

Work and Equalities Institute Research Briefing

2017 FIFPro Global Employment Report: Working Conditions in Professional Women's Football

Aristea Koukiadaki, Senior Lecturer in Employment Law

Summary

Women's football is growing in popularity and status, with increasing participation, professionalisation and media attention across the world. But until recently not much was known about the working conditions for professional and amateur players. This briefing, which explores the first comprehensive study of the women's game, finds an occupation fighting for a stable footing. It shows that a professional football career for women is hard to sustain in the face of low pay, a lack of contractual support and commitments away from the pitch. It highlights the need for changes in the way women are supported to play for club and country, and makes recommendations to prevent the majority leaving the game early, which many are forced to do.

The research – in brief

- There is a lack of support for women footballers and so they struggle to see it as a viable career.
- Nearly 90 per cent of players say they are considering leaving the game early.
- Low pay is an issue. Most salaries are well under \$2,000 a month.
- Players get paid less as they get older, with average earnings over the age of 33 between \$301 and \$600.
- 61 per cent of players with children say they get no childcare support.
- Many players are working alongside their football commitments.
- Compared to the men's game, there is a lack of contractual and agent support, and contracts become more precarious as players get older.
- 35 per cent say they receive no payment from their national team and some even have to pay to play.
- Very young and older players do not get paid enough to cover their expenses when playing for national teams.
- Most players say they aren't happy with the prize money on offer from national competitions.
- There was broad support for medical and psychological support at clubs and gender discrimination was lower than expected.

Introduction and overview: a challenging picture

Women's football is evolving. Alongside increased participation and growing media attention, the game is undergoing a period of welcome development. At elite level, the process of professionalisation is underway in several countries worldwide. FIFA says that around 30 million women play the game globally, and that five million are registered with a national association. In FIFA's current strategy document for women's football, the governing body paints a rosy picture of the current reality, describing the sport as a "global game for women and girls, cutting across all boundaries in terms of society, race, religion, ethnicity and socioeconomic circumstances".

But according to research from us and players union FIFPro, there are significant hurdles to overcome in order to make football a secure career. The 2017 FIFPro Global Employment Report: Working Conditions in Professional Women's Football report found that 89 per cent of female footballers are considering leaving the game early due to low pay and a lack of childcare, and were in pursuit of opportunities outside of the game. The report also reveals a sport where women suffer at the hands of precarious contracts and from a lack of support from national teams.

What we found was a paradox. On the one hand there is a growing awareness of women being able to play football for clubs and national teams, alongside interest from the media. But on the other, the working conditions in the game are not where they should be.

Gender inequality has been well documented in other sectors of the economy and our study confirms that the football sector also suffers, in equal if not greater measure, from unequal pay and other working conditions.

Geoff Pearson, a co-author of the report, and senior lecturer at the School of Law in the University of Manchester, believes in its current state that football is something that women are still doing for the love of the game – in an amateur way, but at a professional level – which involves sacrifices such as raising a family, moving away from parents, or even buying a house.

"Childcare isn't high on the agenda for clubs when they employ male footballers... there is still a very traditional view that there will be a woman at home raising the children," he says. "That simply doesn't work for women footballers. There is a huge part of a woman's child bearing life that is taken out by being a professional footballer. I don't think this is a problem you can solve by throwing money at it."

For the first time, the research shines the light on working conditions in women's football from the perspective of the players. It includes findings from a survey of 3,000 players in 33 different countries, with 60 per cent considered professional, as those who "receive an income from any source for participating in football activity". The report aims to inform policy work, improve the ongoing working realities faced by female footballers, and drive discussions with FIFA and the European Commission about the future of the game.

Pay gaps: money talks, but not for women

Women's football is the poor relation in global sport, compared with its more lucrative counterparts, basketball and tennis. While 40 per cent of people involved in the FIFPro study were considered amateur, the average pay of those earning money from the sport is a key reason why women struggle to maintain a career.

Most players received salaries under \$2,000 a month and the most common pay was \$100 or under. It's very rare for players to earn more than \$4,000 and earnings drop as they get older. The top five countries to "adequately pay" their players (enough to cover the expenses incurred playing) include: Germany, Uzbekistan, England, Sweden and the USA, although 20 to 30 per cent of players in those countries reported they were not paid enough.

There is broad acceptance that female footballers are paid a fraction of their male counterparts. This is backed up by **research from Sporting Intelligence**, which found

that the average salary in the UK's Premier League, for example, is 99 times higher than the top paid women in the country. UK clubs can use **40 per cent of their annual turnovers** on wages but there are no minimum and maximum limits for individual salaries.

The study showed that while elite female players were able to secure higher salaries and longer contracts than those in lower leagues, these contracts were shorter than their male counterparts, averaging 12 months. In addition, while it's normal for agents to represent players in the men's game, only 14 per cent of female players had this support in place.

The problems around pay, the lack of contractual stability and agent support, and the absence of appropriate childcare all operate independently, but also in conjunction, to expose female footballers to precarious working conditions.

National teams: pride in question

Playing for the national team can be symbolic of a pinnacle in sport, and international football makes up an important part of the women's game. The profile of national teams is part of the growth being seen in the sport, alongside an increasing number of competitions between nations.

The research found that while 45 per cent said they had played for their national team, a significant 79 per cent said they didn't know what kind of contract existed between them. Just over a third of players revealed they received no payment from their national team and some even had to pay to play.

"For most women, playing for the national team, is done on an ad hoc basis," says Pearson. "There was also a complete division between the top national teams and the lower-ranked national teams. The wealthiest associations are paying players, and that might be holding up the club, but 20 per cent of people didn't receive any money for playing.

