

Sport Policy and Women's Football: Analysis of the Development Programs of Continental Football Federations

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Aims

Football has traditionally been a male-dominated sport, not because women and girls are innately disinterested or incapable, but rather due to decades of institutional and social barriers that have prevented them from playing (FIFA, 2015). With the aim of popularizing the game and increasing the participation of girls and women in the sport, FIFA has, since 2004, implemented the Women's Football Development Program. The program has made funds available for continental football federations to create their own programs and develop women's football on different continents. Although women's football is one of the fastest-growing sports worldwide, little is known about the main stakeholders in this development. The first aim of this study was to identify the continental football federations that have already proposed structured programs for the development of women's football. The second aim was to analyze the sport policy areas that are targeted by the existing programs.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The stimuli commonly provided by international associations, such as the FIFA Women's Football Development Program, do not guarantee uniform responses at lower organizational levels (Houlihan, 2009), for example in football federations. Sport organizations adopt policies that vary according to commercial, political, social, and cultural factors (Houlihan, 2013). The analysis and comparison of sport policies is a great challenge. In order to compare the sport policies of different countries, De Bosscher et al. (2006) developed a model called "Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS)". This model considers nine key areas, or pillars, that are important during the different stages of athletic development. Although the model was initially proposed for the analysis of sport policies developed by national governmental bodies, it has already been used at regional and city levels (De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, & van Bottenburg, 2016). There have been few studies investigating sport policies at a continental level, and in no case has the SPLISS model been used in the analysis. With due care in its application, the model could be used to analyze the policies proposed by football federations for the development of women's football on the different continents.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The characteristics of the development programs, including the official name, period of implementation, and strategic goals, are usually described in the documents and news available on the official websites of the football federations. Therefore, in this study, a qualitative document analysis was conducted using material retrieved from these official websites. In total, six websites were analyzed, with collection of documents and news that characterized the women's football development programs proposed by each federation. The material was located using the keywords "women", "development program", "strategic objectives", and their combinations. The sources were read in full, with the sport policies targeted by each program being classified into one of the nine pillars of the SPLISS model.

Results and Discussion

Information about women's football was found on the official websites of all six federations. However, structured women's football development programs could be found for only three organizations: the European (UEFA), Asian (AFC), and Oceania (OFC) football federations. The documents and news found on the UEFA website showed that the nine pillars of the SPLISS model were targeted by the federation. UEFA also recognized the importance of qualifying women to act as sport professionals, as a key factor in the development of women's football. The strategic objectives in the development of women's football in Asia and Oceania were described on the official websites of the continental federations. Eight pillars were targeted by the AFC, with only training facilities (pillar 6) not being considered. Only two pillars, financial investments (pillar 1) and scientific research (pillar 9), were not targeted by the OFC. Both federations were also concerned about the opportunities and qualifications provided to female professionals in order to enable them to participate in the sport. Besides the nine pillars of the SPLISS model, it appears that gender equality in technical and managerial positions is important for women's football development. No federation considered post-career support (pillar 5) as a strategic objective. On the official websites of the African (CAF), Central and North American (CONCACAF), and South American (CONMEBOL) football federations, no structured development programs could be found. The majority of the information about women's football was related to the championships held on these continents.

Conclusions

It could be concluded that the European, Asian, and Oceania federations are currently the main stakeholders in the development of women's football at a continental level. The provision of opportunities and the qualification of women to act as sport professionals seem to be important targets for sport policies in women's football development programs. Future work should build on the descriptive analysis carried out in this study, investigating the ways that sport policies are developed by each continental federation, together with their consequences in the development of women's football.

References

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