty. By weaving together historical insight, stakeholder testimony, and evidence-based strategies, this thesis delivers a compelling roadmap to collaborate in transforming women's football into a vibrant, inclusive, and economically robust global sport.

2. Introduction

As the world moves to an ever more inclusive reality, the sports industry seems to be relatively late in embracing women as main players of this popular sector. To better understand the complexity of such an industry, it is crucial to mention the long-lasting factors that influence the functioning of the latter. The first one to take into consideration is the history of these once-purely recreational activities. In fact, what started as a pastime in ancient times, where men entertained themselves in competitions and physical battles, quickly evolved into a means of social cohesion and an important component of it. As most notably, the Olympics come to mind when thinking of sporting events that truly captured the essence of sports and society, and their interconnection through time and history. Moreover, a first insight into the perception of women's position in society at large, and in the sports environment more specifically, may arise from the fact that women were not effectively included in the Olympic Games until the 1900 summer edition, which took place in Paris. On this occasion, only 22 female athletes took part in the competition out of a total of 997 (IOC, 2025). In a sense, it took more than a thousand years' worth of competitions to admit women's sports into the event, as in the ancient Games women were not permitted to compete nor attend the spectacle.¹

As mentioned then, women's participation and inclusion have historically been limited. This though may be changing in today's society and in today's world. In the 19th and 20th centuries in fact, we have seen a slow but noticeable gradual inclusion of females into major sporting events such as the Olympics, the creation of the FIFA Women's World Cup, and the creation of dedicated professional leagues in the largest part of main sports across the world (Adgate, 2024).

These have successfully paved the way for greater participation and visibility for this emerging sector. Furthermore, in recent times women's sports have experienced unprecedented popularity and growth, highlighted by rising viewership rates, sponsorships, crowd attendance, and general appeal (Deighton, 2024). This mentioned, it is important to underline how big the gap remains compared to the men's industry. In 2014 for instance, the men's edition of the FIFA World Cup held in Brazil grossed over \$4.8 billion, compared to the women's 2015 edition with \$73 million of revenue, or the 2018 edition the male tournament even surpassed the

¹ There was however a singular loophole in this rule where chariot owners, were also declared Olympic winners along the riders (considered as the athletes), and technically anyone could own a chariot, thus even women. (IOC, 2025).

previous one for \$6.1 billion, and had a prize money total budget of \$400 million, compared to the \$30 million in the Women World Cup (FIFA, 2015).

Another example of disparities within the sports ecosystem is highlighted by the current average salary of a professional basketball player in the National Basketball Association (or NBA), of approximately \$10 million, compared to the female equivalent WNBA of \$150,000 (Armato, 2024). Additionally, the NBA is one of the most popular leagues in the world, while the WNBA operates at a loss yearly, as a consequence of limited investments and funding (Kosman & Lewis, 2024). While the distance is clear, it is worth mentioning how these issues are being tackled in some sports, for instance, the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) in January 2025, approved a new pay structure for female athletes competing in the final stage of the women's basketball championship, 'March Madness' (Walker, 2025). In addition, the WTA (Women's Tennis Association) has an almost equal salary system compared to the ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) for men, respectively an average of \$1,039,141 and \$1,589,024 (Wigley, 2023).

Finally, football has been at the forefront of change and growth in the women's sports industry. This traces back to the introduction of Title IX in American law regarding sporting events, where from 1971 it was deemed unlawful to grant different funding based on sex, and as a consequence, from then on female athletes were subject to the same investments as their male counterparts (NCAA, 2022). This only helped the growing movement of women's football, which took its most important leap in 1991 with the inauguration of the FIFA Women's World Cup held in China. This can be in fact be considered the true beginning of professional football for female athletes across the world.

Today, the movement is at a pivotal moment in its history. The mentioned global tournaments have attracted a number of girls who for the first time thought of sports, or football, as a possible pastime or even career. As a consequence, the sport has never been more successful, and the industry as a whole is reflecting this growth; in fact, in 2024 women's football recorded record-breaking viewership numbers, with a peak of more than 60 million viewers worldwide for the UEFA Women's Champions League tournament, and a record-breaking attendance of 51 thousand people for the final (The Washington Times, 2024). This comes after an estimated over 2 billion viewers watching the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup (across all platforms), with the final game watched by an estimated 300 million people globally, marking the most-watched Women's World Cup final ever (Euromonitor, 2023). This was also reflected in record viewership numbers across Australia, New Zealand, Spain, the United

Kingdom and virtually every nation involved in the final stage of the tournament. Importantly, this reflected a surprising interest in global social media content, as FIFA reported billions of interactions across media platforms, further highlighting the tournament's global impact (FIFA, 2023).

These impressive figures can give us a good understanding of what the future could look like for the industry as a whole, but also in terms of possible societal changes. It is key, thus, to keep in mind how much sports can influence our childhoods and subsequently our daily lives for several years. The focus of this research will also consider the potential outcomes that may arise from including and fostering the women's sports sector.

The current state of women's football can be analyzed through a fast-growing appetite from male and female customers, increasing investments and funding, and an ever-greater popularity of players and teams. This highlights how the industry is an interesting, fast-growing sector worthy of deeper study. Moreover, being still in a very embryonal phase, it holds significant margins for improvement and potential economic prosperity from various perspectives: the club perspective looking for greater revenues for their shareholders, visibility and competitiveness, the organizational bodies in football, looking for a more lucrative industry to govern, and lastly players, coaches, staff and virtually every stakeholder involved in the football movement.

Ultimately, what this research wants to present is a clear understanding of how women's football presents extremely significant untapped opportunities for economic growth as well as, importantly, sociocultural advancement. Through this, the research paper will have as its core the goal to answer the main questions of how women's football can attract more young girls and women, who are very frequently uninvolved in the sports ecosystem, and subsequently attracting young athletes, who may choose other sports, and sustain its growth as an industry.

These will be analyzed through a thorough study of both sides of the equation: the motivations, factors and barriers in place for families and young females when approaching a discipline and the sport ecosystem in general, and the strategies through which all the key players of the industry (clubs, governing bodies, sponsors, etc.) can position themselves as appealing options for females in society. Innovative and specific marketing strategies will underline the potential benefits and ways to tap into an extremely vast section of society through data-driven analysis and recommendations. The overall objective is then identified in women's football's realization of its full potential, in order to create a lucrative, healthy and sustainable

industry, understanding how a more inclusive and fairer sports ecosystem for future generations can benefit all stakeholders involved.

3. Current State of Women's Football

Women's football has reached a critical juncture in its evolution, following decades of steady expansion and increasing global recognition. Over the past 20 to 30 years, the sport has experienced unprecedented growth in revenue, viewership, and media attention, positioning itself in largely uncharted territory. However, while progress is evident, the sport still faces structural and cultural barriers that limit its full potential. To create a sustainable and lucrative ecosystem, industry stakeholders, including clubs, federations and sponsors, must recognize both the opportunities and obstacles within the sector.

Over the past decade, women's football has in fact evolved from a niche sector into an emerging commercial force. Major corporations such as Nike, Adidas, and Visa have increased their investments, reflecting a growing belief in the sport's marketability. Sponsorship deals for women's football have surged by over 22% year-over-year, demonstrating a growing commitment from brands and investors (Sim, 2024). Additionally, Deloitte estimates that women's sports will generate approximately \$1.3 billion in revenue in 2024, marking a more than 300% increase from their 2021 valuation (Mills, 2024). While these figures indicate rapid growth, women's football still lags significantly behind the men's sector in financial terms, with sponsorship revenue accounting for less than 15% of total global football sponsorships. A similar trend is observed in broadcasting rights, which have reached record values but still trail behind those of men's competitions. The Women's Super League (WSL), for instance, recently secured a five-year domestic TV deal with Sky Sports and the BBC worth approximately £65 million (or \$81 million), set to start in the 2025-2026 season (Garry, 2024).

While this marks a substantial increase from previous agreements and highlights the rising value of women's football media rights, it remains only a minimal fraction of the deals struck for men's leagues. At the club level, organizations such as FC Barcelona Femení and Chelsea Women have begun generating significant revenue, yet many women's teams still totally rely on financial support from their male counterparts. The pathway toward financial independence or meaningful revenue stream creation, for women's clubs requires continued investment and innovative commercial strategies to sustain long-term growth, and as of today seems still extremely far from reality, but it has to necessarily be the ultimate goal. Beyond these preliminary financial considerations, the sport's expansion also needs to rely on increasing participation rates and strengthening its talent pipeline. Despite the growing visibility of elite women's football, evident in the successes of professional leagues and national teams, participation rates among young girls remain a key challenge. Structural barriers such

as limited accessibility, entrenched cultural perceptions, and the absence of robust grassroots programs continue to constrain the recruitment of young female athletes.

In addition, football is actively competing against other sports and activities that do not face such obstacles, whether due to more favorable cultural positioning or better-established funding, coaching, and developmental structures. A good example of this can be observed in Europe, where various studies show that sports such as tennis, volleyball, and ballet often record participation rates among young girls that are 10 to 20 percentile points higher than those for football (ICK, 2021). Similarly, studies in the United Kingdom indicate that while football participation among girls is on the rise, disciplines like dance, gymnastics, and swimming continue to attract vastly larger numbers of early-age female participants (Price, 2024). These insights then underscore the multifaceted competition that football faces in establishing itself as the preferred sport among young female athletes. However, thanks to recent investments in tv broadcasting and social media presence, indicators suggest a shifting dynamic, specifically over half of women's football fans have developed their interest in the game within the last three years (53%), a figure that rises to 62% among 18 to 24-year-olds, while 44% of fans expect to increase their engagement in the coming years (Visa, 2024).

This new interest, particularly among younger demographics, represents a crucial opportunity for clubs and federations to convert viewership growth into active participation. Countries with structured youth development programs, such as the United States and Scandinavian nations, have already demonstrated how early investment in infrastructure and coaching fosters long-term player development and industry sustainability. In fact regarding football, this issue is greater in southern European countries and developing countries, which strangely enough contrasts almost totally in essence with the usual men demographics. It is then not by any means a surprise that the United States has always paved the way in regards to women's football, especially after the success in the first-ever Women's FIFA World Cup in 1991. That led to a 'boom' of young female participation in school 'soccer' activities, which are only gaining more traction in today's industry.

This was possible even in a context where track and field had always been the most popular activity; even so, it found fertile ground thanks mainly to the country's sporting culture, and its extremely advanced facilities (FSO, 2024) (Statista, 2024). Similarly, as shown in various European Union studies, northern European countries found themselves at an easier starting point, compared to developing nations or southern European ones, thanks to their pre-

existing advancement in facilities and cultural openness regarding women's participation in sports (Eurostat, 2024).

Understanding the various cultural, social and economic factors is crucial in order to correctly address and then target, the female section of society. Moreover, this is functional when identifying the most effective strategies for attracting more young female athletes and sustaining the sport's industry growth. While recent advancements have set a foundation for success, the next phase of development will depend on whether the sport can break through existing barriers and establish itself as a truly independent and self-sustaining sector.

Recent progress obtained may seem like a natural outcome of time and organic development, but the reality is far more complex. Unlike many other sports, where women's leagues have struggled to gain mainstream traction, football has demonstrated a unique capacity for rapid advancement. Understanding what sets this industry apart is crucial to unlocking its full potential and ensuring that its recent momentum translates into lasting success, which is intended as a key focus of this research. In this sense, a defining characteristic of the football industry is its unparalleled global reach and cultural significance.

This worldwide appeal presents an extraordinary advantage for the women's game as well, providing a platform that most other female sports leagues lack. From a marketing and, more precisely, branding standpoint, this is an extraordinary advantage that the women's industry as a whole must take advantage of. This being said, while women's football operates within the same overarching industry as the men's game, it targets a distinct audience and faces unique challenges. Examining how the existing global football framework can be leveraged to accelerate the growth of the women's game is essential to shaping a sustainable and thriving future for the sport.

a. Female Section of Society's Historic Non-Engagement

i. *Financial Considerations*

One of the main issues that women's sports are facing is the difficulty in engaging the women's section of society. Historically, it is indeed more common for men to entertain themselves in sporting activities compared to women. This reality has been challenged more and more in the course of the last century, but a significant difference remains. Men are, in fact, more than 20% more likely to participate in sporting activities or to actively follow sporting events on a weekly basis (Eurostat, 2024).

What this underlines is that men have traditionally occupied a more dominant position in the world of athletics, not only in terms of active participation but also in their engagement as spectators and media consumers. Cultural traditions and historical legacies have long idealized sports as a predominantly masculine field, a perception that has shaped everything from grassroots programs to the way sporting events are marketed. Men are often seen filling stadiums and gathering around televisions with an enthusiasm that reflects a deeply rooted sports culture. They are typically more engaged with live events and follow sporting competitions with a passion that has been passed down through generations. In contrast, while women's participation in sports is growing, their presence in many arenas, from active play to media consumption, remains comparatively limited. This disparity is not solely a reflection of individual interest but is deeply connected to longstanding societal structures that have historically marginalized female athletes and underrepresented women's sports in mainstream media. Fewer role models, less targeted marketing, and limited access to high-quality youth programs have all contributed to a scenario in which women are less frequently seen in sports fandom.

Yet, the landscape is indeed changing. There is a growing recognition of the untapped potential that lies in engaging the female audience more fully. As societal attitudes shift and initiatives aimed at gender equality gain momentum, there is an increasing push to reframe sports culture so that it becomes more inclusive. By fostering environments where women are encouraged to participate actively, attend events, and follow competitions with the same passion as men, the sports industry must try to capitalize and benefit from a richer, more diverse engagement that can drive both cultural and commercial growth. This transformation is not just a matter of fairness but a strategic imperative that can broaden the appeal and sustainability of sports in today's dynamic global landscape.

As this may seem intuitive, it must be noted that women are not only a large section of society, but they are also, in fact, half of the latter. What this essentially states is that football can potentially find a new incredible source of revenue and participation in a sport that already finds itself as the most popular and richest sport in the world, even without any female participation until the late 1990s/early 2000s (World Data Bank, 2023).

With this in mind, one of the most significant financial implications is the expansion of revenue streams that comes with tapping into the women's audience. An example of this is that with professionalization continuing at pace in the 2023/24 season, revenue generated by women's clubs surpassed €100m for the first time in their history (Deloitte, 2025). This year,

in addition, Deloitte forecasted that for the first time, women's elite sports would have generated a revenue that surpasses \$1 billion, a 300% increase on the industry's evaluation in 2021 (Smith, 2024). This figure is not merely a symbolic number; it is in fact grounded in observable trends such as increased ticket sales at women's matches, rising viewership of female competitions, and a growing market for women-specific merchandise. For instance, in April, the WNBA Championship game drew 18.9 million viewers, surpassing the men's tournament (Oberoi, 2024). In football, the 2023 Women's World Cup final attracted 13.2 million viewers in the UK alone, as detailed by FIFA (Oberoi, 2024).

These successes demonstrate that when clubs tailor their offerings and marketing efforts to appeal to women, they do not merely enhance inclusivity; they also unlock considerable economic potential. Moreover, the economic impact on the football landscape has to be analyzed through the evolving nature of sponsorship and advertising revenue. As brands increasingly align themselves with female audiences through marketing and commercial initiatives, there is a corresponding increase in sponsorship deals targeted at women's football. Studies indicate that while a significant segment of women over 35 continues to engage with traditional media, an even larger portion of younger women (approximately 80% of those under 35) predominantly follow sports via digital platforms (Nielsen, 2024).

This dual approach not only diversifies the fan base but also creates a fertile environment for targeted marketing. Corporate giants like Nike, Adidas, and Visa are already investing in women's competitions, a move that not only elevates their brand profile but also ensures that their investments yield measurable returns in the form of enhanced consumer engagement and expanded market share (Deloitte, 2025). For this reason, the value of sponsorship in women's sport is increasing exponentially. Forbes estimates that for every 1 dollar spent by a sponsor in women's sports, more than \$7 is generated in "customer value for that organization" (Oberoi, 2024). Additionally, as the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup accumulated more than \$308 million in net sponsorship revenue, and sponsors of the Ladies Professional Golf Association reported up to 400% return in media value on their investment (Oberoi, 2024). As visibility in women's sports rises, sponsorships become increasingly valuable and an attractive investment for brands.

Additionally, the financial benefits extend well into the operational and developmental aspects of football. Clubs and organizations that actively integrate female fans and athletes into their structure can witness improvements in overall economic performance. In this sense, it can resemble the men's impact, or the one of major sports in the world, through match-day revenues

in communities where these initiatives have been embraced. Such increases are attributed to not just the sale of tickets or merchandise but also the broader economic stimulation, from heightened local business activity to increased investment in community sports infrastructure. This economic ripple effect is critical for sustaining long-term growth and enhancing the competitive stature of football clubs both domestically and internationally.

Furthermore, investments in female engagement are meant to be thought of as meaningful for the most ‘concrete’ aspect: club performances on the pitch. In fact, the nurturing of grassroots talent and the creation of dedicated development programs for young women ensure that clubs can cultivate a continuous pipeline of skilled athletes. This not only improves the quality of play on the field, which in turn makes the competitions more appealing to a broader audience, but it also ensures that the sport remains economically viable over successive generations. As is very well documented through various research in fact, early and sustained engagement in sports fosters both athletic and social development, laying the groundwork for a more passionate and committed fan base (Eime et al., 2013). This intergenerational appeal also translates into more stable and predictable revenue streams, which are essential for long-term financial planning and investment. Additionally, this leads to more athletes willing to join a club that invests in developing sectors, and further fosters the club’s competitiveness in the relevant leagues and tournaments. This operates as a ‘trickle-down’ effect that improves almost every aspect of the company and, more directly, the quality of sporting competitiveness of the clubs, which will see a direct effect on the on-field results and a consequent engagement by more and more fans.

A successful example of this is Angel City FC, established in 2020 and LA’s first women’s professional football team since 2010. It attracted the attention of serious investors like Natalie Portman, Serena Williams and Alexis Ohanian. It quickly became a prominent team in the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and has set new standards in women’s professional football. It is now valued at over \$180 million and has rapidly become the most valuable team in the NWSL. The team’s success leveraged heavily its connection to its female fans and its innovative revenue models, which include unique sponsorship structures and a commitment to community investment (Oberoi, 2024). Angel City FC can be taken as an example of the potential that this sector holds at the club level.