"That is going to be problematic in terms of encouraging people to play for the national team in those non-elite nations," he adds, "and it's going to have an impact

on competitive balance, because it's going to deter those better players from weaker nations. If you are also asking people to travel with the national team for a tournament, without pay, that's clearly going to be a disincentive."

The issue of pay in national teams has been brought into sharp focus with **recent campaigns for gender pay equality** in the US and Norway and claims of discrimination in countries including **Argentina** and **Colombia**. Significantly, the research also found that 65 per cent of national team players said they were not satisfied with the prize money on offer. In the recent FIFA Women's World Cup, the prize money on offer was only **10 per cent of the pot** that is available to male players.

Since clubs are not paying enough for women to play, the role of national teams in providing adequate support to players is important. This would help deliver an additional salary for women that play for national teams and help them stay in the game. However, attention should be paid to the need for any such support to be considered as supplementary and not substituting what clubs should offer.

Contracts: the precarious position of female footballers

Despite attempts to provide the right level of employment protection for female footballers through the labour laws of the countries they are working in, the research findings suggest significant obstacles still exist and women's football is exposed to precarious working conditions and standards.

Contracts are important in terms of addressing matters such as salary, health insurance, social security, or paid leave. The existence of a written contract in particular is crucial in ensuring clarity with respect to the obligations of the parties, including on salary and other terms and conditions of employment. In the research, 53 per cent of female footballers (76 per cent of professional players) didn't have a written contract in place. In the context of the men's game these findings are significant, as the figure for female footballers was well below the men's game where 90 per cent reported having a written contract in place. Some 47 per cent of players reporting they had a written contract in place believed they were operating under an employment contract.

The existence of an employment contract is significant in defining the nature and range of rights that female footballers may enjoy including, for instance, protection from dismissal and access to maternity pay. Against this context, the absence of an employment contract may be an indication of a precarious situation. This is because it often disguises a relationship of subordination and dependence and may be also associated with worse employment protection and working conditions. What is striking is that 15 per cent of respondents were not actually aware of the type of contract they had.

At the same time a contract, even when it is a fixed-term one, is not sufficient to guarantee job security. What is crucial is the duration of the contract.

The survey also found that contracts get shorter as players get older. While players under the age of 18 had contracts averaging 22 months, this dropped to 12 months and then 11 months, for players over 18.

Health and discrimination: work to do

Against the challenges of pay, contractual support and ageism in female football, there was broad support for the medical and psychological support available for players. Although a lot of women's clubs are providing sick pay for injured players, many clubs are lagging behind, leaving some without an income from football. Significantly, just under two thirds of players said they had never been asked about their menstrual cycles in relation to performance.

Pearson says: "Where something has a negative effect on someone's ability to play, you would expect these questions to be asked - not just for the player's wellbeing - and it would make sense for the coach to know this as well, so they could take decisions about which players could start a match or be on the bench, for example."

Women's experience of violence, harassment, bullying and discrimination was lower than their male counterparts, and while a higher proportion reported suffering gender discrimination, the figures were lower than we expected to find. The threat of violence for professional players was also much lower than for amateurs, highlighting a potential difference in supporter culture between the two, and fans tended to be the perpetrators of this abuse.

While evidence of sexual harassment was low, there were still 46 players that reported it from coaching staff. Equally concerning were the findings of racism and homophobia in the sport. While 4.5 per cent of players reported racism, a majority of this came from fans on match day.

At first glance, the findings of homophobic discrimination were lower than expected, but in some countries where no incidents were reported (Denmark, Ireland, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, Uzbekistan) there was concern that people didn't feel able to share their experiences because of anti-gay propaganda.

Conclusions

There is a weight of evidence from this research that shows women face an uphill struggle to maintain a career in football. The combined instability of declining financial opportunities and a lack of contractual stability and childcare support, means many are forced to leave the game early.

Against this challenging picture it's important that clubs, leagues and national sides explore ways in which to stabilise the working conditions for female footballers. They should consider the structures that will enable them to flourish – on and off the pitch – alongside their male counterparts. While there are positives to draw from the findings, with limited discrimination and reasonable levels of medical and psychological support, it's clear that women's football has still got a long way to go.

The results as they stand are challenging but women's football also has many positive features that should be consolidated and expanded further. But when it comes to working conditions, there have been so far only limited attempts to address the problems of inequality and precarious working conditions.

Our message is for all stakeholders involved in women's football, be it FIFA, the confederations, and national football associations, as well as public policymakers and legislators, to take women's football seriously and ensure that more women can enjoy decent, fair work conditions as they pursue their professional football careers.

Recommendations

Clubs, national teams and governing bodies should consider the following to help football become an aspirational career path:

- Establish minimum requirements for standard player contracts, addressing issues such as contract duration and maternity rights
- Explore how players can be supported by a network of organisations – including club and country – and ensure that these complement each other
- Tackle the systemic drop-off in pay as players get older – and explore ways to manage their exit from the game sustainably
- Build on the strong solidarity in the women's game and promote further the collective representation of the interests of female footballers at all levels
- Explore ways in which to combine programmes of study and work more closely with professional football, in order to offer more chances of career progression

- Provide adequate levels of childcare support to enable mothers to play on for longer

- Find ways to provide more gender specific physical health support for female players off the pitch

- Collaborate with men's football leagues to tackle racism, bullying and match fixing and address the challenge of structural discrimination across the game as a whole

For a copy of the full report, please see: Koukiadaki, A. and Pearson, G. (2017), Working Conditions in Professional Women's Football (available at: https://www.academia.edu/36496145/Working_Conditions_in_Professional_Womens_Football).

For the top findings, please see: FifPro (2017), 2017 Football Employment Report: Working Conditions in Professional Women's Football (<https://fifpro.org/attachments/article/6986/2017%20FIFPro%20Women%20Football%20Global%20Employment%20Report-Final.pdf>)