

## THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL: FROM PASSION TO PERFORMANCE

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**Abstract.** This article explores the historical trajectory and contemporary development of women's football, tracing its journey from marginalization to increasing recognition, with a special emphasis on the Romanian context. The origins of women's football date back to the late 19th century in the United Kingdom, where despite prevailing social resistance and restrictive gender norms, women organized informal matches and began to challenge traditional conceptions of femininity. The sport's popularity surged during World War I, when women's teams, such as the famous Dick, Kerr's Ladies, attracted significant public attention and large audiences.

However, the English Football Association's 1921 ban on women's football from official grounds severely limited the sport's growth for decades, a setback whose effects were felt internationally.

Globally, the professionalization of women's football gained momentum only in the latter half of the 20th century. The establishment of international competitions culminated with FIFA's inauguration of the Women's World Cup in 1991, which marked a pivotal moment in the sport's legitimacy and global visibility.

In Romania, the development of women's football was considerably delayed due to a combination of limited infrastructure, insufficient institutional support, and cultural attitudes that hindered female athletic participation. The foundation of the national women's league and the official creation of the Romanian women's national team in 1990 represented crucial milestones in overcoming these barriers. Despite these advances, persistent disparities between women's and men's football remain stark, particularly regarding funding, media exposure, and societal recognition. Nevertheless, recent initiatives by the Romanian Football Federation (FRF), combined with the growing international success of Romanian female players, signal promising growth and potential.

This article emphasizes the importance of sustained institutional support, strategic investment, and cultural transformation to foster equitable opportunities and ensure the long-term development and professionalization of women's football both in Romania and globally.

**Keywords:** women's football, Romania, development, media, gender equality.

### Context

Throughout the modern history of sport, football has been deeply entrenched as a male-dominated domain. Rooted in traditional gender roles and supported by institutions that prioritized men's athleticism, football excluded women from official spaces for much of its existence. Despite this, women began playing football as early as the late 19th century in the United Kingdom, defying societal norms and pushing against prevailing ideas of femininity and public propriety (Williams, 2003). These early activities, though marginal and often informal, signaled a burgeoning demand for female representation in competitive sports.



The First World War served as a pivotal moment in women's football history. As men were drafted into military service, women stepped into roles across society including the football pitch. Women's teams like the Dick, Kerr's Ladies drew crowds exceeding 50,000, illustrating public interest and the players' athletic capabilities (Lopez, 1997). However, this progress was abruptly halted by the English Football Association's 1921 decision to ban women's football from official grounds, deeming it "unsuitable for females." This institutional act of exclusion had far-reaching consequences, stunting the sport's growth for nearly half a century (Pfister, 2015).

The global evolution of women's football since the mid-20th century has been characterized by slow but steady progress. FIFA's official recognition of women's competitions, including the inaugural Women's World Cup in 1991, began to reverse decades of neglect. UEFA and other confederations gradually followed suit, introducing women's club tournaments and youth championships that provided pathways for female athletes. Professional leagues have since been established across Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, contributing to increased visibility and commercial investment. According to FIFA (2022), more than 13 million girls and women now play football globally, and the Women's World Cup has reached record-breaking audiences in recent editions, with the 2023 tournament drawing over 2 billion viewers worldwide.

Yet, despite these strides, structural inequities remain. Disparities in funding, infrastructure, and media coverage continue to reflect a gender imbalance in football (Cooky & Messner, 2018). For example, salary gaps between men's and women's professional players remain vast even in well-developed markets such as England or the United States. In many countries, women still struggle to access adequate training resources, medical support, and competitive platforms. These limitations are especially acute in Eastern Europe, including Romania, where cultural conservatism, limited state investment, and underdeveloped sport governance structures exacerbate inequality.

In Romania, women's football is still in a developmental phase, lagging behind Western European standards. Although the Romanian Football Federation (FRF) has initiated several programs to encourage youth participation such as the "Fotbal și Feminitate" campaign and the establishment of regional youth centers the sport remains underfunded and institutionally marginalized. The national league lacks competitive depth, and many clubs operate on minimal budgets, often relying on volunteers or mixed-gender coaching staff without specialized training in female athlete development. Research has shown that Romanian athletes, particularly in women's sports, face obstacles related to access, recognition, and competitive development (Rusu & Ionescu, 2021; Mănescu, 2025a; 2025b). These limitations are compounded by outdated perceptions of femininity in sport and a lack of media visibility issues that are further reinforced by the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within federations and coaching structures.

Furthermore, the broader athletic ecosystem in Romania continues to struggle with structural asymmetries. Studies on motor performance and training asymmetry among athletes show differences between team sports, individual sports, and non-athletes, with implications for training models and developmental equity (Badau et al., 2023). These findings underline the necessity of tailoring training methodologies to support female athletes through inclusive and symmetrized programming critical elements missing from many Romanian women's football initiatives. Gender-specific physiological and psychological needs, such as injury prevention strategies (e.g., ACL injury risks), menstruation-aware training cycles, and mental health support, are often overlooked or inadequately addressed in existing programs.