In conclusion, the financial benefits of engaging the female section of society in football are significant and varied. More generally, it makes great sense to tap into a new commercial territory with great potential upside. It is intuitively clear in fact, how half of the entire world

population could be intended as a ‘blue ocean’ as described in strategic management terms, so as a fertile pool of potential customers without any competition, as virtually no other sport of this magnitude targets women customers strategically. More specifically, by expanding revenue streams, enhancing sponsorship and advertising opportunities, and stimulating local economic growth, the integration of women into the football ecosystem is not only a socially progressive move but also a sound financial strategy.

As the sports industry continues to evolve, those organizations that embrace inclusivity stand to benefit from a more sustainable and diversified economic model, one that recognizes the inherent value of engaging females. The transformation of football through the active inclusion of women thus emerges as a strategic imperative, intended to redefine the financial landscape of the sport for years to come. The most obvious ROI of this intent is the on-field success and improvement by the clubs, which can benefit largely from it, by attracting more fans, more players, fostering youth system development, and virtually developing every aspect of their footballing reality. This can be done by finally embracing the other half of society, that is increasingly more active and interested in sports.

a. Female Section of Society's Historic Non-Engagement

ii. *Cultural Implications*

The second aspect of this analysis on the current state of women’s football revolves around the cultural implications that tapping into the female ‘market’ would bring. More specifically then on the cultural benefits that investing in the latter could generate.

Football, the world's most popular sport, as mentioned in the previous sections, has long been dominated by men, both in terms of participation and investment. However, the cultural and social importance of tapping into the female section of the market cannot be overstated. The growth of women's football is not necessarily or solely an act of equality, it is a transformative opportunity to give young girls a platform and a visible path into an industry that was exclusively masculine until two decades ago. Elevating women's roles in the sport is crucial for true progress in driving broader societal progress. As the game grows, in fact so too does its ability to influence social norms, reshape traditional gender roles, and create a more inclusive sporting landscape.

For young girls worldwide, the opportunity to participate in football represents more than just an athletic pursuit; it is a pathway to confidence, discipline, and personal growth.

Historically, girls have faced systemic barriers to entering the sport, including limited access to quality coaching, facilities, and professional opportunities. Studies prove that girls drop out of sports at twice the rate of boys due to societal pressure, lack of resources, and minimal female role models in professional sports (WSF, 2020). By fostering participation in women's football follows an environment where females can aspire to become professional athletes, develop leadership skills, and challenge traditional gender roles. For instance, the presence of successful female footballers as role models has deep potential influence for young athletes to aspire to become themselves successful actors of the sport, beyond current societal limitations.

Furthermore, structured youth programs dedicated to women's football encourage physical activity and healthy lifestyles from a young age. Research indicates that participation in sports leads to higher self-esteem, better academic performance, and improved mental health (Eime et al., 2013). The lessons learned through participation in sporting activities at a young age, as for teamwork, resilience, and perseverance, equip young adults with valuable life skills that translate into success in school, careers, and personal development (Eime et al., 2013). It is then crucial for society to make sure that more and more young girls, and then women, can benefit from these aspects, the same way that boys, and then men, are.

Moreover, the cultural impact of normalizing female participation in football would reshape societal perceptions of women's capabilities and contributions, fostering a future where talent and effort, rather than gender, determine success in the sport and in society as a whole.

All of this translates also into higher levels of professionalism and better wages, leading to a more competitive and entertaining product for fans. This would correlate to greater visibility in mainstream media and ensure that women's football gains the respect and recognition it deserves, bridging the gap between men's and women's leagues in terms of prestige and financial viability. This has a direct impact on our society because it correlates to the perception around athletes and important figures that shape our cultures. Sports idols have, in fact an unparalleled ability to shape the cultural fabric of society. Their influence goes far beyond the playing field, through social attitudes and national identity. In football, this influence is particularly significant, as the sport is deeply rooted in local culture by its own nature. Icons like Ronaldo in Portugal, Messi in Argentina, and Neymar in Brazil are considered more than athletes; they are almost mythic figures whose influence is significant in their respective nations and cultures (CIES, 2018).

Their triumphs, struggles, and personal stories become linked to national pride and identity, effectively influencing the aspirations and actions of entire generations. This is one aspect of why the presence of successful female footballers can be crucial. Specifically, as for every child aspiring to become an athlete, or simply developing an interest in sports, it is essential to have a role model or 'hero' to look up to; this has to be true for girls as much as it does for boys. Little girls should be able to look up to successful figures who 'look' like them, similar to them and with whom they can identify.

The cultural impact of targeting females of all ages through women's football is, as mentioned, extremely vast and far-reaching. Moreover, the mentioned benefits of having female sports idols, as a consequence of a competitive and developed women's football movement, extend beyond inspiring young girls. In fact, for boys and men, the presence of strong female figures in sports, and football in this case, offers an opportunity to recalibrate their perceptions of gender and respect. Growing up admiring both male and female athletes would be a significant factor in fostering a mindset naturally keen on viewing men and women as equal, where talent and character are valued over traditional gender norms. When boys see the success and influence of female footballers, they can recognize it alongside that of their male heroes, understanding that there is no inherent difference between the two, and subsequently, learn to appreciate the diverse contributions that women make in other aspects of life. This applies equally to both boys and girls, as they learn to value and respect role models regardless of their gender.

This can be analyzed in fact, in the countries that have invested the most in women's sports and football, which also correlate to the most progressive and prone to social development and inclusivity, as per the Scandinavian nations, the United States and Canada, as well as the United Kingdom. This was the element of studies conducted by UNESCO and the International Olympic Committee, which highlight that when women's sports receive adequate funding and exposure, they significantly impact social attitudes toward gender roles and equality, as in the case of the mentioned countries (UNESCO, 2022) (IOC, 2016).

While this is important in developed countries, its impact is even more pronounced in developing nations, where historically gender equality and representation lag significantly behind. This disparity is clearly demonstrated by the two most notable indices on gender gap, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index and the United Nations' Gender Inequality Index (Nater, 2024) (World Economic Forum, 2023) (United Nations,

2022). Moreover, the focus on the development of women's football, can help mitigate the inequalities in developing countries through getting men and boys accustomed to female presence and appreciation. This for instance, can be of monumental importance in societies such as the African or Middle Eastern ones, where women are extremely marginalized and often not even allowed to participate in sports (World Economic Forum, 2023) (United Nations, 2022).

Author Emmanuel Chinaza perfectly details the issues in the African continent:

“Women's sports, for years gone by, have faced countless hurdles in Africa, with the continent majority plumping for better attention on the part of their male counterparts. As such, gender discrimination in sports remain deeply entrenched and tolerated in most parts of Africa. Such perceived prejudicial treatment has re-awakened issues regarding gender inequity as a whole” (Chinaza and Ramsammy 2021).

In this sense then, by investing in women's football, major societal issues can be tackled. Through increasing respect and appreciation for female athletes, men can develop a deeper understanding of women's capabilities, fostering a more equal and respectful society. Seeing women compete at high levels challenges outdated notions of physical and professional limitations, helping dismantle ingrained biases. Exposure to women's sports can promote empathy, reduce gender-based stereotypes, and foster greater inclusivity among male athletes and fans, and more broadly could help society as a whole (Eckstein, Moss, & Delaney, 2010).

Lastly and more concretely, as men's exposure to women's football increases, they are more likely to support gender equality in other areas of life, from the workplace to family dynamics. Fathers watching their daughters play, female coaches guiding male teams, and male fans appreciating women's football can contribute to a culture where men and women view each other as equals.

b. Attraction of Future Athletes

i. *Sport Preferences and Distribution*

While football stands as the world's most played sport, a closer examination of female sports participation reveals a singular picture. Despite the former's global dominance, the choices regarding athletic activities among girls and women are far more diverse than one might

expect. This is in fact reflected in the statistics: only about 16.6 million women play football across the globe, and even though it has seen a steep increase in recent years (accounting for more than a quarter compared to 2019), it is still a very small fraction, more precisely 5.5%, of the 250-300 million men that play organized-football worldwide (FIFA, 2023) (UEFA, 2021). Moreover, when women and girls are in the process of choosing sports of their preference, their choices are almost evenly distributed among a variety of options, with ‘only’ 22% opting for football. Indeed, they seem to not opt for the latter more than sports like badminton (19%), basketball (18%), tennis (17%), volleyball (15%), cricket (15%), and table tennis (15%) as they attract nearly as many female athletes (Statista, 2023). Perhaps most strikingly, 36% of them are not interested in sports at all, a factor that compounds the disparity between female and male participation despite the almost identical global populations, respectively of 50.4% males and 49.6% females (United Nations, 2024) (Statista, 2023).

The aspect that complicates the picture the most then, is the finding that 36% of women show no interest in sports at all. This sizable portion of the female population does not participate in any sport, which further intensifies the disparity in participation rates between men and women. For women who do show engagement in sports, the division of interest across multiple disciplines means that even within the realm of athletic activity, football is not the clear dominant choice, and taking into account the voice ‘not being interested in sports’ as an option, it would not even be the most popular one among the study (36% compared to 22%).

Moreover, what this reflects is that the issue lies in cultural, institutional and more specific factors that shape participation. This gap is emblematic of broader gender disparities between norms, customs and inequalities in sports, where historical biases, resource allocation, and societal expectations continue to favor male participation.

The data reflects a cycle present in various realities: as historically a small number of women participate in football, the sport receives a small rate of investments and media exposure, which in turn discourages new entrants or more simply keeps the sport from becoming more popular. Without a strategic and well-structured management and marketing approach, the cycle is likely to persist. The focus of this study then, is additionally to depict ways and actions through which women's football can become a mainstream pursuit, and beat this ‘chicken-egg’ paradox or problem as it is described in strategic management terms.²

² The chicken-egg problem or paradox refers to the need of, for instance, a platform provider to convince both sides, so users and sellers, to join the platform even if it is worthless (at $t=0$) since the other side is not there (Trabucchi, 2020).

b. Attraction of Future Athletes

ii. *Both Sides of the Equation: Barriers and Factors in Place for Families and Young Athletes*

“Teen girls in these parts explained that there are no places for them to play sports, as most community fields in their neighborhoods are generally understood to be for the boys. The few girls who had tried to play in those public fields were reportedly being told to vacate them or even harassed. Thus, this clearly depicts why women's participation in sports continues to be low in these parts. Another significant barrier has also been the lack of parental permission to do sport. Parents feel overly worried about the safety of their daughters outside the home, with the thinking they might be assaulted. Some others would rather have their daughters beside them at home after school or simply did not believe sport should be a priority for the girl child. However, the males were free to leave home after classes to play sports in the streets and fields.” (Chinaza and Ramsammy 2021)

In order to successfully grow the industry, it is necessary to analyze a wide range of factors influencing girls' and women's preferences from an early age. Children are introduced to a range of sports and physical activities through influences coming from societal expectations, the availability of role models, and the perceived accessibility of a sport. Football, though globally celebrated, has historically been steeped in male-dominated imagery and culture. This legacy creates a subtle barrier for young girls who might otherwise be drawn to the sport. Instead, they are often steered toward sports that are viewed as more “appropriate” for females, both in terms of aesthetics and social acceptability.

The decision-making process in youth sports is not solely about personal interest but is also shaped by the environment in which these decisions are made. School programs, community clubs, and media representations play a pivotal role. When girls see a broader array of sports like badminton, basketball, or tennis being celebrated and made accessible, these sports become attractive alternatives to football. The almost equal percentage of interest among these sports reflects a competitive landscape where football is just one option among many (Statista, 2023).

This balanced distribution can be partly attributed to other benefits and appeals of alternative sports. For instance, sports like tennis and volleyball not only offer competitive opportunities but also come with well-established infrastructures, sponsorship deals, and media

coverage that have been tailored over the years to appeal to women. These factors make them accessible and attractive to girls who are beginning to navigate the landscape of sports.

A perfect example of this is the case of Italy's female participation. As a world-leader in many sports from a standpoint of success and quality of athletes, it is a clear picture of the norms, customs and structural barriers in place. Football is the sport with the highest number of registered athletes in Italy, with 1.4 million players, but only 4% are women. In contrast, tennis ranks second, with 900.000 registered athletes, but 33% of them are women. Volleyball is third in terms of overall athletes, with 350.000, but 78% of these are women, making it by far the most widely played major sport among females (CONI, 2024) (CENSIS, 2019). In addition, other disciplines are entirely female-dominated: DanceSport 71%, Roller Sports 73%, Horse Riding 77%, Gymnastics 88% (CONI, 2024).

What this highlights is that the choice of leaning towards certain sports can be extremely influenced by culture, norms, and societal expectations. In countries such as Italy, as previously detailed, the expectation for families and young athletes is to then choose sports like gymnastics, volleyball or horse riding, which are deemed as more 'fit for girls', not to play football.

Moreover, the decision-making process surrounding sports participation is influenced by a complex interplay of personal, familial, and institutional factors. On the family and individual side, accessibility, safety, cultural norms, and economic factors serve as critical determinants in choosing a sport. For example, research from the Women's Sports Foundation shows that when local facilities are perceived as unsafe or inadequately maintained, families are significantly less likely to encourage sports participation for their daughters (WSF, 2025). In many communities, sports like football are imbued with cultural stereotypes that label them as too aggressive or unsuited for girls. This not only shapes parental attitudes but also impacts self-perception among young females, who may internalize the notion that they do not 'belong' in such environments. In contrast, sports such as badminton, volleyball, and tennis often come with a more supportive narrative, bolstered by accessible training programs, visible female role models, and community-based initiatives. Evidence from extensive studies suggests that when young athletes see successful women figures in a particular sport, their interest and participation rates increase noticeably (Eime et al., 2013).

Lastly then, the decision-making process of choosing a sport or athletic activity often relies on external factors. This can be found in the longstanding issues present in the United

States High School programs, which also highlight how complicated it could be for countries without the resources and infrastructures of the earlier, to give a ‘fair shot’ to girls as in place for boys. In fact, through a variety of studies it appears that by the age of 14, American girls drop out of sports at two times the rate of boys. Thanks to a lack of access, girls have 1.3 million fewer high school sports opportunities than boys, and with fewer school programs and higher costs for alternatives, many struggle to find opportunities, and a lack of nearby facilities further restricts participation (Cooky and Lavoie, 2012) (WSF, 2025).

In the case of safety and transportation barriers, many females must travel through unsafe areas or lack transportation to reach sports facilities. Without safe options like carpooling, staying home may be their only choice. Moreover, as mentioned social stigma is a significant factor, as despite progress, female athletes still face discrimination based on real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. Fear of bullying, isolation, or being labeled in some way can drive many girls out of sports, especially during adolescence. These tend to be issues that men do not encounter in the vast majority of sports. (Cooky and Lavoie, 2012) (WSF, 2025).

Lastly, declining quality of sporting experience is a factor, as it often worsens thanks to inferior facilities, playing times, and coaching quality that differ from those offered to boys’ programs. With less funding for even basic perks such as equipment and uniforms, many lose the opportunity to grow and enjoy the game, making sports feel less fun (WSF, 2025).

b. Attraction of Future Athletes

iii. *Both Sides of the Equation: Clubs, Organizations, Sponsors & Stakeholder Point of View*

Simultaneously, clubs, organizations, and industry stakeholders operate under a different set of pressures and incentives that often determine where investments and decisions are made. These institutions typically prioritize sports that promise a higher return on investment, whether through robust sponsorship deals, media exposure, or ticket sales. In markets where women’s football has yet to gain substantial traction, the perceived risk is considerably higher, and this deters sponsors and investors who are looking for immediate commercial viability. In return, stakeholders are more inclined to allocate funds to sports with established audiences and clear revenue streams, even if these sports are not the most globally played. This refers to the mentioned feedback loop or ‘chicken-egg problem’, this time from

the opposite standpoint: when industry investment favors sports with already strong female participation, it inadvertently sidelines football, further limiting its visibility and growth potential.

When young girls and their families perceive certain sports as more accessible, safer, or more socially acceptable, backed by strong community support and visible success stories, they are more likely to invest their time and resources in those areas. Meanwhile, stakeholders see these same metrics as indicators of market potential, channeling further investment into these sports and perpetuating their popularity (Noble, 2025).

The main difficulty can be highlighted in attracting high-value sponsorship deals and lucrative broadcast rights. Sponsors and broadcasters have traditionally been risk-averse, often allocating only a fraction of the funds promised to men's sports. For example, while broadcasters might pay between \$100 million and \$200 million for the men's FIFA World Cup, offers for the Women's World Cup have been reported to range from as little as \$1 million to \$10 million. This stark disparity in revenue not only reflects existing market biases but also creates a vicious cycle, limited broadcast revenue leads to reduced investment in marketing and infrastructure, which in turn diminishes the overall product and its commercial appeal (Deloitte, 2024).

Organizational structures within clubs further compound these issues. Many clubs view their women's teams as secondary to their established men's operations, allocating fewer resources, inferior training facilities, and less marketing support. This model forces women's teams to operate on a shoestring budget, relying heavily on the infrastructure of their male counterparts rather than developing independent commercial strategies. Consequently, even when clubs like those in Europe have started to break revenue barriers, some surpassing €100 million in total revenue, the financial model remains precarious (Deloitte, 2024). Even with extremely low wages across the various leagues, mounting operational losses have become common, especially in an environment where external investments have been historically limited, undermining the potential for reinvestment and long-term stability (Deloitte, 2024).³

While this has been a serious barrier for women's sports, and football to be specific, across virtually every nation and continent, a crucial difference emerged between the US,

³ The average salary in the Women's Superleague, one of the best leagues in the world and England's 1st tier of women's football, is reportedly only \$47 000, \$57 000-65 000 for the NWSL in the United States. In the male respective leagues, that would be of \$4.5 million and \$410 000 (Deloitte, 2024) (Brischetto, 2023).

Europe and others on a structural level. In fact, the American continent has successfully leveraged the success obtained in the 1991 FIFA Women's World Cup by the USA, investing in the newfound attention for the sport.

On the one hand, in Europe and many other parts of the world, grassroots football is predominantly club-based. Clubs are expected to develop their own youth systems, building training facilities, hiring specialized coaching staff, organizing tournaments, and managing travel logistics, all while dealing with significant financial burdens. This club-centric model, although steeped in a rich footballing tradition, often translates into high costs and administrative complexity. Many European clubs struggle to provide affordable access for young female players; the fees can be prohibitively high, and resources are frequently limited by tight budgets and the necessity to prioritize investments that promise a direct return at the professional level. Consequently, structural challenges sometimes restrict grassroots participation, with the developmental pathway for girls often depending on the financial capacity of the club or local sponsors (UEFA, 2024).

