

Module 2. The opportunities within women's football – Funding and focused investment

Unit 2.1

You will remember that module 1 clearly laid out, and unpacked, the many challenges that have enormously hampered the development of women's football. More specifically, through your engagement with that module, you will now be knowledgeable of the various types of challenges and how they interact; namely, the confluence of historical, institutional, and cultural barriers. Furthermore, you are also now aware of how those challenges gave shape to a subpar environment for the development of women's football (e.g., inadequate facilities, deficient funding, institutional neglect, and lack of commitment to the commercialisation of the women's game).

However, in spite of the many challenges facing the development of women's football, this is an exciting time in its advancement. The challenges facing women's football have been more openly and widely discussed – and given greater weighting within the hierarchy of actions that the sport industry must address. More importantly, steps have been taken (and continue to be taken) to overcome the many and varied historical, institutional, and cultural barriers that handicapped the development of women's football for more than a century.

This module (2) now spotlights both the opportunities present, and the progress that has been made, in women's sport and football. Elevated funding and strategically focused investments in the development of women's sport/football are essential (and they are yielding positive returns/outcomes). This module also explains the different strategic opportunities and shifting perspectives at play; it also explores the resulting increases in positive impacts/effects (whilst not ignoring the limitations).

2.1.1 The development of women's football: understanding the opportunities

In order for you to understand the recent development of women's football, it is important to recognise the different strategies, perspectives, interests, and rationales that are driving the agenda. However, perhaps even more crucially, it is important that you gain knowledge of real examples of funding and focused investment that turn ideas and aspirations into concrete realities. By the end of this module, you will be knowledgeable of various initiatives, funding frameworks, and long-term investment structures that aim/claim to help grow girl's and women's football; from the grassroots through to the elite levels.

To guide you through this learning process, gaining a deeper understanding of the opportunities within women's football, you will start by exploring what is underpinning the increased funding and investment. You will learn to recognise the strategic business opportunities that the sport industry (not only the football industry) sees in women's sport. There is a long history of overlooking – or denying – the commercial opportunities within women's sport. Even the most elite of female athletes have tended to be sexualised – for commercial gain – rather than promoting/leveraging the true commercial value of women's sporting feats (2.1.2). That thinking is now increasingly exposed as dated or archaic; enormous commercial opportunities are being missed, if decision makers remain mired in the varied historical, institutional, and cultural barriers previously explored (these were covered in detail in module 1).

Women's sport has now been recognised by key decision-makers in leading sport federations as being **the** greatest opportunity for growth in the sport industry over the next decade (see 2.1.3). The contemporary strategic business opportunities for women's sport – as seen through the lens of a case study on World Rugby – are spotlighted in section 2.1.3.

Sections 2.1.4 – 2.1.8 of this module then provide students with a specialised focus on the strategic opportunities for growth specific to women's football; narrowing down from the broader sport industry context and examples taught in the opening sections. Metrics are presented that include the record-breaking growth in spectatorship at women's football (2.1.4), and the record-breaking growth in TV and media consumption of women's football (2.1.5), clearly demonstrating the opportunities at hand. The surge in fandom, TV audiences, media attention/coverage, and multi-million-pound broadcast-agreements help illustrate the rate of change in women's football leagues that have only recently achieved full professional status for its players and coaches. The media that supports, analyses, and promotes women's football becomes the focal point of 2.1.6. This highlights the importance of implementing informed strategic decisions regarding who covers the women's game and how they do it; both of which meaningfully impact on how the sport

is perceived, the future trajectories it takes, and the opportunities that will be seized or lost.

The concluding sections, 2.1.7 and 2.1.8, drill down on specific examples relating to the elevated funding and focused investments/strategies in girls' and women's football. Funders and investors increasingly recognise that it is neither socially acceptable, nor commercially prudent, to exclude or marginalise women's football – within the 'football pyramid', or the colloquial 'football family'. While elevated funding streams do help develop women's football, they must – of course – be invested in the right areas, and in the right ways, to achieve optimal returns. Financial and sporting powerhouses such as the English Premier League, the Football Association (of England), and the global broadcaster Sky Sports, are working to seize the opportunities available in women's football. Across both girls' (2.1.7) and women's (2.1.8) football, there has been a lot achieved in recent years. However, there is still much more to do if their true potential is to be realised, and the associated opportunities captured.

As always, it is likely that some of the terminology used in this module is new to you. Do not worry. Remember that being introduced to, beginning to understand, and then being able to use new terminology are all normal parts of the learning process. In addition to new terminology, throughout this module, we will present you with a blend of strategies, frameworks, concepts, or theories. To deepen your learning, these will be 'brought to life' through examples and/or case studies from the world of women's sport/football. These serve to reinforce your learning on the development of women's football, and its associated opportunities.