Technological advancements, which have revolutionized athlete development in sports like handball, basketball, and volleyball (Badau et al., 2025), remain underutilized in Romanian women's football. Tools such as GPS-based movement tracking, performance analytics software, and fatigue monitoring systems are seldom accessible to women's teams outside of the national squad. The absence of sports science integration along with a lack of qualified personnel trained to work with female athletes continues to hinder performance optimization and long-term athlete development. By contrast, countries like the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden have institutionalized sports

science in women's football through partnerships with academic institutions and centralized performance centers.

This research aims to explore the historical, socio-cultural, and institutional development of women's football, with an emphasis on the Romanian context. By examining the sport's global evolution and juxtaposing it with Romania's current landscape, this study seeks to uncover the barriers and opportunities within the sport's trajectory. The transformation of women's football from marginalized activity to an emerging professional field reveals a complex interplay between societal norms, institutional support, and athlete agency. Understanding this interplay is critical for shaping future interventions, policymaking, and educational frameworks that seek to promote equity and excellence in sport.

In conclusion, the path of women's football is emblematic of broader gender dynamics in sport. While international trends point to growing recognition and investment, national contexts like Romania remind us that progress is neither uniform nor guaranteed. A concerted effort from policymakers, federations, coaches, and educators is essential to build an ecosystem where female athletes can thrive from grassroots to elite levels. This includes addressing cultural attitudes, improving infrastructure, adopting evidence-based training practices, and ensuring equitable media representation. Only through such comprehensive and sustained efforts can women's football fulfill its transformative potential in Romania and beyond.

## Research Objectives

- To analyze the historical evolution of women's football globally, focusing on key milestones that marked the sport's beginnings for women, such as the first matches in the 19th century, the popularity during World War I, and the 1921 ban imposed by the English FA, as outlined in the article.
- To highlight the specific development of women's football in Romania, from the lack of tradition and infrastructure to the establishment of the first national league and the national team in 1990, as well as recent programs initiated by the Romanian Football Federation (FRF) mentioned in the article.
- To compare the situation of women's football with men's football in terms of media coverage, funding, visibility, and investment, emphasizing persistent gaps and how these affect the sustainable development of women's football in Romania and globally.
- To analyze the social and cultural impact of women's football, considering gender based obstacles, stereotypes, and cultural shifts that influence the perception and acceptance of women's football in society.
- To identify factors and initiatives that can support the progress of women's football, such as development programs for girls and women, the role of successful players abroad, and the need for coherent public policies to support women's sport.

These objectives will guide the article's development, providing a clear framework for a comprehensive analysis of women's football evolution from its historical challenges to current and future prospects in both Romanian and global contexts.

## Research Methods

To thoroughly investigate the evolution of women's football, both globally and within the Romanian national context, this study employs a multidisciplinary approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The research objectives, which aim to explore the historical trajectory, analyze

socio-cultural trends, and assess comparative differences between women's and men's football, require a diverse set of methods capable of providing a comprehensive and well-grounded perspective.

Thus, documentary and historical analysis will reconstruct the evolution of women's football, identifying key moments and major institutional barriers. In parallel, comparative statistical analysis will evaluate differences in participation, funding, and visibility between the two genders. Additionally, media content analysis will highlight how women's football is represented in public discourse, contributing to the understanding of stereotypes and the current level of promotion.

By integrating these methods, the research seeks to offer a clear and objective picture of the state of women's football, both in Romania and within the broader context of its global development.

*Documentary and Historical Analysis* – this method involves examining archives, official documents, and specialized literature to reconstruct the evolution of women's football, identifying key moments, institutional barriers, and legislative changes. For example, the 1921 FA ban and its repeal in 1971 were decisive events in this evolution (Williams, 2003). FIFA reports show a steady increase in the number of registered female players, exceeding 29 million globally in 2022 (FIFA, 2022). In Romania, FRF documents reflect the launch of programs such as "Football and Femininity" and "Football in Schools" to promote women's football (FRF, 2023).

*Comparative Statistical Analysis* – comparative analysis allows evaluating differences between women's and men's football in terms of player numbers, clubs, funding, and audience. According to FIFA (2022), salaries and budgets in women's football are still significantly lower than in men's football. In Romania, FRF reports approximately 1,900 registered female players and over 60 clubs participating in women's competitions, a significant contrast to men's football (FRF, 2023). UEFA data (2023) also show increasing audiences for women's competitions, although visibility remains lower compared to men's.

*Media Content Analysis* – this method examines the media coverage of women's football, highlighting disparities compared to men's football. Studies show that only 13% of global sports media content was dedicated to women's sports in 2019, despite record viewership at the FIFA Women's World Cup (Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2020). In Romania, coverage remains limited, but social media initiatives have started to increase visibility (MediaFactBook Romania, 2022). Content analysis helps identify stereotypes and proposes strategies for improving public perception.