By contrast on the other hand, in the United States and Canada the athletic landscape bases itself on the academic system. High schools, colleges, and universities rely on state-of-the-art facilities and well-organized sports programs that are often funded through public sources and institutional budgets. Thanks to policies such as the mentioned Title IX, which has played a transformative role in ensuring gender equity in education and sports, girls have unparalleled access to established infrastructures (Farmer & Pecorino, 2012). Young female athletes benefit from comprehensive programs that provide not only top-level training and competition opportunities but also academic support, healthcare, and scholarship options. This academic-athletic synergy creates an environment where participation is both accessible and sustainable, with schools serving as natural hubs for talent identification and development.

This system reduces financial barriers dramatically since the heavy costs of infrastructure and coaching are largely absorbed by schools or provided through government support, rather than by individual clubs. As a result, a wider pool of young women can engage in the sport, ultimately feeding into robust collegiate and professional pathways, helping the overall health of the movement. This has been a key factor in the rapid rise of women's football across North America.

This in Europe and virtually every other continent or country in the world, it represents another critical area where commercial investment falls short. The long-term success of any

sport relies on nurturing talent from the ground up, yet many grassroots initiatives in women's sports struggle with chronic underfunding. Without adequate investment at the community level, the talent pipeline remains weak, and future fan engagement is jeopardized. This lack of investment is often linked to a short-term view among commercial stakeholders who are hesitant to support initiatives without immediate returns, despite the long-term benefits of building a robust, engaged fan base (FIFA, 2024) (Harrison, 2024).

Cultural perceptions and societal biases also play a significant role in shaping commercial outcomes. The legacy of sports being a male-dominated arena continues to influence both public opinion and corporate investment strategies. When women's sports are seen as niche or secondary, it creates hesitation among brands to commit significant resources. This is evident in marketing strategies that have, at times, focused on negative or stereotypical narratives rather than celebrating the achievements and unique qualities of women athletes. Such approaches not only undermine the product's appeal but also hinder the development of authentic and inspiring brand partnerships (Weston & Hilson, 2024).

Despite these obstacles, there are signs of progress. Forward-thinking brands have begun to see the untapped potential in women's sports, as evidenced by landmark deals such as Barclays' sponsorship of the Women's Super League. Such partnerships are starting to shift perceptions and provide the financial backing needed to spur innovation and infrastructural improvements (Lloyd-Hughes, 2024). However, even these successes highlight the broader challenge; in this sense, women's football is still in the process of redefining its commercial model. As organizations seek to bridge this gap, many are exploring alternative investment strategies, including private equity, to fuel the necessary commercial growth while ensuring financial sustainability.

In conclusion, while increasing fan interest and media exposure suggest a promising future for women's sports, from a commercial point of view, it remains influenced by a combination of systemic underinvestment, structural inertia, and lingering societal biases. Overcoming these barriers requires a coordinated effort among clubs, leagues, sponsors, and policymakers to redefine the commercial landscape, investing not only in high-profile sponsorships and media deals but also in grassroots development and innovative business models. By addressing these challenges holistically, the commercial potential of women's sports can be fully realized, leading to a more equitable and sustainable sporting ecosystem and helping future athletes and families choose football as their athletic future.

c. Dependence on the Male Sector

While over the past decade, women's football has grown by incredible measures both on the pitch and in the marketplace, the vast majority of women's clubs are closely tied to their male counterparts. From shared training facilities and bundled sponsorship deals to financial subsidies and brand identity, women's football often remains dependent on the infrastructure and investment of men's teams (Williams, 2007).

As mentioned, historically, women's football has struggled for recognition, and even as the sport has professionalized and found success, many clubs have not built their own sustainable financial models. Instead, they've grown alongside, or as subsidiaries of, established men's clubs. A key component of this reliance is financial. Almost every women's team, in fact, receives virtually its entire operating budget from its affiliated men's teams. This is the case, for instance, in the WSL and NWSL, where clubs even as rich and notorious as Arsenal, Chelsea and Manchester City, derive up to 90% of their income, wages and budget from the parent organization rather than from independent commercial deals or production (Philippou, 2023). Moreover, sponsorship deals are often bundled, as women's teams rarely secure independent deals, and they are significantly less lucrative compared to the equivalent enjoyed by men's teams. This structure means that while the women's teams and movement benefit from an immediate financial lifeline, they also remain invisible as separate commercial entities, making it harder for them to negotiate improved terms over time.

This disparity is stark when comparing revenue figures. Even the most successful women's teams in the world contribute only a fraction, usually 0–1%, of the total revenue in clubs dominated by men's football (Deloitte, 2024). Such financial gaps not only underline the persistent inequities between the two sectors but also constrain the long-term investment needed to develop women's football independently. Without independent revenue streams and a different strategy, women's clubs risk being overlooked in major financial decisions. Additionally, from a commercial standpoint, this perpetually makes the women's movement incredibly difficult to forecast for stakeholders and investors. In a sense, it creates a multitude of additional difficulties and potential harm. Moreover, the main challenge that this strict relationship reinforces is unfortunately also the most frequent one. In fact, the mentioned dependency more often than not relies on a very precarious economic stability that most of the clubs in the world do not possess. Football in today's reality is a political and strategic business, more than a 'money-making' one. That is why the vast majority of clubs are not even profitable

(Zanda et al., 2024). Instead, the most normal recurrence is for leagues and teams to be heavily in debt, even with warnings and sanctions in place from FIFA and UEFA, which try to regulate as much as possible these very dangerous balances (Zanda et al., 2024).

This is relevant for the women's movement as much as the men's, for the mentioned parallelism that exists between the two industries. Very commonly, as the women's teams are still considered as merely an appendix of the men's ones, they abruptly see their budgets being decimated in a matter of months. This is true for numerous clubs worldwide, but a perfect example is the case of Club Bordeaux's women's team. The latter at first saw several investments and attention on the women's team, and created a very promising reality, which reached the Champions League and finished twice in a row on the French Ligue 1 podium, but soon after suffered immensely from a financial crises which hit the parent club (Jucobin, 2024) (Valenti, Scelles, & Morrow, 2018). This led to the women's team being dismantled, as it hasn't played a single match since the end of the 2023-2024 season (Jucobin, 2024). But they are not an isolated reality, as second-tier Orléans narrowly avoided suffering the same fate a year prior and were eventually saved by last-minute state funding.

The real instability of the female clubs is expressed through the words of Bordeaux's Womens team player Andréa Lardez: "This is the problem when you depend on men's teams. We know that for certain clubs and owners we aren't the priority. When cuts need to be made, it can come down on us" (Jucobin, 2024).

Although the mentioned structural dependency holds potential harm for the women's clubs, it is crucial to mention that it also provides essential resources such as access to top-tier stadiums, quality coaching staff, and medical facilities, which might otherwise be prohibitively expensive for a stand-alone women's team. For many emerging women's teams, being affiliated with established men's clubs has been a practical solution. This structure provides immediate access to not only superior facilities, training grounds and expert coaching, but also expansive fanbases and attention, which give players and the whole female movement a platform that would not be present without the extremely popular brands of the males' teams. More specifically, by sharing the managerial structure, marketing departments, and even broadcast platforms, women's teams can focus on developing their on-field performance without having to shoulder the high initial costs of infrastructure. In addition, other important factors leveraged by being part of the same entity, such as the shared youth systems and commercial deals, have in several instances catalyzed the professionalization of the women's game. An example of this

is FC Barcelona Femení's rise to prominence, which was partly enabled by the presence of the world-renowned Spanish giant and which led the former to become independently profitable (R. Smith & Garrido, 2024). Such models then demonstrate that with a correct structure and right support, women's football can rapidly evolve from amateur status to a competitive, professional sport, and even become profitable, leveraging the men's brand and the company's structure.

In conclusion, the reliance of women's football on its male counterparts is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the immediate financial support and infrastructural advantages have been vital in propelling the women's game into the spotlight. On the other hand, this dependence has limited the autonomy and independent commercial growth necessary for long-term sustainability and equality, holding further potential harm in terms of economic stability. For women's football to truly flourish, stakeholders must work toward models that both utilize the benefits of existing support and gradually build independent structures where possible. With the right strategy, the sport can overcome historical and still relevant financial as well as structural challenges, and ensure that the fostering of on-field achievements is matched by a growing industry off it.

d. Case Studies

i. *A Successful Strategy: Olympique Lyonnais Féminin*

While the dependence on the male sector has shown some meaningful reasons for concern, there are a few instances of very well-structured strategies. This is the case of Olympique Lyonnais Féminin, the women's team of the notorious French giant Olympique Lyon, one of the most successful clubs in France's history.

Founded in 1970 as part of FC Lyon and absorbed into Olympique Lyonnais in 2004, the women's team has grown into a global powerhouse. Their evolution is one of the most notable success stories in today's football, and mirrors the broader professionalization of women's football worldwide. Not only have they totally dominated domestically, with a record 17 French league titles (Division 1 Féminine) occurring in the last 18 years, but they have also carved out an unparalleled strength in Europe by winning a record eight Champions League trophies, 5 of which in a row. In addition, their palmarès holds a record 10 French league cups (Coupe de France Féminine), a record 3 French super cups (Trophée des Championnes), as well as an International Women's Club Championship, the former FIFA Women's Club World Cup

(Valenti, Scelles, & Morrow, 2023) (OL, 2025). This sustained excellence has helped establish their identity as a model of sporting success and effective management, most notably during a crisis that has hit the overall club, and which is still today grappling with financial strains (Jones, 2024).

The recent financial struggles that the French Ligue 1 is facing in fact, have hit multiple former excellences of European football. This is the case for instance of Saint-Étienne, winner of 10 Ligue 1 titles, and of Club de Bordeaux, which won on 6 occasions the French first division, in addition to Olympique Lyon. As mentioned in the previous section, Bordeaux's financial instability for instance, became so severe that it was relegated to the third division due to an inability to balance its books and secure adequate funding, which subsequently led to the dismantling of the women's side as well (Jucobin, 2024). These serious financial issues come from a larger instability that French football has experienced as a whole after commercial, broadcasting and funding operations did not meet the precedent expectations set by League 1 (Entwistle, 2024) (Aarons, 2024). This traces back to more complex factors in play, as more generally French football was characterized by loose financial management and clubs' budget constraints, due to the league's weak management, ever since the late 90s and early 2000s (Koutroumanides et al., 2018). This meant that various clubs, as late as the summer of 2024, were realistically in fear of bankruptcy due to uncertain projected revenue streams for many years to come, as in modern football, TV rights are the biggest source of cash injections by far (Aarons, 2024). This instability of French football has greatly limited success for various teams, outside of Paris Saint-Germain, thanks to their rich Qatari ownership led by president Nasser Al-Khelaïfi, which acquired the club back in 2011 (PSG, 2025).

Even in this setting of incredible financial uncertainty for French football, Olympique Lyon's female side has cumulated achievements on the field and off it, which are nothing short of extraordinary. Their record-breaking league campaigns, where they often won nearly every match, and their repeated triumphs in the UEFA Women's Champions League underscore a level of consistency that few clubs, male or female, will ever match (Valenti, Scelles, & Morrow, 2023). Their successes contributed greatly to the establishment of a platform for their star players like Ada Hegerberg, Wendie Renard, and Eugénie Le Sommer to become real icons of the game, not only for their on-field contribution, but most notably off it, thanks to their influence on women's football (Toufaily, 2024).

In contrast, while the men's team once enjoyed similar on-pitch success, their current competitive narrative has been overshadowed by their off-field financial issues that have affected squad depth and stability. This highlights a singular case where even with a world-renowned brand and team like OL, the men's side finds itself in the worst run in recent decades, while the women's side enjoys a prosperous and unprecedented streak of achievements. This stark difference is quite unique in world football.

The main strategic step intended for Olympique Lyonnais Féminin, was to give it its own space and not entirely depend on the male side. This led the women's team to successfully evolve into a critical pillar of the club's overall brand identity, which may have been unthinkable for any women's side of a team not too long ago. Their international accolades and compelling style of play have not only enhanced the reputation of Lyon worldwide but have also attracted sponsorships and contributed immensely to the female's movement as a whole, generating record-viewership numbers and attendance crowds in the French League and Champion's League matches (Sale, 2022) (UEFA, 2025). Their success helps counterbalance the financial challenges faced by the men's side. By consistently performing at the highest level, the women's team has helped build female fan engagement, which happened to be scarce before, creating lucrative media opportunities, and elevating the club's global stature, which greatly facilitated the attraction of private investors into the club (Guillemet, 2023). This success is particularly vital in a period when traditional revenue streams, like broadcast rights, are under pressure due to wider financial instability affecting the club's men's operations.

Olympique Lyon as a whole then, successfully created a great structure for its women's team to flourish. This is an example of how the movement can grow, leveraging the importance and initial structure of men's teams, almost as a 'backbone', in order to then create an independent and not entirely reliant entity that can grow on its own. Even when the men's team had faced a deep financial crisis marked by escalating debts, a risk of relegation, and transfer bans, the women's section had the 'freedom' of building a more sustainable model that emphasized strategic investment in youth development and independent commercial partnerships, as in the case of exclusive deals negotiated with MasterCard, Kleber and more (Glendinning, 2025) (Katra, 2023). In addition, because of this very well-structured organization focused on the separation of the two sides, businesswoman Michele Kang could acquire the majority stake of the women's team and facilitate further external funding. This has not only helped offset financial pressures but also allowed the women's side to maintain a clear focus on sporting excellence (Guillemet, 2023).

In conclusion, Olympique Lyon's model demonstrates that, even while the men's side battles with high-stakes financial challenges, including a very realistic risk of relegation, the women's team can continue to thrive through a clear and strategically sound model. Their ongoing success on the field, combined with their growing contribution to the club's global brand, offers a blueprint for women's growth in modern football. In an era when many clubs see their women's teams as merely large expenses, and consider them as their first choice for cost cuts, OL set an example of how to leverage the men's brand and reach, to then build on their success, while maintaining an independent strategy and structure compared to the male's team. They did not merely rely on the men's revenues as a 'lifeline' stream; on the contrary, they managed to build a self-sufficient strategy, which enabled them to continue a period of unparalleled success, contrary to the men's team.

d. Case Studies

ii. *Meaning of a Strong Movement: Saudi Arabia Women's Football*

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has witnessed a remarkable transformation in its sporting landscape, none more emblematic than the rise of women's football. A strong football movement in this context is not simply about athletic competition; it is a powerful catalyst for social change, gender empowerment, and cultural evolution. By breaking down long-standing barriers, Saudi women's football could become a symbol of progress that resonates far beyond the confines of the pitch.

The first approach to football came from small tournaments in Jeddah and attempts to create a league in the early 2000s, which were deemed illegal and unacceptable by political and religious leaders at the time (Jamjoom, 2010). For decades, conservative societal norms and institutionalized restrictions severely limited women's participation in sport in Saudi Arabia and the entire Middle East. In fact historically, strict interpretations of gender roles and policies banning female spectatorship in stadiums until as recently as 2017–2018, underscored the deep-seated challenges faced by women in sports in Saudi Arabia (Surk, 2012). These limitations were not only about physical access, but subsequently about denying women the opportunity to serve as role models and change agents in a society where football, Saudi Arabia's modern national passion, had exclusively been a male preserve, as for the vast majority of activities in its culture (Jomana Zawawi & Al-Ban 2023).

The gradual easing of restrictions, such as allowing women into stadiums, establishing women's leagues, and forming a national team, marks a crucial time in the country's history, and in the whole movement. These changes are part of a broader socio-cultural reformation driven by 'Vision 2030', which refers to a strategic initiative aimed at diversifying the economy and modernizing Saudi society (Saudi Arabia Gov, 2025). This is in fact, a crucial factor in Saudi Arabia's recent changes in society, as part for example of the acquisition of the rights to host the FIFA World Cup of 2034. In a sense then the country wants to change the perception that Western societies and the world have of its culture, customs and law (FIFA, 2025).

The project is perhaps Saudi Arabia's bold strategy for economic diversification and social reform, in essence reducing the nation's dependency on oil while modernizing its society. A key element of Vision 2030 is the development of women's participation across various sectors, including sports, by enhancing access to opportunities, improving infrastructure, and promoting female activities. This ideal has been instrumental in paving the way for initiatives like the expansion of women's football, fostering a more inclusive cultural environment. The extent to which the government wants to truly develop women's rights is though quite unknown.

As is imaginable, the evolution of women's football in Saudi Arabia has not been without its challenges. Traditional cultural norms based on Islamic principles, resistance from conservative elements, and systemic discrimination hindered the establishment of organized women's sport across the entire Middle East. Early obstacles included not only legislative bans but also widespread societal skepticism about female athletic capabilities and participation. Overcoming these challenges has required sustained advocacy, strategic policy reforms, and significant investments in grassroots infrastructure. These can have a tangible impact on the mentioned historical barriers, and they can serve as a blueprint for future initiatives. It is crucial to emphasize that these actions, in order to have a meaningful effect, must be part of a systematic, long-term strategy, strongly supported by both the Saudi government and its citizens, rather than just temporary measures, because dismantling deeply rooted cultural norms will take considerable time.

The first steps though, have been taken, and the results clearly show it: Saudi Arabia's women's football is currently in its biggest 'boom' ever. The tremendous growth is illustrated by a reported 195% surge in professional female players in recent years, and attests to the importance of acting as first movers, both from an organizational perspective as well as in terms

of providing access for players (Fauzul, 2023) (Ghandour, 2025). The most notable progress has been at the grassroots level though. For instance, the SAFF (Saudi Arabia Football Federation) Girls' Schools League experienced a 46% year-over-year increase since its establishment and has seen participation surge to over 70,000 young players in the 2023–24 season. Meanwhile, regional training centers have grown from just one in 2021 to six in 2023, leading to a 773% surge in attendance, from 22 to 192 young players aged 6–17. Additionally, local coaching courses have increased by 550% and other international courses by 200%, and today, the Kingdom boasts more than 1,500 registered players, over 940 of whom are Saudi nationals (Ghandour, 2025) (Imawan, Zuliansyah, & Surwandono, 2024).

This shows how women's football is driving social change in Saudi Arabia by challenging norms and creating new opportunities for females. Its commercial appeal is growing too, as seen with global brands like Lay's and Rexona, who have respectively partnered with the SAFF Women's Premier League and Saudi Women's National Team in October 2024 (SB, 2025) (Unilever, 2024) (ArabNews, 2023). Lastly, fan engagement is also significantly at historical heights with a reported 48% of female enthusiasts regularly watching matches, and 28% playing at least once a month (Ghandour, 2025). As Saudi Arabia prepares to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup, building the sport from scratch positions the Kingdom to set new global standards for women's football. (Fauzul, 2023).