2.1.2 Strategic opportunities: changing perspectives on the commercial value of women's sport

Women's sport: counteracting outdated thinking to unlock commercial growth

Giulianotti (2016) identified that there has been a long history of commercialised sport industries overlooking the value of women players/athletes (including the most elite levels of women's sport). Even when the sport industry did see the value of some women players/athletes, it was a default tendency to (a) underpay them – compared to their male sporting peers, and (b) confine their endorsement to what executives perceived to be classically 'feminine' products such as perfumes or underwear (Giulianotti, 2016). For example, as recently as the 2020 Olympic Games, elite female athletes were pigeonholed into featuring in advertising campaigns to promote underwear (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Female Olympians, climber Sasha DiGiulian, pole-vaulter Alysha Newman, and runner Queen Harrison Claye, starred in a lingerie advertising campaign



Source: [online image of female Olympians], (n. d.), <https://yhoo.it/3UrcFMK>.

Inequalities and sexism of this nature are now increasingly viewed as outdated or short-sighted; remnants of the many historical, institutional, and cultural barriers covered in module 1. In fact, the advertising campaign featured above (figure 1) was the subject of much controversy. Some female Olympians condemned the campaign because it perpetuates the problem of sexualising women in sport rather than focusing on their athletic achievements (Goodwin, 2020). Olympian Sage Watson said her 'heart broke' when she saw the campaign 'zoomed in on women's butts and breasts' instead of recognising that it is female athletes' 'arms, legs, abs, backs and mental strength' that help them perform elite sporting feats.

To best illustrate the broader progressive transformation in how sport federations (and their executives/decision makers) can better incorporate girls and women, we will next consider a case study from outside the world of football (see 2.1.3). The strategic commitment of World Rugby to advance the opportunities for women in rugby, in countries around the globe, help highlight the benefits that can be unlocked, growing the sport and its commercial value/appeal (without relying on sexualising women or girls).

2.1.3 Sport, women and strategic growth: World Rugby - A progressive case study

Progressive sport industry strategists/decision makers are increasingly keenly aware of the business opportunities in women's sport (2.1.2). For example, a Nielsen study commissioned by World Rugby (Global Reach of Rugby, 2019), identified the development of women's rugby as "the single greatest opportunity for the sport to grow in the next decade" (p. 12). Crucially, this opportunity is not about sexualising women. Instead, it is about investing in women's participation and fandom in sport. World Rugby stated that sport can only be modern, attractive, and dynamic when it is inclusive of girls and women. Moreover, they specifically state that they see women and girls as "the rugby players, administrators, coaches, officials, fans and investors of the future. Women in rugby are exceptional athletes and leaders with huge influence in their communities, the commercial sector, and governments" (World Rugby, 2017, p. 2).

Sir Bill Beaumont, the Chairman of World Rugby, reported in 2019 that the women's game is growing rapidly in both established and emerging markets – with women now accounting for 25% of the global playing population in that sport (World Rugby, 2019). The ascension (and the associated sporting business opportunities!) are clear when you consider that between in just two years (between 2017-2019) the number of women playing rugby rose sharply (by 28%); meaning that there are now over 2.7 million women playing rugby at last count. Most of this growth is occurring amongst younger women and girls. In fact, for two years running, the number of girls taking up rugby has exceeded the number of boys taking up the same sport during the same period of time (World Rugby, 2019).

The growth in girls and women's rugby has not happened by accident. World Rugby, as the global governing body of that sport, made the growth of women's rugby a core strategic component of their sport industry growth plans. Back in 2017, they launched a global development programme to grow the women's game – with several phases kicking in over the period 2017-2025 (Women in Rugby, 2021). World Rugby categorically state that their sport industry strategy is **both** good business **and** socially progressive (see figure 2); positioning rugby as a platform to promote gender equality on and off the sport field – whilst directly benefiting the sporting organisation's growth.

In 2017, World Rugby publicly pledged to make their game be as sport that "has no barriers"; "a progressive, modern, attractive, dynamic and inclusive sport played by girls and women, boys and men around the world" (World Rugby, 2017).

Figure 2. Little girls playing rugby



Source: World Rugby, 2017, p. 1.

World Rugby's strategic investment in the women's game has been proving highly successful at various different levels. The spike in the number of girls and women playing rugby has corresponded with more girls and women perceiving the sport more positively and becoming fans. Moreover, the Nielsen report found that there has been 'dramatic improvements' in both the standard of, and knowledge about, women's rugby – as a direct result of the governing body's strategic investment (World Rugby, 2019).