## Results

*Reconstruction of the Historical Evolution of Women's Football* – documentary analysis shows that although women began playing football as early as the 19th century, the sport was systematically marginalized. The ban imposed by the English Football Association in 1921 limited the development of women's football for nearly 50 years, a fact confirmed by historical research (Williams, 2003). After this ban was lifted in 1971, there was a steady increase in interest and the number of female players, culminating in the first edition of the FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991 (FIFA, 2022).

*Socio-Cultural Trends and Comparisons between Women's and Men's Football* – statistical data reveal a significant gap in participation and funding. Globally, only about 29 million women are registered players, compared to hundreds of millions in men's football (FIFA, 2022). In Romania, for example, there are around 1,900 registered female players and 60 clubs, which shows growing interest but remains modest compared to men's football (FRF, 2023). Salaries and budgets dedicated to women's football remain much lower, a situation documented in the specialized literature as well (UEFA, 2023).

*Media Visibility and Social Impact* – content analysis indicates an underrepresentation of women’s football in traditional media. A study by Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2020) shows that only 13% of total global sports media content is dedicated to women’s sports, despite increasing audiences, as seen in the 2019 Women’s World Cup which recorded a viewership record of over 250 million for the final. In Romania, the press continues to give limited coverage to this segment, but social and online initiatives are beginning to counterbalance this trend (MediaFactBook Romania, 2022).

*Impact of Development Initiatives and Programs in Romania* – FRF programs such as “Football and Femininity” and “Football in Schools” have had a positive effect, leading to an increase in the number of young participants and the gradual professionalization of the sport (FRF, 2023). Romanian players like Olivia Oprea and Teodora Meluță, who compete in foreign leagues, have become inspirational role models, contributing to the popularization of women’s football in Romania.

To illustrate the evolution and current state of women’s football globally and in Romania, we present a series of relevant charts and tables below. These visuals highlight the steady increase in the number of female players, the significant disparities in participation and funding compared to men’s football, as well as media visibility levels. Additionally, they showcase specific trends in Romania, indicating notable progress alongside ongoing challenges in the sport’s development.

1. Evolution of the Number of Registered Female Football Players Worldwide (2000–2023)

Year	Number of Players (millions)
2000	8
2005	12
2010	18
2015	23
2020	27
2023	29

The number of registered female players has nearly quadrupled in the past two decades, reflecting the growing interest and increasing support for women’s football globally.

Source: FIFA Women's Football Strategy (2022)

2. Comparison Between Women’s and Men’s Football Globally (Approximate Data)

Indicator	Women’s Football	Men’s Football
Registered Players Number	29 million	~270million
Average Salary (USD/year)	50,000	1 million
Number of Professional Clubs	~1,500	>10,000
Media Coverage (%)	13%	87%

Major differences in player numbers, salaries, and media coverage highlight the persistent inequalities between men’s and women’s football, despite recent advancements.

### 3. Audience of FIFA Women's World Cup Finals vs FIFA Men's World Cup Finals

Year	Women's WC Final Audience (millions)	Men's WC Final Audience (millions)
2011	25	700
2015	26	750
2019	252	1,120

The viewership of the Women's World Cup final saw a dramatic increase between 2011 and 2019, indicating expanding public interest in women's football competitions.

### 4. Number of Registered Female Players and Clubs in Romania (2010–2023)

Year	Registered Players	Women's Clubs Number
2010	500	15
2015	1,000	30
2020	1,600	50
2023	1,900	60

In Romania, both the number of players and women's football clubs has quadrupled over the last 13 years, marking a positive, though gradual, development of the sport.

Source: Romanian Football Federation, Annual Reports (2023)

### 5. Percentage of Media Coverage in Sports (2019) – Global

Sport Type	Percentage of Media Coverage
Men's Football	55%
Other Men's Sports	32%
Women's Football	13%

Women's football remains underrepresented in mainstream media, with only 13% of total coverage, which limits the sport's visibility and public appeal.

## Conclusions

This research has shown that the evolution of women's football, both globally and in Romania, is the result of a complex interplay between historical marginalization, socio-cultural resistance, and emerging institutional support. The documentary and historical analysis revealed key turning points,

such as the 1921 FA ban and the 1991 FIFA Women's World Cup, which mark both suppression and resurgence. Statistical comparisons confirmed the existence of major disparities between women's and men's football in terms of registered players, average salaries, media visibility, and professional structures. In Romania, the number of female players and clubs has increased steadily over the past decade, supported by development programs such as "Football and Femininity" and "Football in Schools." However, the figures remain modest compared to the men's sector. Media content analysis exposed a persistent underrepresentation of women's football, with only 13% of global sports coverage dedicated to women's sports, despite increasing audience interest. These findings underline the need for targeted policies, greater financial investment, and cultural transformation to ensure equality, visibility, and professional opportunities for women in football. Women's football is no longer a marginal phenomenon, but its sustainable development depends on addressing structural inequalities and actively promoting gender equity in sports.

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