The journey of Saudi Arabia's women's football movement is a testament to the power of sport as a vehicle for cultural transformation and social progress. Through overcoming historic barriers, achieving unprecedented growth, and inspiring a new generation, women's football has emerged as a beacon of hope and change in the country. As the movement continues to gain momentum, it has the possibility to not only redefine the role of women in sports but also chart a path toward a more inclusive and dynamic society in the entire Middle East. Sports can unite communities, challenge oppressive norms, and empower individuals to break free from tradition, and in Saudi Arabia, that is what women's football is fighting for.

From its early days in Jeddah to the establishment of the Saudi Professional League and the advent of the World Cup, it has provided both the impetus and valuable change to harness sports as a vehicle for social inclusion, thus playing a pivotal role in reshaping the national identity toward a more moderate and open society. Whether the impact is going to be a long-lasting one is yet to be seen, and it will be heavily dependent on how seriously the government will want to dethrone the millennia-old Islamic constraints that women face, in sports and life

4. Bridging Academic Studies and On-Field Realities

This literature review is designed to serve as the cornerstone of the research by systematically analyzing and synthesizing the body of academic work surrounding women's football. It lays a concrete foundation for the thesis by scrutinizing historical, cultural, economic, and sociological studies that have documented the challenges and evolution of the sport, thereby lending robust validity to the overall study. By critically engaging with seminal papers and contemporary research, the review not only validates the premise of the thesis but also creates a comprehensive framework that informs future analysis. Moreover, this review is uniquely enriched by an on-field case study of AS Roma Women, where a deep study of the Italian club reality is conducted through various key aspects of its structure. For instance, the focus is centered, among other aspects, on the managerial and marketing strategies deployed, dissected, and contrasted with those of the men's team.

Through this dual approach, merging classical academic insights with practical, first-hand evidence, the literature review tries to give both empirical and concrete validity to the research. In addition, it touches on the transformational journey of AS Roma, highlights player perspectives on the evolving movement, and offers comparative insights into organizational dynamics analyzed in the previous chapter, waiting for them to be re-discussed in the third one.

Another critical section of this, is the research gaps evidenced in the analysis of academic literature. In fact, this literature review intends to spark further discussion on the lack of information and research conducted on the matter of women's sports, subsequently on football, and on the extremely limited access to reliable, professional and serious work conducted by influential figures in the Academic world.

Ultimately then, by weaving together diverse strands of academic inquiry, first-hand research, and its intention to add to the unacceptable scarcity of research on women's sports, this review not only underscores the critical issues at the heart of women's football but also sets the stage for a modern exploration of contemporary challenges and opportunities within the sport.

a. Examination and Evolution of Existing Research on Women's Football

i. *Cultural and Socio-Political Studies*

The development of women's football is a narrative steeped in a long history of marginalization and institutional neglect, a legacy that continues to influence the sport's current state. Early academic investigations into women's football are pivotal for understanding the entrenched patterns of exclusion and cultural stereotyping that have defined the sport. By examining seminal works such as *Women, Football and History: International Perspectives* by Williams and Hess, *The F.A.'s Ban of Women's Football 1921 in the Contemporary Press: A Historical Discourse Analysis* by Jenkel, and *Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Women and Football* by Pfister, we can trace the foundational arguments that inform contemporary discussions around financial constraints, cultural implications, and the persistent dependence on male-dominated structures (Williams & Hess, 2015) (Jenkel, 2021) (Pfister, 2024).

Firstly, Williams and Hess's *Women, Football and History: International Perspectives* provides a historical analysis that is critical to understanding the roots of women's football's marginalization. Their work in fact, documents how societal norms and institutional biases have relegated female participation in football to a marginal status. According to the authors, the early sidelining of women was not an isolated phenomenon but a systemic reflection of a broader social order that devalued female athleticism. This narrative of exclusion is crucial when tracing the historical non-engagement of women in sports, and as a consequence to women's football. The study illuminates how early financial underinvestment, and cultural stereotyping laid the groundwork for ongoing challenges in attracting future athletes, as well as setting the stage for later debates about the role of economic support and media representation in the sport (Williams & Hess, 2015).

Building on the historical narrative presented by Williams and Hess, Jenkel's *The F.A.'s Ban of Women's Football 1921 in the Contemporary Press: A Historical Discourse Analysis* delves into one of the most pivotal moments in the sport's history. The 1921 ban by the Football Association in England represents the infamous moment where institutional policy and media narratives converged to cement the notion that women's football was unsuitable for public consumption. Jenkel's analysis of contemporary press coverage reveals that the ban was not merely an administrative decision; it was a culturally mediated event designed to reinforce existing gender hierarchies. It explains how the language and imagery deployed by the media served to legitimize the exclusion of women and underscored their "unsuitability" for competitive sport. This discourse not only justified the immediate exclusion but also had

serious, long-lasting implications, contributing to a cycle of underinvestment and limited institutional support. Jenkel's work serves, therefore as a critical foundation in understanding the cultural implications of the historic non-engagement highlighted in the previous chapter, as it underscores the power of media in shaping public perceptions and sustaining gender biases that persist in the modern context (Jenkel, 2021).

Complementing these historical and media-focused analyses, Pfister's *Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Women and Football* adds a vital sociological perspective that deepens our understanding of the mechanisms behind women's exclusion. Pfister explores how deep-seated cultural assumptions about femininity and athleticism have been systematically embedded within sporting institutions (Pfister, 2024).

Her research suggests that the very structure of football, as an institution historically dominated by male interests, has actively discouraged female participation. Through an examination of organizational practices and societal expectations, Pfister reveals that the exclusion of women is not simply a matter of individual bias but a reflection of broader social structures that privilege masculinity. This insight is particularly relevant to the previous discussion on women's football dependence on the male sector, as it highlights the ways in which early exclusionary practices have led to a persistent reliance on male-dominated infrastructures for decision-making, funding, and media representation (Pfister, 2024).

Additionally, this literature review has the intention to base itself on concrete studies and research while analyzing different cultures, authors, and social perspectives, to create a valid and broad spectrum. This is done through the addition of studies such as the *Gender-Stereotyped Barriers Against Women Football Players: A Qualitative Perspective on the Eccles' Expectancy-Value Theory* by Safer Elmas and F. Hülya Aşçi, conducted in Turkey, and *The Sociohistorical Challenges to the Development of Women's Football in Poland* by Magdalena Zmuda Palka, in Poland. The first investigates how deep-seated gender stereotypes hinder the participation and development of female football players by applying Eccles' Expectancy-Value Theory. The authors demonstrate that societal expectations and cultural norms significantly impact both the self-perception of female athletes and the external support they receive (Elmas & Aşçi, 2022).

Similarly, the study conducted by Magdalena Zmuda Palka offers a focused look at how sociohistorical factors in Poland have shaped the development of the sport. Zmuda Palka's work underscores that local cultural histories, institutional legacies, and social attitudes can create

unique barriers to growth, even as global trends push towards professionalization and increased visibility (Zmuda Palka & Abouna, 2023).

By adding these diverse cultural perspectives, from Turkey and Poland, this literature review underscores the importance of cross-cultural analysis in capturing the full complexity of women's football. These insights reinforce the necessity of a global perspective in addressing the various issues explained in Chapter 1.

In summary, the academic investigations based on the historical, cultural and socio-political aspects of women's football serve as a critical foundation for understanding the complex web of cultural, financial, and institutional challenges that continue to shape the sport today. The works not only document the historical exclusion of women but also provide a lens through which modern issues, ranging from financial underinvestment to the persistent reliance on male-dominated structures, can be understood. By tracing these narratives back to the broader context, we see that the legacy of historic non-engagement remains a powerful influence on contemporary debates over cultural implications, financial considerations, and the strategies needed to attract future athletes. Ultimately, these studies underscore the importance of addressing long-standing biases and reimagining institutional structures to pave the way for a more inclusive and dynamic future for women's football.

a. Examination and Evolution of Existing Research on Women's Football

ii. *Economic and Structural Studies*

The evolution of women's football in recent decades has been characterized by a dynamic interplay of progress and persistent challenges. While the previous studies laid the foundation by highlighting historical exclusions and ingrained cultural biases, this section of this literature review explores the more technical realities of modern sport. This, in fact delves into how studies addressed professionalization, participation, and the complex financial challenges facing women's football today. As intended, and doing so, it also reflects back on key components of Chapter 1.

For instance, Carrie Dunn's work, *Women's Football in a Global, Professional Era*, is central to understanding the economic and organizational transformation in women's football. The author examines how globalization and market forces have not only increased the sport's visibility but have also brought about significant financial changes. Her analysis reveals that

professionalization has opened up new revenue streams and sponsorship opportunities. However, it also highlights the challenges of achieving parity with men's football, challenges that stem from longstanding patterns of financial underinvestment (Dunn, 2023). The discussion then ties directly to the earlier chapter, having previously analyzed the vast financial considerations, demonstrating that while commercial interest is on the rise, the economic disparities and resource gaps that have historically plagued the sport remain deeply embedded.

Additionally, Rodney Fort's *Economics of College Sports: A Topical Reading List* provides a comparative framework to further interrogate these financial dynamics. Although Fort's focus extends beyond women's football, his exploration of economic pressures in collegiate sports offers valuable parallels. The insights drawn from his work help to contextualize the financial hurdles faced by women's football, highlighting how market forces, sponsorship deals, and media attention contribute to both opportunities and limitations. By situating women's football within this broader economic discourse, Fort's analysis reinforces the need for more equitable financial investment in women's sports, a theme that resonates with the ongoing struggle to secure adequate funding and support (Fort, 2004).

A critical component of the sport's landscape is understanding what drives participation in women's football, as mentioned in the first chapter. In *To Play or Not to Play? What Drives Girls' and Women's Participation in Football?* Hardy, Balliauw, and Vandenbruaene offer a multifaceted examination of the factors influencing engagement. Their study investigates how intrinsic passion for the sport, familial encouragement, and societal expectations converge to either facilitate or hinder participation. This work is especially significant for the theme of attracting future athletes. It not only identifies the barriers, such as lingering cultural stereotypes and inadequate institutional support, but also underscores the enabling factors that can inspire young athletes to engage with the sport. The study then provides a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities that shape the recruitment and retention of talent (Hardy et al., 2023).

Adding another layer to this discussion is the research by He, Su, and Wang in *Girls Play Basketball Too? A Study of the Mechanisms of Traditional Social Gender Consciousness on Female Participation in Contact Leisure Sports*. Although their focus is on basketball, the parallels they draw are instructive for women's football. Their findings highlight how traditional gender consciousness continues to influence sport preferences and participation patterns, affecting not only resource distribution but also the societal support for female

athletes. This cross-sport comparison enriches the intent of this research and understanding of the cultural implications that remain a formidable barrier in attracting future talent and achieving true gender parity (He, Su, & Wang, 2024).

Moreover, high-profile competitions and the increasing commercialization of women's football bring both accolades and contradictions. Tjønndal, Skirbekk, Røsten, and Rogstad, in their study *'Women Play Football, Not Women's Football': The Potentials and Paradoxes of Professionalisation Expressed at the UEFA Women's EURO 2022 Championship*, offer an incisive critique of the professionalization process. Their analysis of the UEFA Women's EURO 2022 Championship illustrates a striking paradox: while the sport is gaining legitimacy and attracting significant commercial interest, the process of professionalization can inadvertently reinforce traditional gender norms. For example, even as the event garners global attention and improved funding, the underlying structures, often inherited from male-dominated frameworks, continue to shape its organization and media representation. This tension speaks directly to the theme vastly mentioned in the previous section, emphasizing that the progress in professionalization is inextricably linked with, and sometimes hindered by, the legacy of male-centric governance in football (Tjønndal et al., 2024).

In a different context, Charlotte Lysa's *Women, Football and Social Change in Saudi Arabia Pioneer Players* offers a compelling case study that stands in contrast to Western models of professionalization. Lysa's work documents how, in the culturally conservative context of Saudi Arabia, the emergence of women's football is not merely a sporting development but a revolutionary social movement. This research highlights how female pioneers in the sport are challenging deeply entrenched gender roles and fostering broader societal transformation, which directly aligns with the case of the expanding Saudi movement. It demonstrates that while financial and institutional challenges persist, the cultural implications of introducing women's football in such contexts can lead to significant shifts in public perception and policy, offering a model for other regions grappling with similar issues (Lysa, 2025).

Complementing these various studies is the integrative review by Valenti, Scelles, and Morrow, titled *Women's Football Studies: An Integrative Review*. This work synthesizes the extensive body of contemporary research, highlighting recurring themes, methodological innovations, and ongoing research gaps. The integrative review serves as a different perspective, bridging insights from diverse studies and emphasizing the interconnected nature of financial, cultural, and organizational challenges. Valenti underscores in fact, the necessity

of a holistic approach to understanding women's football, a perspective that resonates with the section of Chapter 1, '*Both Sides of the Equation*' (Valenti, Scelles, & Morrow, 2018).

As mentioned in the section related to the financial aspects and considerations, the transformation of women's football in recent decades cannot be fully understood without examining the economic and political determinants that have come to the forefront in international competitions. The second of Nicolas Scelles's studies, *Policy, Political and Economic Determinants of the Evolution of Competitive Balance in the FIFA Women's Football World Cups*, offers a comprehensive analysis of how policies and political decisions have influenced competitive balance at the highest levels. Scelles's work reveals that the evolution of the sport on the global stage is not only a matter of athletic performance but also a product of economic strategies and political negotiations (Scelles, 2021).

By integrating these contemporary perspectives, this literature review not only maps the current state of women's football but also traces its evolution back to the foundational themes identified in the broader index. The financial considerations, cultural implications, and efforts to attract future athletes are all interwoven into the fabric of modern women's football, illustrating that progress in the sport is as much about challenging historical legacies as it is about seizing new economic and organizational opportunities. Ultimately, the rich tapestry of contemporary research provides both a critical analysis of where women's football stands today and a hopeful vision for how it might evolve in the future—a vision that bridges academic inquiry with the transformative power of on-field realities.

a. Examination and Evolution of Existing Research on Women's Football

iii. *Research Gaps*

The academic exploration of women's sports has long been overshadowed by research into men's sports, resulting in a significant underdevelopment of scholarship on the women's game. This deficiency is especially pronounced in the field of women's football, where historical exclusion, financial underinvestment, and cultural stereotyping have been compounded by a persistent neglect of dedicated research. By merging insights on research gaps with the broader lack of studies on women's sports, this literature review examines how these twin issues shape both academic understanding and the practical evolution of women's football.

The literature review has previously laid the groundwork by merging historical, cultural, economic, and sociological insights. However, while delving into academic databases and contemporary studies, several critical research gaps have emerged that not only challenge existing paradigms but also underscore the urgency of addressing the understudying of women's sports.

Despite women constituting roughly 50% of the population and participating widely in sports, research indicates that they are vastly underrepresented as both research subjects and authors (United Nations, 2024). A study conducted by several medical professors named *Under-Representation Of Women Is Alive And Well In Sport And Exercise Medicine: What It Looks Like And What We Can Do About It*, notes that knowledge gaps persist in key areas, such as sport performance, cardiovascular health, and muscular development, because women are included in only about 6–8% of sports science studies (Anderson et al., 2023). This serious underrepresentation results in training methods, injury prevention strategies, and performance guidelines that are largely extrapolated from male data, potentially jeopardizing the health and success of female athletes.

Additionally, contemporary scholarships call for a rethinking of how women's sports are studied. For example, the article written in 2021, *Re-thinking Women's Sport Research: Looking in the Mirror and Reflecting Forward*, reinforces the argument that much of the existing literature compares women's sports to men's rather than exploring the unique challenges faced by female athletes (Lebel et al., 2021). This approach not only builds on outdated stereotypes but also limits the development of evidence-based practices tailored for women. When research fails to acknowledge these differences, it perpetuates a cycle where female sports remain marginalized both in academic inquiry and on the field.

To address these deficiencies, recent initiatives have begun to take shape. Leaders in Sport recently highlighted, for instance, the creation of the 'Centre of Excellence for Women in Sport', a dedicated space where academic research meets real-world application. The center focuses on providing evidence-based insights that inform coaching, training, and health support for female athletes (Woodland, Wright, & Evans, 2024). By translating theoretical research into practical strategies, such initiatives demonstrate how bridging the research gap can have immediate benefits on performance and injury prevention.

Moreover, the most striking cases occur when neglecting these research gaps has tangible consequences. This is the case for example of training regimens, injury prevention

protocols, and recovery strategies, which are based predominantly on male physiology, and as shown extensively, female athletes are at higher risk for issues such as ACL injuries, a problem well documented in both academic research and real-world sports reporting. Inadequate research can lead to misdiagnosis, ineffective treatments, and ultimately, career-threatening injuries, as illustrated by numerous high-profile cases in women's football (Williams, 2024). Furthermore, scholars such as Michael Messner and Rebecca Jordan-Young have long criticized the male-centric nature of sports research. Their work argues that by neglecting female-specific contexts, the field not only produces skewed data but also reinforces systemic inequalities that affect everything from media coverage to funding and policy decisions (Messner, 2011) (Karkazis & Jordan-Young, 2018).

The implications of these research gaps are profound. Without a robust, gender-sensitive research agenda, the entire ecosystem of women's sports, from grassroots participation to elite performance, remains at risk of being undervalued and under-supported. It is critical for policymakers, funding bodies, and academic institutions to reallocate resources and prioritize academic research that addresses the specific needs of female athletes. Only through such a comprehensive and inclusive approach can we hope to generate the evidence needed to inform best practices, influence policy, and ultimately, create an equitable sports environment. This is true to every aspect of the industry: the medical implications for female athletes, the on-pitch performance and the business and managerial side of the movement. Without a real and fair attention to the women's sports ecosystem, in this case football, the industry as a whole will always be negatively affected.

In summary, bridging the research gap in women's sports is not merely an academic exercise, it is a necessary step toward ensuring the safety, performance, and long-term development of the women's football industry. By integrating interdisciplinary insights and advocating for targeted research, it is crucial to act in order to transform both the limited academic landscape and the lived experiences of women in sport, paving the way for a more just and high-performing sporting world. This research, on one hand, intends then to address the lack of studies conducted on such matter, and on the other to actively participate in the study of its various industry dynamics.

b. On-Field Research Case: AS Roma Women Behind the Scenes

Building on the comprehensive exploration of women's sports research gaps and the broader historical and socio-cultural challenges discussed so far, the next section delves into a focused, empirical investigation: an on-field case study of AS Roma Women. This segment, titled *AS Roma Women Behind the Scenes*, offers a rare glimpse into the inner workings of a team that has rapidly emerged as a beacon of success in Italian women's football.