At the end of 2021, World Rugby announced that, due to the immediate dividends being reaped, their investment in women's sport would be further accelerated (see figure 3). One example of their immediate return-on-investment includes their attraction of Mastercard as a founding partner in their women's development programme. Encouraged by their success, World Rugby has also begun delivering executive leadership and coaching programmes to further support the advancement of women in their sport (Women in Rugby, 2021). They are also launching a series of new international elite-level competitions in the women's game.

In 2021, World Rugby updated, and announced an acceleration of their strategic commitment to make rugby a 'global sport for all'.

Figure 3. Accelerating the global development of women in rugby



Source: Women in Rugby, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3SifSNv>.

World Rugby have made clear that their investment in the women's game has served to enhance the commercial value of their sport, broadening its appeal to a bigger portfolio of corporate sponsors. They also expect to see further dividends paid back to them from their investment; in the form of increased merchandising sales, financial injections from private equity investors and philanthropic organisations, as well as taking advantage of a host of emerging diversified income streams in the sport industry (World Rugby, 2021). Their ambition is to use their strategic investment in women's sport to turn rugby into 'a global leader in sport' by 2025 (Women in Sport, 2021).

2.1.4 The growth of women's football: record-breaking attendances and strategic opportunities

What should now be clear to students is that the investment in girl's and women's sport is about much more than good intentions – or striving for social equality (alone). The case

study above (2.1.3) has demonstrated both the social and the commercial/sport business successes, arising from strategic investment in girls and women in sport.

Football, as a sports industry, competes for the attention and participation of people around the world, asking people to spend their time and money on their sport – as opposed to another sport (such as rugby) or leisure activity. Rugby's vocal commitment to, and investment in, sport as an inclusive space for girls and women demonstrates the strategic advantages on offer to progressive sport-industry decision makers. In fact, as exemplified above (2.1.3), other sports have successfully leveraged their commitments in this area – using them as key drivers in making their sport a global leader.

Women's football, strategic change and rapid growth: record attendances

The football industry has a long history of being slow to embrace the growth opportunities arising from the women's game; perhaps, because the men's game has been experiencing such a sustained period of financial success. We should not forget the Women's Super League (WSL), the most elite levels of women's football in England, only became fully professionalised in 2018. It was only at that time that the Football Association (i.e., the sport's governing body in England) introduced criteria to guide the original eleven professional women's teams to include provision of a youth academy and guarantee a minimum of 16 contact hours per week for their professional players (Garry, 2018). The criteria must be met in order for the clubs to gain a licence to compete in the top tier of the women's footballing pyramid. It was also in 2018 that professional women's teams, such as Chelsea, dropped the use of the adjectives 'ladies' or 'women' from their team names. They stated that this strategic change underlined the 'ever-growing status' of women in professional football, where the men's teams should no longer be viewed as the 'first' team (Garry, 2018).

It is incredible to think that, just four years after the introduction of professionalisation in women's football in England, the English national team went on to win the 2022 UEFA European Championships in front of an all-time tournament record attendance of 87,192 (see figure 4). The previous attendance record for a women's European Championship game was 43,301 fans – dating back to the 2013 final (UEFA, 2022). This attendance at Wembley again illustrates that, although the Football Association have been struggling to keep up (as they themselves admitted) with the provision of institutional support and resources, there continues to be an explosion of interest in the women's game (Wrack, 2020). The overall total number of spectators (attending across the entire tournament) at the Euro 2022 championships also beat records; 574,875 fans attended matches, smashing the previous overall tournament record of 240,055 set at the 2017 finals (UEFA,

2022). Furthermore, in August 2022, after England's success at Euro 2022, England's WSL clubs announced that they were experiencing unprecedented demand for the purchase of match and season tickets for 2022-2023. For example, Man City's Women's team said their sales had increased 100 %, while Liverpool topped the list with a 254 % year-on-year increase in season-ticket sales (Mians and Majid, 2022).

UEFA announced a new record attendance at a European International Women's Tournament, at the final of Euro 2022, when England played Germany at Wembley Stadium.

Figure 4. Record crowd watches women's Euro 2022 final at Wembley



Source: Martinez, 2022, <https://reut.rs/3S2NpLk>.

Some more progressive football clubs are ensuring they capitalise on this momentum – while also ensuring that are being publicly acknowledged as strategically helping to grow the women's game. For example, Brighton and Hove Albion F. C. announced that it would stage their women's opening games in the WSL at their Amex Stadium – the same stadium which hosts their men's first team matches (Mians and Majid, 2022). This is a significant change to the problems outlined in 1.1.8, in which Wrack (2020) identified the injustice of relegating WSL players to perform on heavily muddied/substandard pitches while the men's teams play on pristine surfaces. It is also historically noteworthy to recognise that the women's Euro 2022 final was played at Wembley, and – because of a clash with the

Community Shield – it was the men’s teams that were moved to an alternate stadium. The Community Shield, the traditional opening-game of the men’s season in England, saw Premier League champions Manchester City and FA Cup winners Liverpool relocated (playing at the King Power Stadium in Leicester), in order to hold the women’s final in England’s most prestigious stadium (Kelly, 2022).

