'The future is feminine' declared Sepp Blatter, General Secretary of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the global governing body of football, in 1995 following a successful Women's World Cup championship. Over the last 15 years, female participation in football in the UK has witnessed an exponential rise. In 1993 there were 80 affiliated girls teams and approximately 1000 players, in 2005 the English Football Association reported that 130,000 women and girls were now playing in affiliated teams and football had overtaken netball as the most popular female participation sport in England. Elsewhere the women's game has been established for far longer. Participation rates in Europe and America are considerably higher. In Germany for example there are approximately half a million female players nationwide (figures from the German FA). Italy also provides a good marker for the British female game with a semi-professional league that has been in operation since the early 1970s, and women's matches there sometimes draw crowds of up to 10,000 (Sir Norman Chester Centre Football Research).

This rapid growth in female football has been accompanied by an increasing academic interest. In the UK the large number of females participating in what has previously been considered an 'exclusively masculine domain' (Whannel 1992) has encouraged analysis on how participating in football is challenging broader gender regimes both in football and society more broadly. Research in female football has covered a wide number of areas. A summary of the main areas is provided in the remainder of the ruff guide.

**Historical Analysis of Women's Football**

Women's football in England is not a new sport. As early as 1895, a representative football match between northern and southern women's teams was recorded in London (See Williams and Woodhouse, 1991). During and after the First World War women's football flourished with team being established from women working in factories during this period. The most successful team was Dick Kerrs Ladies from Preston who attracted crowds in excess of 50,000 (Newsome, 1994). There have been a range of historical analyses of women's football conducted. Williams (2003) has examined the history of the game in Britain, whilst Macbeth (2007), Prudhomme-Poncet and Skogvang have examined the historical context of female participation in Scotland, France and Norway respectively.

**Organisation of Women's Football in the UK**
In 1993, the FA formally took control of the administration of women's football from the Women's Football Association (WFA). As a voluntary organisation, the WFA had encountered problems in attempting to accommodate the growth of the sport, with a weak infrastructure compounded by financial difficulties (Lopez, 1997). Since the FA takeover, female participation figures in England, especially for girls, have increased greatly. To what extent this is a direct impact of the FA's management is however much debated. It is undeniable that association with the FA has increased exposure, provided better access to resources and effectively centralised administration. Yet these benefits can be considered as largely cosmetic, as little has been done to alter the provision of football. Integration has involved the acceptance of an institution that historically dismissed the sport and has been traditionally, at best, hostile to the involvement of women (Williams, 2003). The FA has been criticised in research on women's football for the under-representation of women on boards and councils (Williams, 2004), and the sport remains heavily influenced and controlled by men (Scraton et al, 1999).

**Women in Coaching and Football Administration**

There is a lack of research in this area and most of the work in this areas focuses on women coaching and administering the elite game. Welford (2008) has examined the experiences of female administrators in grass roots voluntary clubs. Williams (2003) considers women in these roles in her comprehensive overview of both the historical development and current context of women's football; Coddington (1997) explores the movement of women into male structures of football, incorporating roles such as spectator, match officials, and employees at football clubs; and a small amount of research has been conducted on the gendered experiences of women as football coaches, an area within sport more generally and football in particular that remains heavily male dominated despite increases in female representation as participants (eg Fasting & Pfister, 2000).

**Experiences of Women Footballers**

Women's experiences of playing football, particularly in the context of it being a male dominated sport, have been the most common focus of research in women's football. Such work has covered benefits and constraints to football participation, the potential of football as an arena to contest gender norms and the influence of football participation on female identity construction. Scraton et al, (1999) conducted an examination of elite level players across four countries analysing how women had become involved in football and their experiences of participation at elite level. This work highlighted the sense of worth female players gained from physically challenging their bodies, developing skills in football and developing friendship networks through the game. It also however, highlights the difficulties faced by women players when
attempting to negotiate the demands of femininity alongside participating in a 'masculine sport'. Some attention has been given to the image of female football (Harris, 2005) in particular its association with butchness and lesbianism. Cox and Thompson, (1999) provide a detailed analysis of how this image has been constructed and how female players are affected by this. They illustrated the strategies women undertake to negotiate their participation whilst remaining 'acceptable' females. Caudwell, (1999, 2002) has examined in detail the potential of football participation for allowing women to perform alternative gender identities and resist repressive stereotype. Her work indicated the value of football to some lesbian players for providing a secure space to 'be out' and be accepted.

Girls and Football Participation

Research examining girls' participation in football has been relatively limited but what is available is useful for illustrating that despite the rapid growth in the female game football remains very much a masculine pursuit in the eyes of young boys and to some extent girls. The majority of research in this area has examined the role of football in constructing boy's masculine identities and as an aside has examined girls' attempts at participation within this. These studies have been useful for indicating how football has no real part in moulding girls' gender identities but also how difficult it is for girls' to access football in a male setting. Most of the girls in the studies that tried to play football with boys were subject to abuse and derision from the boys and were forced to stop playing. Some girls who constructed a more 'tomboy' identity and were highly skilled were able to break into the masculine arena of football but found it increasingly difficult to continue to construct the masculine identity needed to legitimise playing in this setting as the moved into adolescence and womanhood. Jeanes, (2005 & 2007) has examined the experience of girls playing in a female only setting and concluded that whilst girls gained a great deal of enjoyment from playing their participation was heavily restricted by dominant notions of femininity. Playing also did little to challenge views of football as a male sport.

Conclusions

Research examining female football is a developing area. Similar to broader gender and sport research, it is recognised that women are not a homogenous group and have varying experiences within football. Ratna (2007 and 2008) along with Scraton et al (2005) have been developed analysis further and considered the experience of Asian girls in football. Their work has explored how Asian girls reconcile participating in football within their identities as well as highlighting the racism many Asian female girls encounter (Ratna, 2007). The area of women, girls and football is therefore a fertile one that would benefit from continued exploration.
References


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