AS Roma Women, in recent years, has established itself as an impressive footballing reality based on field successes and clear strategies. It has successfully defied traditional expectations and pioneered innovative approaches to team management, training methodologies, and marketing strategies. In this section, we take an in-depth look at the dynamics that underpin their rise, from strategic coaching and player development and care to organizational culture and strategic decision-making. By examining these factors, we aim to connect the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review with real-world applications and outcomes. This on-field research provides a multidimensional perspective that enriches the existing academic discourse. It illustrates how addressing systemic issues, such as funding disparities, inadequate media representation, and the underrepresentation of female-specific research, can translate into tangible success on the pitch. By capturing behind-the-scenes insights, including interviews with coaching staff, players, and support personnel, this case study highlights the interplay between empirical evidence and strategic innovation. Moreover, it serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges and opportunities facing women's sports today.

Through this detailed exploration of AS Roma Women, we not only validate the critical issues identified in earlier sections but also chart a path forward. The insights garnered from this case study underscore the potential for transformative change when research, practice, and policy converge in support of female athletic excellence.

In an era marked by transformative change, the world of women's football in Italy is undergoing an evolution that is as challenging as it is promising. Throughout this research, I interviewed Carlo Maria Stigliano, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of AS Roma Women, who provided a detailed account of the many facets of this transformation. The intention behind this was to give a practical insight into the reality of today's women's football. The first part of this conversation spanned a wide range of topics, from innovative marketing strategies and cutting-edge managerial practices to the evolving organizational structures within AS Roma

Women and the broader financial ecosystem in Italian women's football. With the recent professionalization of the sport and significant government investments, the landscape is being reshaped before our eyes. This highlighted not only the triumphs and tribulations faced by the pioneers of the movement, but also reflected on the multifaceted challenges that lie ahead as the industry strives for sustainability and equity.

In 2019, Italian women's football reached a watershed moment when it was officially recognized as a professional sport. This historic leap was supported by a landmark initiative from the CONI committee, which allocated 11 million euros for a total of three years to provide a financial kickstart for the entire Italian league. This government backing was a powerful signal of intent, aimed at both elevating the status of the sport and fostering broader societal change (D'Ascenzo, 2019).

Stigliano elaborated on how this newfound professional status has necessitated a significant rethinking of operational models. The transformation means that clubs must now manage increased expenses associated with professional management, enhanced training facilities, higher salaries, and more rigorous administrative processes. In addition, this brought a lot more exposure, which now required the acquisition of highly-trained professionals to handle communications, public relations and the overall image of the clubs, as this was intuitively not the case in the previous amateur setting. These are one of the reasons why for instance, leagues with much larger followings and historical representation, such as the Italian Volleyball League, purposefully shy away from entering the professional area. In some cases in fact, it is seen as more of a burden for clubs and leagues, instead of a true benefit.

While professionalization was seen as crucial for the long-term growth of the women's football movement, it has also exposed the stark economic disparities within the league. Smaller clubs, in particular, find themselves grappling with the challenge of meeting these elevated costs on budgets that have historically been modest. The financial support distributed across the league, ranging from 2 to 7 million euros, with sponsorships contributing a mere 2 million euros, has to be split equally for all 10 teams in the Women's Serie A. This clearly underscores the significant financial constraints in place in the current structure. This scenario demands that clubs innovate relentlessly in both their financial planning and operational strategies to sustain the competitive edge in a newly professional arena.

Moreover, the financial framework underpinning Italian women's football is characterized by a delicate balance of potential and risks. With total club budgets and league

revenue distributions, as mentioned, confined to a few million, the economic environment is inherently challenging. Stigliano discussed how the limited financial resources force clubs to navigate a landscape where every output must be optimized to cover rising operational costs. The reliance on modest sponsorships and minimal revenue streams means that clubs are often forced to adopt a dual strategy of cost control and creative revenue generation in order not to fold.

In practical terms, this economic challenge has spurred clubs like AS Roma Women to explore diverse avenues to supplement their income, in order not to rely too much on the men's financial backing, which is present, but for a variety of reasons is interested in keeping expenses for women's teams as low as possible. Moreover, the reliance on the financial and infrastructural support from the men's teams has become a critical aspect of the survival strategy for many women's clubs. Fortunately enough, this is not necessarily the case with AS Roma. While the last two ownerships have extensively funded the women's teams, in order to establish themselves as a dominant force of Italian women's football, they have developed at the same an initial structure for future independence.

The strategy AS Roma implemented was thought of as a modern approach to tackle the different realities of men's and female sports. From leveraging digital media for targeted advertising to forging strategic partnerships that go beyond traditional sponsorship deals, every opportunity is being harnessed to create new revenue streams. Stigliano, while stressing that Roma is trying to reach financial independence, acknowledged how, in today's reality, it is still almost impossible not to rely on the men's financial support. This interdependency, while providing a lifeline, also highlights the need for the women's game to eventually stand on its own financially. The dialogue with Stigliano revealed that while the industry is still in its nascent phase, there is a concerted effort by stakeholders to transform these initial investments into long-term sustainable growth, all while keeping cultural and social objectives in sharp focus.

One of the most compelling parts of the on-field research was the detailed exposition on the marketing, managerial, and organizational strategies that AS Roma Women is pioneering to navigate this challenging environment. Recognizing the early-stage status of the women's game, the club has embarked on a mission to elevate its profile and connect deeply with a broader audience. Stigliano described a multi-pronged approach that integrates digital marketing, community engagement, and innovative branding initiatives.

On the marketing front, the club is leveraging digital platforms and social media to create compelling narratives that resonate with both long-time football fans and new audiences. Campaigns are designed to showcase the athletic prowess of the team and create exposure for the players, while also emphasizing the cultural and social significance of women in sports. This dual approach not only enhances the club's modern marketability but also aligns with broader societal values, thereby attracting sponsors and partners who share these ideals.

Managerially, the transition to a professional setup has demanded a radical overhaul of internal operations. Stigliano detailed how AS Roma Women has restructured its administrative processes to better manage the complexities of professional sport. This includes adopting new technologies for performance analysis, enhancing talent development programs, and instilling a culture of innovation and continuous improvement. The club's organizational transformation reflects a broader strategic vision: to build a resilient institution capable of competing at the highest levels despite financial constraints.

Organizationally, the interdependence between the women's and men's teams plays a pivotal role. While the women's team is increasingly carving out its own identity, the historical reliance on the men's club infrastructure continues to provide essential support. This symbiotic relationship has spurred discussions about how to eventually achieve a degree of financial and operational independence. The strategies discussed by Stigliano are not just about survival in a competitive sport but are also about laying the groundwork for a future where women's football can flourish as a standalone entity with its own robust revenue models and sustainable practices.

Beyond the immediate operational and financial challenges, Stigliano offered a reflection on the broader ecosystem of women's football in Italy, particularly the career trajectories of female athletes. In contrast to the structured college sports systems in the United States and Canada, where athletes benefit from a dual pathway that integrates sports with academic achievement, the Italian model presents a very different picture.

In Italy, the pathway to professional sports is totally independent from the schooling system (as in virtually all of Europe). Many talented young women face a high dropout rate as they struggle to balance the demands of athletic training with limited opportunities for educational advancement. Stigliano pointed out that this lack of a robust support system for athletes who do not make it to the top-tier teams leaves a significant gap in the overall ecosystem. Without the safety net of higher education or alternative career pathways, many female athletes are left vulnerable once their sports careers come to an end, and they generally

end up leaving the football ecosystem entirely by the age of 16-17, where they are supposed to make the jump to Primavera or first teams.

This systemic issue is not just a matter of individual opportunity but has broader implications for the industry. The absence of comprehensive educational support systems for athletes can undermine the long-term sustainability of the sport by reducing the pool of talent that can contribute to the movement in various capacities. Addressing this gap is seen as essential for building a more resilient and dynamic ecosystem, one that values both athletic excellence and academic achievement. Stigliano's insights underline the urgent need for a paradigm shift that integrates sports development with educational and career support, ensuring that young women are equipped to thrive both on and off the field.

At its core, the evolution of women's football in Italy tries not to be merely an economic venture, but also to foster a profound cultural, social, and athletic investment. Stigliano emphasized that the early-stage financial investments, although modest in comparison to some global sports markets, carry a far-reaching significance. The financial outlay by clubs and the Italian government is as much about sparking cultural change as it is about nurturing athletic talent.

The Juventus football club, for example, has emerged as a beacon of sustainability in this context, having invested in its women's team many years earlier and developed a relatively robust model. By doing this, it established itself as a pioneer in the women's sector of Italian football, anticipating the other clubs and competitors. While Fiorentina, he explained, had done the same around the same time, it has not found the same success. This shows, he notes, how the starting structural core of the club (in a sense the solid managerial system in place for the men's team) is key for the women's team to rely on, especially in the beginning. This in fact, was not the case for Fiorentina compared to the notoriously solid corporate structure of Juventus. In contrast with these examples, many other clubs are still in the process of finding their footing. This early-stage investment is seen as a strategic gamble, one that prioritizes long-term societal benefits over immediate financial returns. By investing in women's football, stakeholders are championing a vision that transcends the sport itself, aiming to reshape societal perceptions of gender roles and promote equality in the traditionally male-dominated world of football.

Stigliano's perspective is clear: the journey toward sustainability in women's football is a multifaceted one, where cultural and social investments play a critical role. The current

phase is viewed as laying the foundational blocks for a future where women's football is celebrated not just for its athletic achievements but also for its role in driving social progress. This holistic investment approach ensures that every investment is not only a bet on sporting success but also the broader transformation of society, one that aspires to leave a lasting legacy of empowerment and equality.

At the same time, he underlined how far the system is from a 'reasonable' and true business presence worthy of consideration. This, as he explained, is clearly shown by the revenue streams, which are still too modest for a true business model to even take place, both at the club and league levels. What this means is that the movement had its kickstart, and is improving, but as he pointed out, it would be considered totally unprofitable and not worth it in any other corporate industry. He stresses though how, thankfully enough, this is understood by current Serie A ownerships, or at least some, and that they are not viewing this as a profit-driven investment. This is a stepping stone necessary for the long-term improvement of the whole women's football industry.

Carlo Stigliano's in-depth reflections provide a vivid portrait of a sport in transition then. From the historic professionalization supported by a significant government injection of funds to the intricate challenges of limited budgets and the strategic overhaul of marketing and managerial practices, the journey of Italian women's football is both inspiring and complex. AS Roma Women, under Stigliano's leadership, among others, is pioneering new pathways, innovative, resilient, and deeply committed to the future of the sport.

As we look forward, the conversation underscores a critical point: the evolution of women's football in Italy is not solely about athletic competition. It is a broader cultural movement that seeks to redefine opportunities, support female talent holistically, and ultimately foster an environment where sports and society grow hand in hand. The combined efforts of clubs, government bodies, and community stakeholders promise not just a sustainable sporting future, but also a significant societal transformation that could serve as a model for women's sports worldwide.

The second phase of this interview focused on the multifaceted evolution of the club and the specific corporate structure in place at AS Roma Women. The research was structured around key questions addressing strategic, operational, and cultural aspects of the club. Stigliano's responses provided rich insights into the innovative managerial and marketing approaches adopted, the distinctive dynamics compared to the men's teams, the streamlined

corporate structure, comparisons with other clubs, the transformative impact of AS Roma SRL's acquisition, and the club's on-field successes alongside its future prospects. The discussion not only highlighted the rapid growth of the women's game but also underscored the ongoing challenges and opportunities that come with building a sustainable, revenue-based system in a still-nascent industry.

The COO underlined immediately that at the heart of AS Roma Women's strategy lies a strong emphasis on fan engagement, a cornerstone that has been instrumental in the team's flourishing success. Stigliano revealed that the club has achieved remarkable growth in home game attendance, noting an impressive jump from the modest 200–300 spectators of the early days to a consistent minimum of 1,100 per game, with several sold-out matches at Tre Fontane stadium attracting over 4,000 fans.

Central to this achievement is the innovative use of social media, which has become a vital tool in reaching and retaining a new audience. Recognizing that the women's team is essentially a new product in the sports market, the club's board has adopted a "start from scratch" mentality. Unlike the men's team, which benefits from a long-established fan base, the women's team needed to create its own identity and build a loyal following from the ground up. A standout element in this strategy is the introduction of the female mascot 'Romina', alongside the men's one 'Romeo', designed specifically to resonate with young female audiences and movement. This initiative was purposefully conducted with a social media focus, where mascots are easily 'spendable' as fun, engaging and post-friendly, across virtually every platform, as very well documented and present in the American market. This was intended to differentiate the team in a crowded market, and as the COO simply described it: "It honestly just made sense to have a female character alongside the men's one. It was a great idea of the Marketing department for various reasons, not least because it offers fun and relatable entertainment to young girls as well as to boys". This successful and natural marketing proposal perfectly aligns with the overall strategy of the women's team.

Moreover, Stigliano extensively addressed the cultural and operational differences between the women's and men's teams. As presented earlier in this paper, he also pointed out that one of the primary challenges for the women's team is overcoming entrenched social stigmas around football and navigating a different set of dynamics. The women's game, as mentioned, while rapidly growing, operates in an ecosystem that is considerably smaller and

less lucrative than that of the men's football scene. This relative infancy comes with both challenges and unique advantages.

For instance, the reduced pressure from external influences, such as agents, fans and external stakeholders, and a less intense media spotlight can actually foster a more agile and adaptable environment. He explained how this less stressful environment is extremely helpful for a growing industry, and in this case, a club like AS Roma Women. It reduces players' pressure on the pitch as well as off it, media attention and scrutiny, and the need for success, which is required for the men's teams by fans, owners and every stakeholder involved.

Additionally, this setting permits career advancement opportunities to be more readily available, with fewer hierarchical layers to navigate. In this sense, the management structure itself is also relatively smaller. This agility, combined with a tighter-knit operational structure, enables quicker decision-making and potentially faster career progression for those involved in the women's side, contrasting sharply with the more complex and sometimes slower-moving structures found in men's football.

In this sense, the key factor behind the efficient management of AS Roma Women is its deliberately lean corporate structure. Unlike the extensive setups seen in the men's teams, the current ownership purposefully decided for the women's side to operate with a compact and highly focused leadership team. This structure is composed of just three primary roles: Elisabetta Bavagnoli as the Head of Women's Football, Gianmarco Migliorati as the Sporting Director, and the interviewed Carlo Stigliano as the Chief Operating Officer.

This minimalistic approach was a deliberate decision by the club's owners to ensure direct control over operations and rapid, informed decision-making. Daily feedback and close communication among these roles create a dynamic where operational efficiency is paramount. While the Head Coach, Alessandro Spugna, plays a crucial role in the team's development and is consistently consulted, he does not sit at the decision-making table. This clear delineation of roles ensures that the club remains agile and responsive, a critical factor in an environment where competencies, small revenue streams, and effective decision making, are key components of the movement, keeping the need to outperform competitors as the main goal, through sheer innovation and operational excellence.

In comparing AS Roma Women with other teams, Stigliano highlighted the extraordinary attention to player care as a distinguishing factor. The club has institutionalized

a very human approach, devoting approximately three-quarters of its budget to ensuring that players receive comprehensive and extensive support. This includes the provision of housing, personal assistance, transportation solutions, and a variety of other support services that contribute to both their personal well-being and professional performance. As he pointed out: “These services seem like a given, but in the women’s league they most definitely are not. A lot of clubs purely focus on their on-field duties and, surely they try to assist their players, but we really try to go the extra mile.” These in fact may seem like basic provisions for highly lucrative football clubs, but this reality is only true in the men’s teams, not in the women’s.

Such a commitment to the “little things,” then, has fostered a close-knit relationship between the players and the organization. This level of care goes far beyond what is typically seen in larger, more commercialized teams and helps create an environment where players feel valued and supported. In doing so, AS Roma Women not only attracts and retains talent but also sets a benchmark for what player-centric management can achieve in terms of both athletic performance and overall team morale. This was a strategy intentionally crafted for overcoming financial limits that the men’s side does not possess, and to compensate with human care second to none.

The research then delved into the club’s evolution in recent years. In fact, the once Res Roma was acquired by AS Roma SRL at the end of the 2017-18 season, which marked a turning point in the club’s history (Holmes, 2018). This was a significant factor in the current structure of the women’s club. This is because, integrating the pre-existing structure with the expansive resources and clear strategic intentions of the larger organization, AS Roma, created a functional balance between new and past staff personnel, board members and players as well. In this context, a significant factor has been the newfound financial backing that regenerated the former club. Before the acquisition, in fact, the team operated within a more limited framework with constrained resources, and thanks to the integration into the AS Roma SRL, a fresh infusion of economic funding and access to superior infrastructures were now possible.

This transition was not merely financial; it represented a cultural shift as well. The new ownership provided a revamped organizational structure with clear priorities and an unequivocal commitment to the long-term development of the women’s side. With enhanced resources and modern infrastructure, the club was better positioned to implement its innovative strategies, streamline operations, and build a sustainable model that could eventually rival its men’s counterpart in efficiency and effectiveness.

Stigliano, though extensively noting how the most important factor in this was the possibility to train and operate in world-class facilities and infrastructures, especially in Italy, where this is not the case for so many teams, he noted that this factor immensely helped AS Roma Women development, more than the economic value in itself.

On the field, AS Roma Women's success is a testament to the effective strategies that have been meticulously put in place. The club, since its birth in 2018, has won the Serie A league title twice, in 2023 and 2024, as well as adding the Coppa Italia league cup in 2021 and 2024 and the Supercoppa Italiana in 2022 and 2024. This translated to six major trophies in three years, including a Domestic Treble (or *Triplete*) in 2024, winning the league championship, league cup and league supercup (AS Roma, 2025). In addition to this, the team has reached the quarter finals of the UEFA Women's Champions League in 2023 (UEFA, 2023). Stigliano's account underscored the clear on-field successes that mirror the well-executed off-field strategies. The club's emphasis on detail and daily operational excellence has led to a winning formula, both in terms of competitive results and in the development of a robust youth system. Remarkably, he explains, the youth structure has expanded dramatically, from a modest 26 players to an impressive 220 across various age groups, ranging from under-9 to the Primavera and under-21 levels, all within a span of five to six years. This expansion is a clear indicator of the club's commitment to nurturing future talent and building a pipeline that will sustain its competitive edge for years to come.