Of course, it is not just English women’s club teams – or its national team – that are experiencing record setting growth. In March and April 2022, Barcelona twice broke the world record for attendance at women’s club football games (see figures 5 and 6), while playing in the UEFA Women’s Champions League quarter- and semi-finals (Euronews, 2022; UEFA, 2022).

Barcelona’s women’s team defeated Wolfsburg in front of 91,648 fans during a UEFA Champions League semi-final in April 2022.

Figure 5. Barcelona defeated Wolfsburg in the first leg of the UEFA Women’s Champions League semi-final



Source: Euronews, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3BXQtTf>.

Figure 6. FC Barcelona celebrated their women's team's world record achievement in April 2022

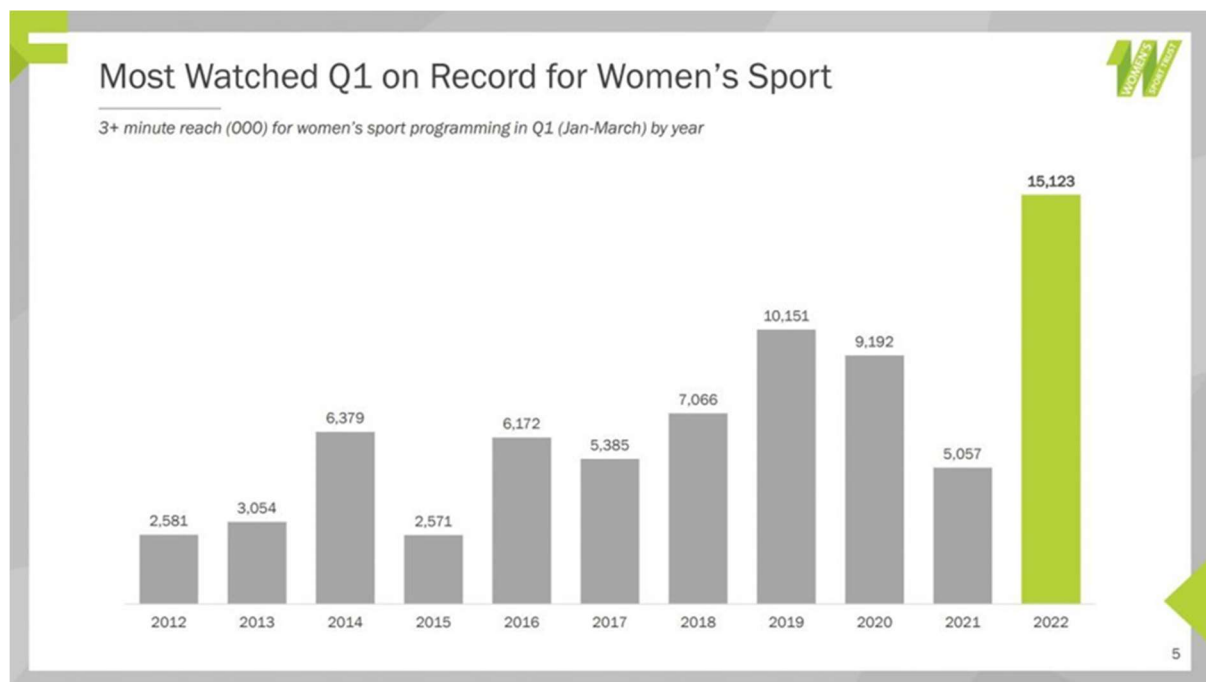


Source: FC Barcelona, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3qYkvjI>.

2.1.5 The growth of women's football: record-breaking TV and media consumption

It must be understood that, from a commercial perspective, it is not only stadium attendances that highlight the opportunities and growth within women's football. TV viewership of women's football has also been flourishing. The Women's World Cup, for example, had a growth of 65 % in viewership between 2015 and 2019 editions, reaching over 1.2 billion viewers (Fernandez, 2021). Furthermore, it is not only women's football that is drawing record numbers of TV viewers. A study conducted in the United Kingdom in 2022 (prior to the Women's Euros) found that, in the first three months of 2022, more people had watched TV coverage of women's sport than in any year (over the same period of time) throughout the previous decade (see figure 7).

Figure 7. Data collected by the Women’s Sport Trust demonstrates the growth in people consuming media coverage of women’s sport over a period of ten years (the year 2022 [highlighted in green] marks a significant uptick



Source: Most Watched Q1 on Record for Women’s Sport, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Slg031>.

The research conducted by the Women’s Sport Trust (Most Watched Q1 on Record for Women’s Sport, 2022) also found that women’s sport is not only attracting a greater quantity of viewers, but people are also tuning in for longer. The average viewing time per person across all women’s programming rose to 122 minutes, in comparison to 68 minutes in 2021. The most watched women’s sports in the UK were football (Barclays WSL and the Arnold Clark Cup), rugby (Women’s Six Nations), and cricket (ICC Women’s Cricket World Cup).

The increased recognition of the growing value (and further opportunity for growth) of women’s football was also recently demonstrated by the multi-million-pound agreement between the Football Association in England with the broadcaster Sky Sports. It was announced in March 2021 that Sky will show the top tier of women’s football for the first time; purchasing the right to show up to 44 matches. A minimum of 35 will be screened across Sky Sports’ marquee channels including Main Event, Sky Sports Premier League and Sky Sports Football. Some matches will also be simultaneously broadcast on Sky Sports Mix and Sky One to help ensure the game reaches as large an audience as possible (despite the paywalls associated with subscription-based broadcast deals). The increased



coverage, and associated elevation in the media profile for women's football, has been welcomed by football fans across the UK – as noted in the 2021 'Fan Led Review of Football Governance' (2021).

2.1.6 The growth of women's football - The changing face(s) of media coverage, and strategic opportunities

You will remember (see sections 1.1.5-1.1.6) that women's sport and women's football were virtually invisible in the media – even on sport focused outlets – until very recently. Until 2018, there were still dedicated sports channels where no women's sport was shown, and many countries where women's sport was allocated less than 2 % of the sport reporting time (Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, 2018).

On occasions, when women's football was covered in the media, there was still a prevailing tendency to focus on women's sexuality and/or their personal lives as women (e.g., who they are romantically involved with, and their fashion preferences). Media reporters used far less action-packed language or adjectives when covering women's matches. Remember these tendencies connected back to widespread societal sexism (i.e., cultural barriers). These tendencies reproduce the sexist stereotypes that sport and women do not mix well or 'naturally'. By contrast, media reporters covering the men's game of football overwhelmingly focused on the men's athletic abilities, daring/exciting performances, and sporting performances on the pitch. Remember the stereotype that sport is a 'male domain' (Giulianotti, 2016).

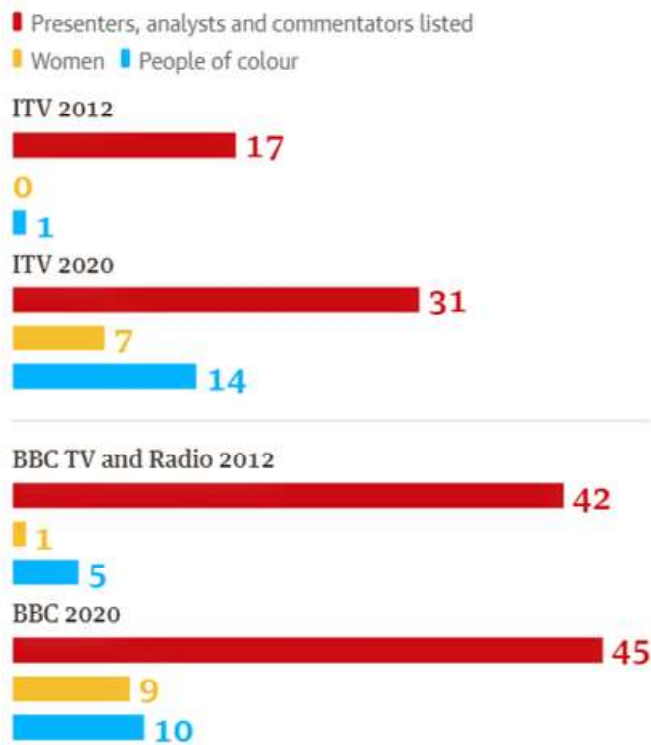
However, the good news is that some of these media barriers are also beginning to be broken down – with new opportunities arising and being seized. Fernandez's (2021) research found that, over the last two decades (2002-2020), the sexist differences in media coverage of men's and women's football are beginning to diminish. Fernandez's (2021) media analysis identified 2013 as the turning point for when the sexist differences first began to reduce – albeit slowly; with less focus being placed on women footballer's family lives, off-pitch relationships and/or being sexualised. However, there is still a strong tendency to use gendered language only when reporting on women's football. So, for example, reports focus on 'women', 'women's', 'woman' and 'girls' when reporting on women's football. However, 'men', 'men's' or 'boys' are not prevalent terms when reporting on men's football. In fact, the word 'male' is used much more frequently when reporting on women's football than on men's; suggesting that that even when the media covers female players, it still makes reference to them in relation/comparison to male players.