Looking forward, the future of AS Roma Women is anchored in a dual focus: continuing to build on their current successes while gradually steering the club toward a sustainable, revenue-based model. While immediate profitability may still be a distant goal, the strategic investments in player care, youth development, and operational excellence are setting the stage for long-term viability. The medium to long-term objective is to evolve the club into a self-sustaining entity that not only excels on the pitch but also establishes robust financial foundations, a vision that, although ambitious, is increasingly within reach.

As the women's game continues to grow, the insights from this on-field research underscore the importance of a holistic approach that integrates operational excellence, human-centric management, and strategic investment. The journey is still in its early stages, but the clarity of vision and the effective execution of strategies discussed by Stigliano point to a future where women's football in Italy can stand on its own as a model of innovation, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability, or at least this is what AS Roma clear focus is.

5. Growing the Game: Possibilities and Strategies for the Industry

No longer a niche interest or an alternative to more established female sports, Women's Football now has the chance to reinvent itself as the preferred sporting choice for young girls and teens, especially in areas different from North America. As examined, a significant difference emerged during the analysis of athletic choice for girls, especially during school years, between North America and Europe. As mentioned, this difference emerged mostly because of barriers present in the European schooling system, infrastructures, coaching quality and overall frictions in this process for young girls interacting among the various sports. This chapter is going to analyze how this can change. Specifically, the attention is on how women's football can be a vibrant, accessible, and sustainable option that rivals volleyball, basketball, and beyond. This lays out a comprehensive roadmap of strategies, both intended for marketing and managerial frameworks, aimed at unlocking the vast potential of women's football, ensuring its long-term growth while simultaneously redefining the cultural landscape of the sport.

At the heart of this then, is a dual focus on financial sustainability and inclusive cultural support. Historically, women's football has had to contend with funding gaps and inherent systemic biases. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to set financial sustainability as a core goal while actively seeking strategic backing from governments and even drawing on the established financial ecosystems of men's football. This means creating hybrid funding models where public support, institutional aid, and private investments combine to foster an environment in which women's football can thrive. By aligning itself with wider national sports priorities and leveraging the reputations and revenues of the men's game, women's football can signal to sponsors and policymakers alike that it is a serious, long-term investment with profound cultural implications.

Moreover, today's environment calls for renewed emphasis on these themes, as innovative marketing and agile management models together can drive both commercial success and genuine social impact. Over the past decade, increased viewership and growing participation have set the stage for a radical transformation. This chapter introduces a range of possibilities and strategies that can help the sport not only compete with the vastly mentioned established sports, but also to become the primary athletic choice for the next generation.

The discussion begins with the recognition that today there is a real opportunity to develop robust, sustainable financial models. Achieving this goal will require innovative

funding strategies, being this is crucial for addressing the cultural and institutional barriers that have long limited the growth of women's football.

In tandem with these financial imperatives is the need to capture the imagination of young girls. Drawing on lessons from sports like college basketball, where influential players and social media personalities have transformed the sport into an aspirational, culturally relevant phenomenon, women's football must build a compelling narrative of empowerment. By harnessing the power of social media, as well as various other options, the sport can create an engaging, digital ecosystem that speaks directly to young audiences. Visible role models and influencers play a key role in this transformation, offering relatable stories of struggle and success that help to dismantle outdated cultural stigmas and reduce barriers to entry.

Another central theme is the debate over whether women's football should be managed and marketed as a distinct entity or be more closely intertwined with existing men's football structures. There is merit to both approaches, and the ideal strategy, as the chapter will analyze, may lie somewhere in between. By allowing women's football to develop its own identity, one that is attuned to the unique needs of female athletes, while still benefiting from the expertise, resources, and infrastructure of the broader football world, the sport can enjoy the best of both worlds. Such a hybrid model not only optimizes operational efficiency but also reinforces the sport's emerging distinctiveness. On the other hand, the same can be said about the pre-existing structures which are in place in the men's teams, that have been successful for various decades before the thought of expanding into the women's sector.

One thing appears clear though, at the grassroots level initiating a strong foundation is critical. Grassroots programs provide the first exposure to the sport and nurture the future stars of the game. Ensuring that girls have access to quality training, supportive coaching, and competitive opportunities from a young age is essential for building a sustainable talent pipeline and for fostering a sense of belonging and excitement around the game. This grassroots focus, in turn, fuels the broader vision, a vision that embraces the idea of exploring new, less crowded territories. In a sports market often dominated by established names, women's football can adopt a blue ocean strategy, pioneering innovative approaches to digital marketing, commercial partnerships, and management practices that are uniquely tailored to its context.

Finally, further bolstering the sport's competitiveness is the aspiration to create a more professional and agile environment. As women's football matures, the potential for specialized training, advanced performance analytics, and even experimental adjustments to game rules,

such as modifications in pitch or equipment dimensions to better suit female physiology, can result in a game that is faster, more dynamic, and more technically refined. These innovations, while speculative, signal a commitment to excellence and a willingness to rethink traditional models to fully harness the sport's potential.

In essence, this chapter sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of the possibilities that lie ahead for women's football. It provides an overarching narrative that ties together financial sustainability, digital engagement, operational innovation, and grassroots development. The ultimate goal is to create a vibrant, resilient ecosystem where women's football is not just an alternative option but the number one choice for young athletes, a platform that embodies cultural progress, commercial opportunity, and endless growth potential.

a. Building on the Previous Chapters

i. *Financial Basis for Development*

As the Chapter starts to delve into the strategies possible for the future development of the Women's Football industry, it is crucial to start with the most important factors. Indeed, the 'elephant in the room' present around all of women's sports is its reality of underachieving and non-profitable structure, which has sparked a fierce debate around whether it has the potential to ever be a successful industry, even questioning its existence in the first place.

Today, women's football is in a sense often likened to a Series A startup, gaining traction and proving its scalability, yet still in urgent need of substantive, long-term funding to realize its full potential (Oberoi, 2025). This parallel is somewhat accurate. It represents the appeal that this industry holds, but also refers to the evident financial constraints lying at its basis. Financial sustainability must therefore become the sport's 'north star', guiding every strategic decision from grassroots development to elite competition as also highlighted by UEFA itself (UEFA, 2022). As analyzed in the first Chapter, despite record revenues, such as the FIFA Women's World Cup generating over \$570 million in 2023 and the Women's Super League in England enjoying unprecedented commercial success, the average cost structures of clubs continue to outstrip their incomes, imperiling player retention and infrastructure investment (Reuters, 2024).

What is key then is a combination of multiple factors. What women's football needs is a combination of investment and solidarity from both the men's teams, as mentioned women's

clubs in today's system rely almost entirely on their financial backing, and governing bodies, both nationally and internationally. This is necessary as the men's game finds itself in a 120-year head-start, which directly translates to its exponential advantage in terms of commercial exposure and revenue. It is key to remember these factors when analyzing the current status of the women's industry. Indeed, it would be impossible for the latter to have obtained the same or even similar success in the span of just two decades. That is why the movement needs 'solidarity' as well as financial backing. All too often in fact, when resources are directed toward some marginalized groups of people in society, public backlash arises as critics decry it as unfair to prioritize one group over another. This applies to women's football as well.

The initial investment is then the stepping stone that can foster its development. In fact, UEFA understood this and decided to formalize its commitment with a total of €1 billion in competition revenue strategies and targeted investment between 2024 and 2030, in order to help teams balance their books across Europe's women's game and facilitate their operations (UEFA, 2024).

In this context then, government support emerges as a pivotal enabler. An instance of what tangible actions can mean for the industry, is the UK's 2024-25 Women's Sport Investment Accelerator scheme, for instance, which seeks to attract private capital into elite women's sport by pairing rights holders with investors and industry experts, a concrete step toward closing the funding gap. Alongside this there is the £30 million Lionesses Future Fund, which is dedicated to delivering thirty new high-quality pitches for women's and girls' teams, directly improving facility standards and community access (GOVUK, 2024).

As explained through the Government's project presentation:

"The scheme will prioritize development, commercial growth and financial sustainability. Sponsorship and investment are key to increasing visibility and inspiring young female athletes to ensure greater talent pathways are created, and to develop their careers in sport" (GOVUK, 2024).

These public interventions signal to commercial partners that women's football is a strategic priority, while also laying the groundwork for sustainable local ecosystems.

Simultaneously to this, the established men's football sector holds extremely valuable resources, infrastructures, staff, sponsorship networks, media platforms, and operational know-how, that can accelerate massively the growth of the women's game if shared equitably.

An instance of this is UEFA's first-ever cross-subsidy from men's club competitions to support women's football. The latter establishes how integrated funding models can work in practice, ensuring that every stage of the Women's Champions League brings tangible financial benefits to participating clubs (UEFA, 2024). However, it is crucial that these collaborations are structured as genuine partnerships, with clear, transparent agreements that give tangible resources to women's teams rather than treating them as junior or minor affiliates.

In this sense, clubs and government-based initiatives, as the ones mentioned, must be intended as a fundamental starting point for the women's movement, from a financial standpoint. Without these prerequisites, it would be extremely challenging to be successful in the modern sports industry rich with alternatives, competition, constant access to every athlete, team and sport, and even more important is the commitment to a sustainable effort being understood as a core feature of the process.

Underpinning both public funding and private sector alliances is then imperative for a significant change in development. In addition, it has to be taken into consideration the cultural impact of these initiatives. Women's football must be celebrated as a powerful movement and a catalyst for social progress, community cohesion, and the redefinition of gender norms in sport. The recent success illustrates its capacity to captivate diverse audiences and inspire future generations; its economic precarity as of today should not alarm stakeholders or governing bodies into not deeming the industry worthy of investment or attention. On the contrary, it is crucial to see how an investment in the present can be thought of as a cornerstone for future success while bringing necessary social change. These high-profile successes not only attract commercial interest but also challenge outdated perceptions of women's football as a secondary pastime.

By aligning the pursuit of financial sustainability with strategic government investment, financial backing from the men's clubs, authentic partnerships with the men's game and a powerful cultural narrative, stakeholders can break the vicious cycle of underfunding. Doing so will transform women's football into an economically robust, culturally resonant industry, one in which young girls and teens see the sport as a true career possibility, and where clubs, players, and communities thrive together.

a. Building on the Previous Chapters

ii. How to Become the Choice of Preference

As mentioned greatly in Chapter 1, section b the attention of this research is extremely focused on the present distribution of females' and girls' interests when approaching the sports ecosystem. In this context, a higher retention of athletes can be obtained through various marketing and managerial strategies.

Women's football must vie for attention against established sports like volleyball, basketball, and gymnastics to win the hearts of young girls. Drawing on lessons from college basketball's rise, most notably through stars like Caitlin Clark, Paige Bueckers and Hailey Van Lith, just to name a few, this study outlines how women's football can leverage the reach that athletes have in today's platforms, and how can digital engagement, fantasy leagues, video games, cultural narratives, and partnership strategies can facilitate football to become the sport of choice for girls and teens worldwide.

Female college basketball players have become extremely recognizable sporting figures in the last 3-5 years, by blending elite performance with authentic off-court personalities. Caitlin Clark's record-breaking scoring and engaging social media presence helped her WNBA debut become the most-watched broadcast ever on ESPN, and her first season to become the most successful commercial year in the history of the league (Behr, 2024). Similarly, UCONN star Paige Bueckers' incredible 2024 season for the Huskies, combined with her notorious TikTok presence, granted her first overall selection at the 2025 WNBA Draft. In the same Draft, Hailey Van Lith was selected as the 11th overall pick (WNBA, 2025). Clark currently has 3.1 million followers on Instagram, Bueckers 2.4 million and Van Lith 1.3 million. These are staggering numbers if put in context, in fact the last two players did not even play a single professional game yet. But thanks to the marketing strategies put in place by College Basketball teams, especially leveraging TikTok and Instagram platforms, they were able to increase immensely the following and appeal of the sport.

This process has started in women's football as well, notably the first players that utilized social media platforms in order to gain visibility and personal brand awareness, like Jordyn Hiutema, Alisha Lehmann or Juia Grosso in Italy, grossed millions of followers across various platforms and subsequently brought major attention to their respective teams and leagues. The sport, following these examples, should identify, elevate and even more, encourage possible stars and players whose on-pitch excellence is matched by compelling

personal brands, to serve as influencers and ambassadors to enhance brand resonance for every stakeholder involved: clubs, leagues and the movement as a whole. Football is in this sense a perfect fit for a brand trying to gain brand awareness or recognition. This is because the market is already regarded as the most popular on the planet, while the women's game, being extremely new in terms of relevance and still virtually untapped, is an extremely compelling 'pocket' of the sector where players can act as influencers. For instance, this would not be the case for a regular car company trying to build its brand from scratch, while a football team has an instinctive appeal and practical social media marketability. The reason for this lies at the very basis of its business, being sports and an entertainment-based industry and not purely commercial.

In a sense, this has always been the case in the men's game. The most famous examples can be highlighted through the incredible attention and exposure that clubs give to their stars on and off the pitch: David Beckham, Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar Jr are some of the most notable examples of how their respective clubs significantly leveraged their off-pitch impact and, more simply their looks, to engage the female section of football fans successfully. That is the reason why David Beckham is still to this day, even having retired in 2013, one of the most famous and mentioned footballers of all time, making him arguably the first "influencer-footballer" in the modern era.

Following then the successes of female athletes in other disciplines, women's football should be encouraged to do the same, and foster the exposure of their players in order to reach directly more young viewers, both girls, aspiring to become like them, and boys to the same extent to which David Beckham attracted millions of female viewers or spectators to his games.

While delving into the specific Marketing strategies, they should definitely revolve around social media, as is the modern playground where athletes and fans connect. In 2022, social conversations around women's sports surged nearly 20%, and directly reflected the growth of the NCAA in Women's Basketball, Volleyball and Soccer, as subsequently the rise in players' notoriety. This can be done through behind-the-scenes content, training insights, locker-room tours, and personal stories, where women's football can build deep emotional bonds. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are the perfect platforms for this, allowing players to showcase authenticity, fostering loyalty and breaking down cultural stigmas that suggest girls belong on the sidelines, as well as maintaining a 'spontaneous' type of content and marketing which is by far the most effective and popular as of today (MacKay, 2025).

Moreover, other specific strategies could penetrate the Fantasy football industry. As one of the most lucrative and successful areas in sports, it has huge potential commercial upsides for the female movement. This has traditionally regarded male consumers, but women now make up 38% of players, the fastest-growing demographic in the sector (NASSM, 2024). Unofficial initiatives are starting to be taken into consideration, as for *FantasyWSL*, which attracted over 32,000 participants in its first English season and targeted 100,000 users for the 2024–25 edition (Garry, 2024). In the U.S., Fantasy NWSL has launched to similar fanfare (Westlake, 2025). Women’s football leagues should partner with established fantasy platforms and integrate official fantasy games, offering tailored scoring to highlight female player achievements in order to gain visibility and foster player recognition. This gamification deepens fan investment and introduces girls to strategic aspects of sport, which being then part of the ecosystem, can easily translate to attracting them as customers and fans of the teams and players.

Following these tailored marketing strategies, video games seem the perfect choice in terms of direct access to a great market, as they bridge a multitude of generations. FIFA 23’s free Women’s World Cup update attracted millions of players, giving fans the chance to “Lead Your Country” in a tournament mode, and it was the first videogame of that magnitude, being the most played game in the world, to include women players (Electronic Arts Inc., 2023). More recently, EA FC 25 has included women’s teams in career modes for the first time as well as hundreds of real players, coaches and stadiums from the women’s clubs (Holt, 2024). These are small, but incredibly powerful marketing actions done by the women’s leagues that expand the exposure of the sport to a platform of billions of customers invested in the sector.

By advocating for more expanded women’s content, as club leagues, player ICONs in Ultimate Team, career modes and more, women’s football can directly reach gaming audiences and spark interest in the real-life sport. This is both a perfect marketing environment and a very powerful cultural tool that can organically accustom male consumers, from a young age, to view and consider female players, women’s football, and more broadly women in society as equal to men.

Furthermore, while still dealing with the marketing possibilities for the industry, approaching the main aspect of brand management perspective is key. In this sense, men's football still commands the largest audiences, viewers and resources by far. The starting point for every club, league or organization (for instance, UEFA organizing the Women's Champions League), as in this case they are purely being analyzed from a brand management perspective, is to heavily leverage their male counterparts. This is because their brand familiarity, awareness and notoriety (more easily overall fame) are a crucial asset for every stakeholder involved.

When posed this question during my interview with AS Roma Women's COO Carlo Stigliano, he greatly emphasized the concept:

“When the question of how to name the team in 2018 arose, my answer was clear and immediate: AS Roma. We must understand that this team is indeed AS Roma, not a different club or entity. The two teams form the same family. And that was a very simple but also strategic decision that the ownership strongly wanted, as well as everyone involved. We obviously wanted to create a women's team that resembled the same spirit of territoriality that the men's team has in the city, this commercially including and targeting girls and women of all ages. This clearly worked beautifully from a marketing and brand perspective, as we did not have to start from zero. The team and the brand are world-renowned, and as a consequence, so are we”.

Specifically, this can be done through smart partnerships, shared sponsorships, cross-promotion on men's matchdays and co-branded merchandise, which lend credibility and visibility to women's teams. For example, Chelsea and other clubs have begun integrating women's fixtures into broader marketing calendars, although improvement in equity, transparent revenue-sharing, and shared facilities are crucial (Agini, 2024).

As a consequence of this, while being more related to the socio-cultural environment, another significant factor arises. In fact, the impact that visible figures, or role models, have on the younger generation is meaningful. As it happened for decades in men's sports, for instance football, with role models such as Messi, Totti, Maradona, Pelé and more, generations of boys and then men grew up idolizing figures that came from difficult environments to then achieve universal success and fulfil their dreams. This can and should be the case for the women's game as well. As mentioned in previous chapters in fact, little girls in the future should be able to look up to recognizable role models, such as famous and successful women star players. Mentorship programs pairing first-team players with youth squads can immediately foster

personal connections and further this crucial social aspect. Publicizing stories of women succeeding in women's football is then the key to achieving this, with efforts of both the clubs, organizations and virtually every stakeholder involved, but predominantly in the media.

Lastly, in order to facilitate the choice of little girls and female athletes when choosing football, structural barriers need to be addressed. As these incredibly discourage participation across the globe, and across the entire ecosystem, limited access to quality pitches, high equipment costs, scheduling conflicts, real dedicated facilities, coaching quality and more than anything else, social stigma around the game, among many more mentioned in detail in earlier chapters, must be tackled to foster the movement.