Strategic investment and change in the media coverage of women's football

The reduction of sexist differences in media coverage may be partially explained by whom the journalists are that get to report on the sport – and how in-depth their knowledge is of women's football. For example, Suzanne Wrack, a highly respected journalist who covers women's football, recently reported on a pivotal change she has observed in the media surrounding women's football. When she first started writing about women's football, there was not a single national newspaper in the United Kingdom that had allocated funds for even one full-time journalist to work on the women's game. It was not until 2017 (with the more progressive *Guardian*) that Wrack was given a once-weekly column focused on women's football. Her experience reflects a widespread trend of women and ethnic minorities being largely excluded from the sport media – unable to land positions as sport journalists, presenters, analysts or commentators. Thankfully, this too is beginning to change – with more diverse teams of media pundits now covering the sport (Lewis, 2018; Tapper, 2021).

Figure 8 (below) demonstrates a marked shift in the greater inclusion of women and 'people of colour' in the sport media in 2020 – as compared to 2012 – on the two principal TV and radio channels in the UK covering the (men's) UEFA European championships. The yellow bars (under the 2020 headings) demonstrate that 16 women were part of the 2020 media teams – an enormous growth from **just one woman** that was part of the 2012 media staff. However, as you will also see in figure 8, the number of women in the media team still pales in comparison to men (50 % less) when looking at ITV – a national broadcaster.

Figure 8. A numeric breakdown of the number of women and ‘people of colour’ that comprised the media teams (i.e., presenters, analysts, and commentators) on the UK’s principal TV and radio channels covering the (men’s) UEFA European championships in 2012 vs. 2020



Source: BBC and ITV

Source: Tapper, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3qWYxNW>.

Now, in 2022, over a five-year period, the experiences of Suzanne Wrack contrast sharply with the packed pressrooms – with large numbers of female football pundits – reporting on the elite levels of women’s football at Euro 2022. In 2022, the director of sport at the BBC, Barbara Slater, announced that the United Kingdom’s national broadcaster had seen a real turning point in audience interest. In 2019, they took the strategic decision to invest heavily in the quantity and quality of their coverage of women’s football.

As part of their strategic investment in women’s football, they declared the women’s Euro 2022 Championships as their most ambitious broadcast commitment to a major women’s football tournament (Easton, 2022). Alongside their live TV and radio coverage of the tournament, they created an enormous range of documentaries, podcasts, and original behind-the-scenes content of women’s football to promote on TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, they employed a range of women (including football coaches, ex-footballers and media specialists) to cover the women’s tournament (see figures 9 and 10 below). This is a clear example of a strategic effort to overcome the

many cultural and institutional barriers that have perpetuated sexist stereotypes in the media's coverage of women's sport.

The United Kingdom's national broadcaster, the BBC, invested heavily in their coverage of women's football since 2017. Their media team now includes a broad range of female faces and voices who are experts on women's football.

Figure 9. BBC experts on women's football



Source: BBC Sport, 2022, <https://bbc.in/3f94TqT>.

The United Kingdom's national broadcaster, the BBC, made a strategic decision to ensure that their media team on football matchdays now includes the views and expertise of media pundits who are women.

Figure 10. Arsenal legend Ian Wright and Gunners Women boss Jonas Eidevall joined former Arsenal and England star Alex Scott as pundits for the Lionesses' sensational 8-0 win over Norway



Source: Vaghela, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3qUgrRd>.

Wrack (2020; Wrack, 2022) makes clear that the continued development of women's football is still very, very reliant on and invested in an engaged media to help it grow. She reminds us that the success of the men's game has been maintained by the enormous media machine that creates coverage that leaves a 'deep stamp' on society. To be clear, there must be a positive synergistic relationship between women's football and the media. Wrack (2020; Wrack, 2022) terms this as a reciprocal relationship – where the media continues to help grow the game and the game, in turn, the game helps grow the media – and so grows a virtuous and synergistic cycle feeds the growth of all involved.

2.1.7 A lot done, more to do: elevated funding and focused investments in girl's football

You will now be familiar with significant development of women's sport/football. You have learned about the shift in thinking about, and then capitalising on, the commercial value of women's sport; moving beyond the exploitative sexualisation of female athletes (2.1.2). Global sporting federations/governing bodies, such as World Rugby (see 2.1.3), have committed serious resources to the growth of their sport through their strategic investment in gender equality; welcoming, catering for, and promoting the participation of girls and women in sport around the world.