The solutions for these resemble, to some extent, the financial considerations mentioned earlier, where stakeholders must invest first to produce a visible impact in the future. Specifically, organizations such as UEFA, FIFA, as well as national leagues and down to the clubs, should focus their efforts on granting subsidized safe community pitches, access to equipment, and in some sense, try to close the gap between the US and Canada schooling-athletics relationship system. This is arguably the biggest advantage that North American girls and the American women's football movement hold compared to the rest of the world. As detailed in Chapter 2 in fact, this is reflected by a 'normality' or cultural acceptance of sports in their society, as per women's football as well, thanks to this system.

In addition, the clear correlation with the latter is then tied to the pipeline of players produced and player quality ensured, present on the American continent. To put this into context, the number of girls taking part in high school sports in the United States was reportedly 3.42 million in 2023-24, and 405,000 of them played football/soccer (Statista, 2024a) (Statista, 2024b). These numbers reflect how much of a disparity there is compared to Europe and the rest of the world, as for instance in Italy, the number of female football U-18 players, which would correlate to the high school years, was roughly 23,500 (FIGC, 2023).

For this to change to occur, a focus on school-club partnerships that streamline transitions from PE classes to local clubs, infrastructure investment and digital platforms development, making football more accessible to girls and families, must be taken into consideration. It is important to mention that other contexts come into place, as per politics in this case, but even so, if local governments, town halls and districts do not actively participate with a true intent to make a long-lasting change, this would merely be confined as a utopic thought, more than an actual process of development.

b. Further Ideas

i. *Organizational Structure: Dependent or Independent?*

As women's football started its journey in recent times, it holds an intrinsic modernity that other sectors, in this case the men's side of the industry as well, do not possess. More accurately, these agents may have achieved this modernity after a long history of failures, trials and tribulations. In fact, for instance the broader football industry, which remained largely unsustainable and financially precarious up until the end of the 2000s and early 2010s, has seen countless teams failing to keep up with the expenses of modern sports. For example in England, 48 English league clubs from 1974 to the end of the 1990s revealed widespread operating losses across multiple divisions (Szymanski & Smith, 1997). Moreover, the 2010 mark is considered a turning point, because it is the moment in which the sports industry as a whole finally adopted contemporary business practices long used elsewhere in commerce and commercial sectors, and in football Financial Fair Play (or FFP) regulations were introduced by UEFA to regulate the transfer market (Peeters et al., 2014).

This being mentioned, the women's game can start with a knowledge of past errors and experience, setting a good starting point for the movement to be sustainable and modern in order to 'hit the ground running'.

A new approach based on a solid managerial structure is crucial when clubs must choose between establishing women's teams as independent entities, integrating them fully under existing men's clubs, or pursuing a hybrid approach that blends autonomy with shared resources. Each structural strategy carries unique benefits and challenges in terms of branding, sponsorship, operational efficiency and long-term financial sustainability.

The first option, treating a women's team as a standalone club, can foster a distinct identity with a tailored mission and targeted partnerships. The American club taken into consideration in Chapter 1, Angel City FC, conceived as a social enterprise with a female-majority ownership group, leveraged its independence to craft values-driven narratives and attract sponsors aligned with gender equity (Garry, 2024). They have been successful in this regard, but they have also benefited from a different league structure and cultural context, as in the NWSL and American sports in general, it is extremely common to have totally separate brands or even to have no ties with any male club. This is the case in the WNBA as well, where there are no true 'sister-clubs', as per the *Los Angeles Lakers Women* or *Boston Celtics Women*, but entirely different brands and teams (Rumsey, 2023).

Nevertheless, this autonomy enables clubs to negotiate kit deals, merchandising and community initiatives specifically for the women's market, often more agile and innovative than a larger organization might permit. Yet, without a parent club's infrastructure, standalone teams face high overheads. They must build marketing, media rights and training facilities from scratch, often with thinner revenue streams and limited stadium access. The early collapse of franchises and then of the two former US professional women's soccer leagues, named WUSA and WPS, underscores the financial vulnerability of wholly independent ventures (Straus, 2003).⁴

By contrast, the second option would be to integrate a women's section within an established club. This allows immediate access to brand equity, fan bases and shared administrative systems. European giants such as Olympique Lyonnais, FC Barcelona and Chelsea have demonstrated how pooling resources can accelerate sporting success and commercial reach (Ol Groupe, 2024) (Chelsea FC, 2024). Shared venues, unified sponsorship packages and combined media channels drive economies of scale, while marquee matchday experiences boost ticket revenues (Hadwiger & Schreyer, 2023). However, integration can cause a reality in which the women's side could be considered as an afterthought or as a burden, more than an actual investment if not actively prioritized. In fact, operating under the same badge does not guarantee fan engagement, clubs must deliberately market women's fixtures and ensure equitable resource allocation (Welford, 2011).

Recognizing the extremes of full separation and total integration, many clubs now adopt a third option: hybrid models. These combine centralized support, training infrastructure, medical teams, sponsorship negotiations, while at the same time delegating marketing, community outreach and commercial strategy to the women's department. Clubs like Paris Saint-Germain maintain a unified brand yet empower their women's leadership to forge local sponsorships and media narratives (Hampel, 2024). Tottenham Hotspur's "one club, two teams" philosophy grants its women's side full access to the main stadium while preserving distinct recruitment and coaching structures (Tottenham Hotspur, 2025).

Additionally, in the U.S., strategic partnerships, such as OL Groupe's merger with Seattle's Reign, create multi-club platforms that share best practices globally, even as individual teams retain unique identities (Spirit, 2023).

⁴ These two former leagues respectively stand for Women's United Soccer Association or WUSA, and Women's Professional Soccer or WPS (King, 2025).

Ultimately, having detailed the three structural realities available as part of the broader club's Business model, with the addition of a fourth in the case of the multi-club platform, the choice of organizational structure must align with each club's history, market context and strategic priorities. Separate entities can harness grassroots momentum and purpose-driven branding, but must overcome scale limitations. Integrated clubs, on the contrary, benefit from established platforms yet must guard against marginalizing women's operations.

This is why the most successful strategy seems to be to adopt a hybrid model. It offers a middle path, blending efficiency with specialized focus. This emerged both in the on-field interview conducted in collaboration with AS Roma Women, where Stigliano detailed exactly this structure, and in the numbers of most of the successful women's teams by revenue and marketing strategies. The numbers in fact, clearly show that even if it is possible to be successful as a standalone brand and totally new club, as in the U.S. market, it is extremely more profitable and efficient to implement a shared structure. Specifically, integrated women's football teams can attract larger crowds, have more successful and larger marketing reach and as a consequence, on average produce higher revenue streams (Hadwiger & Schreyer, 2023) (UEFA, 2022).

What remains indisputable is that success itself depends not simply on structure but on genuine commitment, but as a consequence of the extremely rooted culture that football holds in Europe and in the world, while not historically in the United States, leveraging the male club is a clear advantage. As adopted by Tottenham or AS Roma, and by the vast majority of clubs in Europe, teams seem to realize that the best strategy is to in fact, be part of the history, branding, territoriality and overall upsides of being in the same 'family'.

Finally, women's football clubs should then start from this advantage if they have the possibility to do so, and leverage as much as possible the men's structure from a business organogram standpoint, as well as for successful marketing strategies. This efficiency can be translated to the athletic side of the operations too, where especially in the academies and youth sectors, the goal could be to establish a system through which the two realities are perfectly intertwined with coaches, staff and players training or working interchangeably, which would help the development process of the female's movement immensely. This structure as explained by Stigliano, is being used for example in the AS Roma Youth System, as well as in other clubs, but not with the so-called 'A teams', so the ones with the best players and coaches, but with the B teams only.

b. Further Ideas

ii. *New Possibilities: Grassroots*

As analyzed in other instances, the fact that the movement is in its initial steps means that some major advantages are still possible to achieve. Unlike many men's clubs, where entrenched profit pressures demand near-instant returns on the pitch and often deprioritize youth pathways, women's football has the opportunity to operate in a less saturated ecosystem, granting space for patient, academy-centric models that integrate grassroots engagement and player development from U9 to first teams. This has to be a must for the industry and every club involved, because of the extremely significant implications that this has for a multitude of aspects in the ecosystem. These are reflected in: aligning long-term sporting objectives with community values, where new and existing clubs should invest and cultivate loyal support bases, generate diversified revenue streams, and reinforce national team pipelines, thereby elevating both the quality and commercial appeal of the women's game as a whole.

In this sense then, the relative novelty of professional women's leagues means that clubs are not yet bound by the 'win-at-all-costs' imperatives that dominate the men's sphere, where immediate results often eclipse sustainable growth. In many top men's divisions, shareholder expectations and broadcasting contracts hinge on weekend performances, leaving little room to blood youth talent over veteran signings. In contrast, the Women's Super League (WSL), National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), and other leading competitions are still defining their competitive hierarchies, enabling clubs to adopt a developmental ethos without fear of immediate relegation or catastrophic financial loss (Swanick, 2025). This freedom allows for the strategic dismantling of barriers between grassroots outreach programs, regional centers of excellence, and professional academies, creating seamless pathways for young girls all the way to international athletes (Heil, 2024).

Central to this approach is the establishment of robust youth academies that mirror best practices in men's football. For this reason, many clubs choose to weave their women's setups into their existing academy networks, sharing high-performance facilities, coaching staff, and educational support to create a truly unified development environment (MCFC, 2025). By aligning the women's squads alongside boys' pathways, clubs optimize resource utilization, foster a consistent coaching philosophy, and ensure that young female players receive the same level of professional support as their male counterparts.

Similarly to the previous chapter, the emphasis must be on accessibility and reducing barriers to entry rather than focusing solely on elite academies. Crucially, these structures achieve their greatest impact when they are firmly rooted in the surrounding neighborhood through school partnerships, grassroots tournaments, and female-only coaching initiatives, efforts that not only broaden participation but also foster enduring local engagement. Such community-anchored approaches cultivate promising young players while simultaneously generating a sustainable supporter culture that underpins long-term financial health.

Some clubs have already started this process by committing to first-team rosters comprised significantly of homegrown youth, thereby reinforcing the direct link between academy success and senior performance; this strategy also yields attractive returns through player development and ethical transfer policies (Garry, 2024). By embedding women's football at every level, focusing from grassroots and academies, within a single, coherent structure, clubs can foster both athletic excellence and vibrant community support, laying the groundwork for a truly sustainable and modern approach to the women's game.

Moreover, this structure fosters more competitive national teams and leagues by ensuring that talent pools widen beyond established urban centers and socio-economic enclaves and limits the need for foreign player acquisitions. FIFA's Women's Football Development Programme has shown that targeted funding and technical assistance in under-represented regions can yield rapid improvements in playing standards and participation rates, as evidenced by the ascent of nations like North Korea in youth World Cups and emerging South American federations investing in youth leagues (FIFA, 2025).

In addition to this, decentralization of talent identification not only diversifies playing styles at the elite level but also engages broader segments of society, reinforcing the sport's role as a driver of gender equality and social cohesion. In so doing, women's football can avoid the inequities of the men's game, where elite academies often cater to privileged demographics, and instead chart a more inclusive, sustainable path forward.

To translate these principles into widespread industry transformation, stakeholders must coordinate on several fronts: governance, funding, and media coverage. National associations can mandate minimum academy standards and incentivize investment through licensing requirements, while governing bodies like UEFA can expand financial fair play frameworks to reward clubs that demonstrate genuine grassroots engagement (UEFA, 2024). Concurrently,

private investors and sponsors should recognize that backing youth-focused models aligns with broader ESG goals and, from a marketing point of view, yields long-term brand loyalty.

Finally, enhancing broadcast commitments to youth system domestic women's leagues, alongside elevated storytelling around academy prospects, will engage audiences beyond marquee fixtures, creating year-round content that cements the sport's commercial viability in its marketing sphere.

In embracing grassroots and academy-centered growth from the beginning, women's football can leverage the early stages of its existence in the right way. This is through a modern and sustainable industry, one that champions local talent development and athletic excellence, as well as social impact on a global scale.

b. Further Ideas

ii. *New Possibilities: Blue Ocean Strategy Approach*

As briefly described in previous chapters, the concept of a 'blue ocean' strategy emphasizes looking for or creating uncontested market space rather than competing within existing boundaries. This principle is highly applicable to women's football. Unlike men's football, which operates in a saturated, intensely competitive environment, the female sector offers a 'blue ocean' for brands, broadcasters, and investors. The market is not yet overcrowded, allowing for innovative business models and fresh marketing approaches.

Recent studies confirm that more than half of surveyed individuals aged 16–64 express interest in women's football, yet 76% feel coverage is insufficient, indicating clear room for differentiated offerings and content innovation (S5, 2025). This gap is then the perfect opportunity for untapped potential realization, through developing bespoke media products, immersive fan experiences, and community-driven events, women's football can establish new demand rather than merely reallocating existing fans.

Through the application of the Four Actions Framework (Eliminate, Reduce, Raise, Create), it can be illustrated how clubs can reposition themselves to unlock this new territory. This style of approach has already been put into action by elite teams such as Real Madrid, and subsequently, much of the framework's literature has focused entirely on established clubs. Nevertheless, the same principles apply to women's teams and should not be confined to

prominent figures of the industry, nor to merely men's clubs (Pilatti et al., 2024). This if applied to the women's game, can help immensely in reducing outdated gender stereotypes in branding, raising investment in youth development, creating hybrid entertainment-sport offerings, and eliminating structural barriers to matchday experiences (Pilatti et al., 2024). As Real Madrid understood this strategy before anyone else, and achieved great success consequently, the women's movement has even more potential for commercial gains and development.

In this sense, Real Madrid was acting as an agent in a very saturated market (in this case red ocean), and found its pocket of action, its blue ocean, where to grow. This can be done even more successfully in a market extremely new and with very mild competition, while at the same time experiencing great demand and appeal in a variety of different markets/nations. This is the perfect representation of today's women's football industry.

Specifically, from a managerial and business administration perspective, this relative novelty provides a rare opportunity to shape the industry's culture and practices from the ground up. Unlike established men's leagues, women's football can avoid inherited inefficiencies and instead build sustainable ecosystems, raise standards of professionalism, and develop innovative fan engagement strategies. The English Women's Super League and Spain's Liga F, for example, have demonstrated that strategic investments and innovative management can drive rapid growth in attendance, sponsorship, and media rights, and this can happen by reconceptualizing the fan journey from grassroots engagement to professional spectacle, the movement can forge its own ocean of growth, distinct from the red ocean of men's leagues (Soto, 2025).

Finally, perhaps the most compelling argument for the commercial potential of women's football lies in its ability to engage half the world's population, therefore women, who have historically been underrepresented both as participants and as fans.

b. Further Ideas

ii. *New Possibilities: Specialization in the Sector*

Another interesting possibility that the industry holds is that one of the new professionalizations in the football industry. The need for a more agile professional environment, one that can adapt to rapid changes, embrace innovation, and respond to the

unique demands of the women's game, has been highlighted in recent academic literature (Valenti, Scelles, & Morrow, 2018). Such agility is crucial not only for players but also for the broader ecosystem of coaches, administrators, marketers, and support staff.

A professionally agile environment is characterized by flexibility in organizational structures, openness to new business models, and the capacity to integrate lessons from crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Clarkson et al., 2022). This adaptability enables women's football organizations to respond proactively to market shifts, sponsor expectations, and evolving audience demographics.

Moreover, agility supports the diversification of career paths beyond playing, encompassing roles in management, media, sports science, and governance areas where women have historically been underrepresented. Academic reviews underscore the necessity of cross-disciplinary approaches in research and practice, advocating for the inclusion of economic, managerial, and marketing perspectives alongside traditional sociological and historical analyses (Valenti, Scelles, & Morrow, 2018). This interdisciplinary focus not only enriches the understanding of women's football but also opens up new professional avenues, fostering a more dynamic and resilient industry.

One of the most pressing themes is the need for professionals who are specifically trained and specialized in the women's sector. The rationale for such specialization is multifaceted. First, women's football operates within a distinct socio-cultural context, shaped by historical gender imbalances, unique patterns of participation, and differentiated audience expectations. Professionals who understand these nuances are better equipped to design effective development programs, marketing strategies, and governance structures tailored to the women's game.

Second, specialized training addresses gaps in knowledge and practice that can hinder the progress of women's football. For example, issues such as parental and childcare policies, career transitions, and player welfare require context-sensitive solutions that may differ significantly from those in men's football. The specifics of the female industry call for more research and practical initiatives focused on non-playing roles, including coaching, administration, and media, to ensure that women's football benefits from a diverse and highly skilled workforce.

Furthermore, the presence of sector-specific professionals can help challenge and ultimately transform the male-dominated culture that persists in football organizations and media coverage. Studies have shown that increased representation of women in sports journalism and leadership positions contributes to more equitable narratives and decision-making processes, which in turn support the broader legitimacy and commercial appeal of the women's game (Morrow, 2018).

Lastly, effective management in women's football requires both strategic vision and adaptive governance structures. As highlighted previously, UEFA studies and efforts have shown that clubs with integrated women's programs benefit from cross-subsidization, shared marketing platforms, and enhanced corporate sponsorship opportunities, yielding higher overall brand equity for the parent organization (UEFA, 2022). Moreover, the study of other successful strategies can be useful for women's football to extract valuable knowledge in order to grow. This is the case, for instance, of new emerging markets, such as the NCAA's recent inclusion of women's flag football set to debut at the 2028 Olympics (Northam, 2025).

This directly demonstrates the impact of institutional support and coordinated league governance in driving rapid growth. Additionally, this mirrors possibilities touched upon throughout this research. In fact similarly, one of the key concepts is the leveraging of the male organizations, which was the case for flag football as well. The sport successfully utilized the know-how and reach of the NFL, or American football in general, to attract the women's side of the market, combined with a specialized approach to its management, which was useful for its newfound success in the United States. (Northam, 2025).

b. Further Ideas

ii. *New Possibilities: Future Status*

A further strategy that would help unlock the full potential of women's football runs through the idea of future 'status' that the women's movement would want to achieve. More specifically, even after the success that the latter has gained, professionalization yet remains structurally and culturally distinct from the men's game (Valenti & Rocha, 2021).

A central aspiration of the women's football movement should not simply be increased investment or visibility, but a genuine parity of quality and permeability with the men's sector, whereby elite coaches, tactical innovations, and developmental pathways can flow

bidirectionally between women's and men's clubs in an organic way. Realizing this integrated status would result in a reality in which women's coaches regularly guide top-flight men's teams and vice versa, fostering a richer exchange of expertise and dismantling entrenched gender hierarchies within the sport (Kuntz & Moorfield, 2024).