By contrast, the football industry has not been the fastest moving, or most progressive, in its efforts to grow women's football (perhaps because of the riches already streaming from the men's game). However, in spite of their tardiness – and a century of discrimination – the opportunities within women's football are still growing (2.1.4 – 2.1.6). Football fans around the world – at both national team and club levels – are smashing records that demonstrate the burgeoning appetite for women's football (2.1.4). The growing commercial opportunities in women's football are also demonstrated in a range of other ways; including TV and media consumption (2.1.5), and strategic media investments in the broadcasting of women's football (2.1.6). This module illustrates that it is not only the increase in funding of the women's game that is important – but, critically, it highlights the strategic thinking that must be implemented over the long-run to ensure that investments are focused manner to produce optimal returns.

A lot done, more to do: strategic investments in girl's football

In short, a lot has been done, but there is still a lot more to do if the growth opportunities within the women's game are to be seized. A century of subjugation is not easily – or quickly – overcome. The barriers are still enormous, at grassroots levels, for girls and young women to participate in organised football. For example, the latest data from the Football Association of England found that only 63 % of schools offer girls the same access to football in physical education as they do for boys (Downey, 2022). That number falls even further – to 44 % – as girls become teenagers and lose access to playing football as they enter adolescence and the later stages of their schooling (Downey, 2022). This clear discrimination will no longer come as a surprise to students of this course – as they are familiar with the cultural durability of sexist stereotypes that reaffirm the idea of 'he-sports' and 'she-sports' (see 1.1.5).

A lot done: institutional strategic investment in a more equal future for women and girls in football

There are policies in place to address sexism in sport; however, again, both their creation and implementation have arrived late and move slowly. In 2020, the Football Association unveiled a four-year strategy entitled *Inspiring Positive Change* (2020), aimed specifically at creating a more equal future for women and girls in football (see figure 11). However, even that highly focused strategic policy's stated ambitions did not anticipate girls having the opportunity for equal access to participation in football until 2024 at the earliest (*Inspiring Positive Change*, 2020).

The FA's 'Inspiring Positive Change' campaign is a four-year strategy to create a more equal future for women and girls in football – including participation, technical development, community development, coaching, refereeing, and elite pathways for both club and national successes.

Figure 11. The FA's 'Inspiring Positive Change' campaign



Source: The FA, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3S48QM5>.

A lot done: the Premier League, the girl's game, and enhanced coaching/facilities

In recent years, commercial powerhouse football leagues, such as the Premier League, have made public commitments to increase their funding to girl's and women's football. Moreover, they have committed to channel their funding in ways that support broader strategic frameworks (Premier League, 2022a; Premier League, 2022b). For example, in May 2022 the Premier League allocated £5.25M to help grow the existing talent programme for women's football in England (see figure 12). Their funding, spread over three years at £1.75M per annum, is being used to provide footballing centres open to girls aged eight to 16. Those centres form part of the Football Association's (of England) new network of infrastructure for girls' emerging talent programmes (Premier League, 2022a; Premier League, 2022b). This example helps demonstrate how footballing bodies can partner, and create synergies, as the Premier League supports the 'Inspiring Positive Change' strategy (outlined earlier) of the English FA.

In 2022, the Premier League announced they will be working alongside The FA to provide funding for new Emerging Talent Centres for girls playing football. This will provide more opportunities for girls to access enhanced coaching and help forge new pathways that connect the professional and grassroots infrastructures.

Figure 12. Girl's Emerging Talent Centres



Source: Premier League, 2022a, <https://bit.ly/3UnGy0F>.

More to do: capitalising on the vast opportunities for further growth in girls' football

The funding case studies above are proof that both increased funding and focused strategic investments are coming online – but, perhaps, not at the speed of need. The growing appetite for girl's football around the world (as well as girl's sport more broadly) must be met with a developed infrastructure to meet (and help continue to grow) those appetites (Downey, 2022). In short, there is still so much room to grow the game and reap the rewards from the many opportunities available; from the grassroots/recreational levels (McVeigh, 2022) through to the elite professional levels (Varley, 2022). However, there are legitimate fears that, although women's football is experiencing tremendous growth (see 2.1.4 to 2.1.6), discriminative barriers (conscious and/or subconscious) will continue to stifle the true potential growth (starting with girl's football). For example, it is

not acceptable to continue to allow institutional structures to obstruct almost 6 out of 10 girls (in England) being denied equal access (as compared to boys) when they enter adolescence. Such glaring inequalities are not isolated events. As students of women's football, and as strategic thinkers, you must consider the effects of similar – or even worse – levels of discrimination operating throughout the women's/girl's footballing pyramid around the world.

2.1.8 A lot done, more to do: elevated funding and focused investment in women's football

A lot done: institutional strategic investments in the professionalisation of the women's game

Decades-long delays in football associations'/institutional support for the women's game can help explain why elite pathways, such as the Women's Super League (i.e., the elite level of women's football in England), only became fully professionalised in the 2018/2019 season. The recent commitment to professionalisation has helped develop the women's game in an array of areas. For example, the Football Association (of England) approved new licence criteria for their Women's Super League clubs. This meant that clubs were guided to (i) increase their investment in their women's teams; (ii) to provide a minimum of 16 contact hours per week for players (rising to 20 hours per week from 2021); and to (iii) add a girls/women's academy structure if it was not already in place (Fan Led Review of Football Governance, 2021).

A lot done: the Premier League and the women's footballing pyramid

Of course, developing girls' and women's football, and leveraging the opportunities available, requires a dual pronged strategy. Alongside the development of equal access, quality infrastructures, and enhanced coaching for girls, there must also be focused investments at that connect these to the higher levels of women's football. There must be a clearer pathway that links grassroots girl's football and women's elite football. For example, there must be support for women's football below the level of the Women's Super League. Football fans have made clear that they want commercially successful leagues, such as the Premier League, to take some responsibility for levelling-up investments in the women's game (Fan Led Review of Football Governance, 2021). Football's successful institutions must demonstrate their support for the building of a stronger women's footballing pyramid so that it can reach its true potential.

In June 2022, the Premier League announced an additional £4.5M of funding (separate to their investments in the girls' emerging talent centres) to help grow the lower tiers of women's club football (see figure 13). This includes funding targeted at stadium improvements that will make grounds more inclusive and enhance the playing and spectating experience in women's football (Premier League, 2022b). The Chief Executive of the Premier League, Richard Masters, said that they are proud of these investments and how they contribute to an exciting time for women's and girls' football (Premier League, 2022b). The Premier League will fund the Women's National League Strategy to improve eight key areas of the women's footballing pyramid: players; coaches and leaders; referees; club development; league development; facilities and infrastructure; commercial, and marketing and communications.

The FA's Director of Women's Football, Baroness Sue Campbell, has lauded the Premier League's strategic investments (announced in 2022) in the Women's National League. She said that "the launch of this strategy is game-changing for the women's football pyramid" (Premier League, 2022b, para. 12).

Figure 13. The FA Women's National League



Source: Premier League, 2022b, <https://bit.ly/3BZFAn>.

More to do: capitalising on the vast opportunities for further growth in women's football

The case studies above provide yet more evidence of both the increased funding, and focused strategic investments, in women's football. This has been a long time in the making. Students always consider the historical context. Even after the football associations of many countries lifted their formal bans on women's football in the 1970s, it was still decades before they took any responsibility – or even any interest – in helping support the game. For example, the FA lifted their ban in 1971, but it was not until 1993 that they took responsibility for women's football. Even after 1993, whilst they began to offer some support and direction to women's sport, they focused narrowly on grassroots participation. This meant that key pathways for the growth and professionalisation of the women's game were neglected – as documented in the 2021 'Fan Led Review of Football Governance'. There was no support, or strategic planning, for the game's commercialisation, for fostering spectatorship and fandom, or for developing media interest/resources/relations.

Football clubs, leagues, national associations, the sport's six continental federations (UEFA, CAF, AFC, CONCACAF, CONMEBOL, and OFC) and its world governing body (FIFA) must continue to work harder, faster, and more strategically, if the opportunities available are to be converted into benefits accruing to the sport. Moreover, there is a need for the plethora of regional, national, continental, and trans-continental footballing bodies and decision makers to work together – with 'joined up thinking' – to share best practices and co-ordinate effective policies. This is key if the football industry is to be able to capitalise on the enormous opportunities that women's sport/football presents. For example, it is very disappointing that FIFA's 'Women's Football Strategy' (2018) only included a plan to create a 'Women's Football Commercial Programme' by 2026; a full eight years after the publication of their strategy framework (see figure 14).

FIFA's 'Women's Football Strategy' chose this image, of six-time World Player of the Year six - Marta, to accompany their stated goal to broaden the exposure of women's football and grow its commercial value. Their strategy did not plan for the creation of a FIFA 'Women's Football Commercial Programme' until 2026.

Figure 14. World Player of the Year six, Marta



Source: Women's Football Strategy, 2018, <https://fifa.fans/3dBqIV1>.

As global stewards of the sport, it is unclear why FIFA's own strategy scheduled an eight-year time lag before they expected to implement a commercial programme for the women's game (see figure 22). The football industry, and its strategic decision makers around the world, must not be complacent. Other sports (see 2.1.3) continue to make enormous strides forward, and they are already reaping enormous gains arising from the opportunities available within women's sport.

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