In today's system in fact, it is almost impossible that a female coach or manager would be even considered for a men's coaching job, while neither the opposite is necessarily true; male coaches that work in the women's sector tend to not move to the men's either (Valenti & Rocha, 2021). Football represents then a typical example of strong gender bias, with women accounting for less than 10% of total registered players, 28% of the total administrative workforce, 25% of the total management staff and 7% of the total coaches, and this is present to the extent to which even male coaches that work for women's clubs are then regarded as 'not fit' for the men's (Kuntz & Moorfield, 2024).

It is notable to mention that the appointment of female coaches has occurred in the past in the men's sector. Indeed, Carolina Morace became the first woman to coach a professional men's team in Europe when she managed Italian Serie C1 side Viterbese in 1999, Corinne Diacre at Clermont Foot 63 managed the team for three seasons, becoming the first woman to coach a men's professional team in a competitive match in France, Renate Blindheim became the first woman to coach a professional men's football team in Norway when she took charge of Sotra in the country's second division in 2020, Chan Yuen-ting led Eastern to the Hong Kong Premier League title in 2016, becoming the first woman to coach a men's team to a top-flight championship, and lastly Hannah Dingley became the first woman to manage a professional men's team in England when she was appointed head coach of Forest Green Rovers in 2023 (Binner, 2020) (The Guardian, 2025).

While there have been a few instances where women have been hired as coaches for men's teams, such appointments still remain evidently extremely rare at the professional level.

This being mentioned, the women's industry needs to be prioritized for further development and to achieve a levelled status. This is one of the crucial aspects through which the women's game can transform itself into a 'real' competitor in sports. This is intuitively a complex goal to achieve, having a variety of factors to be taken into consideration, in order to succeed. This is because it directly correlates to cultural, socio-economic and socio-political structures that have been in place for centuries in our societies. A clear correlation to this is the findings that indicate that football institutions have been historically active opponents of the

women's game, as organizations such as UEFA, FIFA and other stakeholders in the industry actively tried to keep the male and female systems separated (Valenti & Rocha, 2021).

In addition to this, the difference emerges in cultures and countries. For instance, the integration of female coaches and staff members is higher in northern European countries, compared to Brazil, even being one of the most cultural 'football-based' nations in the world, where overall development of the women's game finds itself in a reality of amateurism and difficulties to sustain basic team expenses (Binner, 2020) (Valenti & Rocha, 2021).

Moreover, as mentioned, the women's side of the industry stays confined as it has long been shaped by social attitudes based on male-centric structures. This points to the notorious "glass ceiling" concept, or even "glass cliff", wherein women are appointed scarcely, as it has happened only in the instances mentioned, and if so only during crisis phases and then quickly replaced when performance pressures mount (Serpell et al., 2023). Conversely, men who gain experience coaching women's teams face industry-based cultural resistance when seeking roles in the men's sphere and are always regarded as inferior to coaches of Primavera or B teams, or coaches in lower leagues in the men's sector. This is despite the transferable tactical and leadership skills they develop (Tjønndal et al., 2024).

Finally, enabling coaches and staff members to move fluidly between the women's and men's games can yield multiple benefits. It can facilitate knowledge transfer, as men who adopt innovative training methodologies from the women's game, such as period-aware conditioning protocols, can enhance performance metrics in men's squads, while women entering the men's sphere can introduce fresh and different tactical approaches rooted in the women's game, compared to the men's. Initiatives to trial this model, such as mentorship programs pairing elite women coaches with men's academies, and vice versa, have shown promise in pilot studies, yielding improvements in both technical outcomes and workplace culture perceptions (WSF, 2019). At the macro level, governance bodies like FIFA and UEFA have recognized the importance of such cross-pollination, urging member associations to adopt licensing frameworks that award equality bonuses or fast-track qualifications for candidates who have professional experience across both genders' competitions (Tjønndal et al., 2024).

This change in cultural approach, as well as management structure at the club level, can immensely help the women's movement and speed up its growth and contribute to a tangible impact in both football and society. The goal should be to create a structure in which achieving parity between men's and women's football coaching is a must, and this reciprocal movement

of coaches between sectors should be a normal step forward. Overcoming these obstacles will require not only policy interventions but also a fundamental reimagining of what constitutes expertise and authority in football, as well as a sustained commitment to challenging the norms and practices that have historically excluded women from the highest levels of the game (Drury et al., 2022).

b. Further Ideas

iii. *Speculative Innovations*

The final strategy intended to help the female movement grow is a more speculative and difficult one to achieve, but not impossible. This touches on the parameters of the game-pitch dimensions, ball characteristics, and goal size, standardized to the male archetype.

The argument in this case is exploring whether adapting these rules to better suit female physiology could enhance the pace, intensity, and technical quality of women's matches, thereby narrowing the experiential gap with the men's game. Drawing on research into anthropometric and physiological differences between sexes, studies on small-sided games, ball mechanics, and goalkeeper performance, evidence suggests that scaled-down rules can elevate physical outputs, improve skill execution, and reduce injury risk. In addition, potential drawbacks, such as tradition and regulatory complexity, offering a balanced academic discourse on the speculative reframing of women's football regulations.

Biological distinctions in strength, speed, and endurance between male and female athletes are well documented. Male players typically exhibit greater maximal oxygen uptake (VO_2max), higher anaerobic power, and increased muscle mass, while females tend to have superior fatigue resistance in endurance contexts (Joyner, Hunter, & Senefeld, 2025). Incremental testing of German soccer players revealed that males and females rely differently on aerobic and anaerobic metabolism, with women showing more even distributions across energy pathways but lower peak outputs (Baumgart, Hoppe, & Freiwald, 2014). Moreover, large-scale analyses of match performance characteristics confirm that female players cover less high-intensity distance and perform fewer sprints per match compared to their male counterparts (Bradley et al., 2014).

These physiological parameters underpin the importance of a proposal to tailor game dimensions to optimize women's inherent strengths while mitigating their comparative limitations. This lays the scientific basis for this to be taken into consideration.

As a consequence of this, alterations in pitch area should be considered as a practical means for a more 'fair' and more 'suited' athletic experience, as it directly influences physical demands and tactical patterns. Research on small-sided games (SSGs) demonstrates that reducing the playing area to better match women's typical sprint speeds and endurance capacities can amplify both physical and technical outputs without overloading the cardiovascular system (López-Fernández et al., 2018). The studies observed that sub-elite female players in 4v4 SSGs on 400 m² pitches performed over 20 % more acceleration efforts and reported greater ball engagement compared to 800 m² formats, all while maintaining similar heart-rate responses and enhancing decision-making under pressure (López-Fernández et al., 2019). Translated to full-size football, shrinking a 105 × 68 m field by roughly 15–20 % (to about 90 × 56 m) would limit long-sprint demands, where women cover 50–250 m at high intensity per match, thus postponing fatigue and preserving technical sharpness late into games (Haugen, Tønnessen, & Seiler, 2012).

Moreover, compact dimensions foster denser tactical interactions, more one-on-one duels, quicker transitions, and increased ball contacts, which mirror the dynamic intensity prized in men's football, which is not present at the moment in women's football, arguably because of the difficulty in covering the entirety of the regular-sized pitch for 90 minutes. By aligning pitch size with women's anthropometry, shorter average stature and lower peak running velocities, such scaling can elevate match tempo, showcase skill execution, and reduce overuse injuries, bringing the spectacle of the women's game closer to the speed and strength characteristic of the men's sector, and making it more just for women's to play.

The next step to take into consideration is ball mass, pressure, size, shape, technical execution and biomechanical loading.

Systematic reviews indicate that lighter or slightly smaller balls reduce impact forces during heading, lowering concussion risk and facilitating quicker ball trajectories in women's football (Oliva-Lozano et al., 2024). Experiments manipulating ball type in youth (under-12) footballers found that smaller balls improved passing accuracy and fluency, as reduced circumference enhances control for smaller hand-sizes and leg-lengths (Oliva-Lozano et al., 2024). Supporting safety, research at Purdue University advocates a size '4.5' ball with

optimized pressure to minimize force on the head without compromising flight characteristics (Purdue University, 2021).

Extrapolating this to women's senior football, adopting a marginally lighter or smaller ball could expedite ball circulation, enabling faster combination play and extending technical precision late into high-intensity phases, while preserving the integrity and safety of the female players.

The final proposal concerns the goal size. The latter not only dictates scoring difficulty but also shapes goalkeeper movement demands. Recent analyses within UEFA competitions correlate goalkeeper height and reach to save success rates, underscoring that female keepers, who on average are shorter in height and less athletic or explosive compared to men, face disproportionately larger goal volumes (De-la-Cruz-Torres et al., 2025). Reducing goal width by a few percent could balance save-to-goal ratios, fostering more competitive shot-stop scenarios without undermining scoring opportunities. Such adjustments might cultivate more resilient and technically adept goalkeepers, as smaller goals necessitate quicker lateral movements and refined positioning, aligning with women's relative agility strengths and their less prominent height.

This could be a significant change as the goalkeeper position is the one that tends to struggle the most in women's competition (De-la-Cruz-Torres et al., 2025). The impact on the quality of overall performance could vastly enhance games and the women's movement as a whole.

Collectively then, these changes are intended to close the qualitative gap between the sexes, showcasing women's technical and tactical acumen in a context that honors their unique physiological profile.

This being mentioned, it is significant to highlight how, despite explained and proven theoretical benefits, rule adaptations face hurdles. The entrenched tradition of uniform regulations across men's and women's football resists divergence, and governing bodies may be reluctant to sanction different standards. There is also the risk that modifications could fragment training methodologies and spectator expectations, complicating cross-gender comparisons and media narratives. Therefore, comprehensive trials across elite leagues would be needed to validate long-term impacts on performance metrics and injury incidence. Ethical

considerations demand that any changes prioritize player safety and consent, ensuring that scaled-down rules do not inadvertently diminish the prestige of the women's game.

Additionally, when posed this question to Stigliano, COO of AS Roma Women, he highlighted how these rule changes would definitely help the quality of women's football games, but it would find structural difficulties when applied, because women's teams rely almost entirely on the men's infrastructures and facilities. The latter would have to be entirely tailored to the women's game, or at least modifiable when necessary, to accommodate their needs, and this could be extremely challenging, mostly for financial reasons.

Finally, these targeted rule adaptations are not new to the sports world, as we find various instances of these in other disciplines. Basketball long ago adjusted its equipment and court markers for women, adopting a size 6 basketball instead of the men's size 7, and positioning the three-point line at 6.75 m rather than the NBA's 7.24 m (Akin, 2021) (Skleryk and Bedingfield, 1985). Volleyball likewise differentiates net height, setting the women's net at 2.24 m compared to 2.43 m for men, to account for average differences in reach and leaping ability (FIVB, 2024). In softball, the field is scaled down and the ball enlarged to balance gameplay and safety (IOC, 2024). Alpine skiing enforces shorter minimum ski lengths for women, 155 cm in slalom versus 165 cm for men, ensuring equipment matches typical stature and strength differentials (IOC, 2024). Team handball utilizes a smaller, lighter size 2 ball in women's competitions compared to the men's size 3 (IHF, 2019). And finally, even in hockey, where rink dimensions remain constant, women's sticks are tailored in weight, flex, and fit to optimize performance.

These examples underscore a fundamental principle: by thoughtfully adapting rules and equipment, sports can uphold fairness while maximizing athletic expression for women. Translating this approach back to women's football, through the mentioned reductions in pitch size, ball adaptations, and proportional goal dimensions, seems to be a logical move to bring football closer to other sports, in order to permit a fair display of female players' strengths, sustain intensity, and technical play.

Despite potential institutional and financial hurdles, these adjustments are feasible, as mentioned, other sports in fact routinely tailor their rules to athletes' physiologies, and present a strategic opportunity to foster a more equitable and compelling football landscape. By narrowing the gap in both quality and perception between women's and men's football, the

women's game and its industry can position itself as a truly attractive, high-caliber option for players, coaches, sponsors, and fans alike.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of women's football from a marginalized pastime, punished and dismissed by early bans and entrenched gender norms, to a growing record-breaking global phenomenon, has been nothing short of extraordinary. As it appears clear through a first glance, the sport's past constraints have created enduring participation gaps and systemic barriers, even as viewership records tumble and sponsorship deals multiply. To finally fulfill women's football's true potential as an autonomous industry, capable of captivating its own audiences, generating sustainable revenues, and driving social progress, stakeholders must coalesce around an integrated strategy that honors both its history and its unprecedented modern momentum.

Central to this transformation is financial sustainability. Women's football today resembles a Series A startup: rich in promise yet still dependent on patchwork funding that threatens long-term stability. Landmark revenues, such as the mentioned FIFA Women's World Cup's \$570 million earnings in 2023, are impressive, but at the club level, average cost structures continue to outstrip incomes, imperiling investment in player welfare, infrastructure, and broadcast innovation.

This thesis project outlines how multi-year grant programs (for example UEFA's €1 billion investment structure), cross-subsidy agreements from the men's game, and targeted public-private vehicles like the UK's Government efforts can together create predictable cash flows. By turning the 'north star' toward long-term financial models, the sport can reinvest in facilities, youth development, and year-round content, a self-reinforcing cycle of growth that centers around a modern and thoughtful structure.

Financial security alone, however, cannot spark fans' attention.

Through the course of the study, the focus is purposefully placed on immersive digital storytelling and its essential role in converting passive viewers into loyal consumers. Behind-the-scenes footage, athlete-influencer strategies, and interactive social-media campaigns are capable of influencing outdated stereotypes while at the same time building emotional connections that translate into ticket sales, merchandise revenue, and overall brand-reach maximization.

Elevating relatable role models, as per young stars who share candid reflections on overcoming cultural and logistical barriers, can forge an aspirational narrative that resonates

with girls, their families, and a broader entertainment-hungry audience, which can see themselves in their stories and be more inclined to be attracted. As very frequently throughout the study though, the attention is not only, or necessarily, on economic goals and benefits.

In fact, having relatable idols and recognizable success stories is intended as a social drive for change and influence. In this sense, while the marketing strategy is focused on its commercial success, the potential social impact must be taken into account and be at the forefront of the industry's efforts.

The importance of territoriality in football is essential. Clubs worldwide feed off their communities, folklore and local history. As is very present in the men's team's communication strategies, the carefully crafted focal point on upbringings and local culture both for their players and the club itself, this must be conceived for women's teams as well.

Moreover, organizational design must reflect women's football's dual needs for operational efficiency and brand identity. The case studies proposed, from Olympique Lyonnais Féminin's seamless integration within a storied club to Saudi Arabia's top-down movement that combined grassroots surges with cultural reform, demonstrate two distinct pathways to excellence on and off the pitch.

Yet, from an administration standpoint, neither total independence nor full absorption into men's structures suffices on their own. Instead, hybrid governance models, where shared infrastructure and centralized services coexist with autonomous marketing, sponsorship, and community-engagement arms, seem to offer the best balance. Paris Saint-Germain's unified brand but distinct women's leadership, and OL Groupe's global multi-club platform, both illustrate how this 'third way' harnesses scale while preserving a women-centered identity. The case is similar to the approach that AS Roma Women established within its organization. The freedom of different strategies between male and female sectors, while leveraging the century-old structure of the club and the extremely solid brand identity that it offers.

Furthermore, no strategy can succeed without a vibrant grassroots foundation. The intent of the paper is to underscore that social expectations, safety concerns, and limited local facilities still dissuade many girls from taking up the sport. This is a very prominent friction in the industry, especially in lower-income countries that may have serious facilities deficiencies. This creates a trickle-down effect that impoverishes the participation rates and overall pool of

players in the movement. In addition to this, in various countries of the world, which may have the infrastructure to accommodate young girls safely, cultural frictions emerge.

The main example studied is Italy. While having a renowned history in the sports world, the European country faces, to this day, various gender norm impediments in women's football. The same appears to be occurring in Brazil. What appears to be striking in this context is how successful these two countries are in the men's sphere (as they are two of the most successful national teams in history). At the same time, football seems to still be deemed as not 'appropriate' for young girls.

To dismantle these barriers, federations and local governments must invest in school-club partnerships, subsidized community pitches, female-only coaching initiatives, and coaching platforms. By mirroring North America's academic-athletic synergy, where Title IX ensures state-funded sports programs, Europe and other regions that may have financial constraints can dramatically lower entry costs, nurture talent pipelines, and cultivate lifelong fandom.

Beyond expansion, women's football stands poised in a rare 'blue ocean' of uncontested market space. Unlike men's leagues mired in fierce competition, the women's sector can pioneer innovative fan experiences, hybrid entertainment-sport events, community-driven activations, and augmented-reality matchday offerings that create new demand rather than fight for scraps.

Furthermore, the bridge between academic research and on-field realities highlights the importance of evidence-based decision-making. The on-field case of AS Roma Women demonstrates how rigorous performance analysis, player-centric management, and media partnerships coalesce to produce both sporting triumphs and revenue growth. By continuously integrating scholarly insights into operational playbooks, clubs and federations can iterate their models and avoid repeating historical mistakes.

Finally, the aim is then to highlight possible bold initiatives, as professional excellence demands relentless technical and operational innovation. This thesis aims to underline how other sports tailor equipment and rules, as the examples of women's basketball's size 6 ball, volleyball's lowered net, and alpine skiing's shorter skis, to optimize for female physiology. In football, thoughtful adaptations to pitch dimensions, ball materials, and goal sizes, coupled with performance analytics and specialized training regimens, can elevate both safety and spectacle.

This agile willingness to experiment signals a genuine commitment to athletic and entertainment quality that attracts elite talent, sponsors, and discerning fans.

By weaving these strategic pillars of robust financial models, dynamic storytelling, hybrid governance, grassroots empowerment, blue-ocean market strategy, and bold technical innovation, women's football can transcend its long history of secondary status and importance to become a self-sustaining, modern, world-class industry. This is not a distant dream, but a concrete roadmap grounded in historical lessons, empirical research, and real-world precedents.

In conclusion, this research calls on every stakeholder, clubs, leagues, sponsors, federations, and governments to move with a concrete and clear purpose. If these strategies are pursued with conviction, women's football could not only try to close the gap with the men's game but, most importantly, will chart its own course as one of the planet's most vibrant, inclusive, and economically resilient sporting realities.

Football is the world's most followed and played sport, yet for too long half the population has been sidelined. Even after modern successes, the perception still only scratches the surface of its true capability. Embracing this promise won't just complete football's story, it will redefine its future.

The time has come for its true potential to be finally fulfilled.

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