DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 08.03.2023 | Helene Altgelt

High time for equal p(l)ay

The emancipation of women's football is in full swing. Federations must move with the times and stop treating female players as second-class athletes

23 February 2022: fifteen players from the Spanish women's team declare they are no longer willing to play under coach Jorge Vilda. 10 February 2023: the Canadian women's team publishes an open letter levelling serious accusations against the federation. 24 February 2023: Wendie Renard withdraws from the French women's team, saying she can no longer support the current system.

These are just three examples from the wave of accusations and disputes currently shaking the world of international women's football. Chile, Nigeria and Argentina have also seen players protesting against unequal treatment and pay, sexism and reactionary federations. The names and details may differ from case to case, but the underlying structures are the same. Considering the French or Spanish accusations as one-offs or to place the blame on coaches alone is short sighted. When the same patterns and problems keep cropping up, they can't simply be isolated cases; the issues can only be systemic.

Women's football has seen rapid progress in recent times. Within the space of just a few years, there has been a major shift in perceptions of what's possible: where in 2015, it would have been considered utopian that women's Champions League matches might regularly attract crowds in the tens of thousands, such attendances are now a reality. 'Think big' seems to be the new watchword for women's football – but federations are still failing to keep up.

Lagging behind by 74 years

This has to do with the history of the game: many federations, Germany's included, banned women from participating in organised club football for decades. In Germany's case, it took until 10 November 1982 for the women's national team to get to play their first official match. The opponent that day was Switzerland, just as it was when the men's team

played their first game – some 74 years earlier. For those pioneering women footballers, donning the Germany shirt was a privilege that had long seemed unthinkable. From day one, however, it was as if the players owed a debt to the federations for generously letting them play. Remuneration, recognition and participation in decision-making weren't even on the agenda – and the numerous titles the German women's team subsequently won did nothing to change that.

In the meantime, the balance of power in women's football has shifted radically. The top clubs have long since professionalised their training facilities and begun promoting their women's teams intelligently. That strategy has, in many cases, already paid off: in the 2021/22 season, for instance, Barcelona's women's team posted earnings of 7.7 million euros and twice broke the world attendance record for a women's football match. A week and a half after 91,553 fans watched Barcelona Femení's thrilling 5:2 victory over Real Madrid in the legendary Camp Nou, the German national team played Portugal in Bielefeld – in front of 7,364 people, at ten past four in the afternoon. It's just one of many examples of federations failing to keep up with the changing face of women's football.

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Despite all the records being set by women's teams, their games are often shunted out to less accessible locations and given little promotion. Take, for instance, the recent *Tournoi de France*, a friendly international tournament organised by the French federation. It brought together some of the world's best teams and players, yet, hardly anyone noticed. It didn't get talked about in the media or on the street, which is perhaps unsurprising given that half the games took place not in Paris or Marseille but in Laval, a town of just 50,000 souls.

This kind of thing creates a vicious cycle: low levels of interest lead federations to view women's football as an unproductive terrain and to avoid investing in better conditions and marketing, which in turn results in low levels of interest. Clubs have now broken out of that cycle, making huge investments and raising standards, but many federations still cling to old ways of thinking.

It doesn't have to be that way, as England's Football Association has shown: for a number of years, it has been pursuing an ambitious growth strategy, investing in both the league and national teams. That strategy has already borne fruit: Euro 2022 was a resounding success at every level, smashing attendance records, generating a hype that continues to

reverberate today and finishing with the *Lionesses* being crowned European champions. Some federations have still not learned the lessons of that success, and so it's hardly surprising to see their players protesting. They are used to better treatment at the club level and they have already seen other countries step up; now they are demanding their own federations to follow suit. A good example of the current discrepancies can be seen in France, where the federation employs a technical staff of three for its women's team, but the leading women's club, *Olympique Lyonnais*, has a coaching staff of eight.

Is Germany on the right track?

The recent withdrawals and protests are thus a sign of women footballers' emancipation and of a logical, even inevitable revolt against backward-looking federations. Why then are there protests in France and Spain but not, for instance, in Germany? Is the German federation, recently criticised over its establishment of an all-male taskforce, really that much more progressive than its counterparts? The answer is no; rather, there are three distinct factors behind the relative quiet in Germany.

Firstly, there was a specific reason for the withdrawal of key French and Spanish players: the controversial nature of the countries' respective head coaches. Jorge Vilda and Corinne Diacre are both said to have exerted obsessive control over their teams, conducted poorly prepared training sessions and shown little consideration for players' injuries. These are serious accusations, and yet, it would be wrong to paint the pair as the only guilty parties. If the federations had offered players sufficient protection and taken their concerns seriously, then it wouldn't have come to such withdrawals in the first place. The fact that the players chose to ultimately resort to high-profile protest suggests deep-seated structural problems, problems that, without the presence of controversial figures at the helm, probably wouldn't have come to light. By contrast, the Germany head coach Martina Voss-Tecklenburg is, as far as we can tell from the outside, a capable coach who believes in treating her players properly.

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Secondly, the German federation deserves credit for performing a 180 degree turn following Euro 2022. Since Germany's second place at the tournament and the subsequent euphoria around the team, the federation has made noticeable efforts to ensure more favourable kick-off times and greater publicity. Granted, this change of heart was many years overdue and, in 2023, it's almost embarrassing to be

still not a given.

praising a federation for valuing its women's team. But the problems elsewhere, be it in France or in Nigeria, where win bonuses have been withheld, show that this is still not a given. The sad truth is that women's teams across the world probably all face similar issues, even those in countries where you might not expect it. The United States, for instance, is an absolute pioneer in women's football, winning a medal at every single World Cup to date, their players being genuine stars. And yet, they had to fight long and hard to get their equal pay agreement through, even took that fight to court.

In Germany, equal pay for the national teams is a hot potato: when asked about it in interviews, Germany's women footballers quickly point out that the income generated by the two teams is not equal either, and that they are, therefore, not demanding equal pay. As captain Alexandra Popp says, adopting a far less drastic tone than her US colleagues: 'we're not talking about equal pay here, that's a very long way off.' Rather than equal pay, players are demanding 'equal play': the first step, they say, is to have decent playing conditions in the league, which is still not a given. When it rains, women's *Bundesliga* pitches often resemble muddy fields and a large proportion of players still have day jobs alongside their football careers. Top clubs such as Wolfsburg have expanded their infrastructure for their women's team enormously in recent years, but even there they are still a long way from equal training conditions.

The problems in Germany may thus be different and possibly less severe than those in France or Spain, but their roots are the same. Federations need to move with the times and stop treating women footballers like second-class players. They may succeed in slowing the process of emancipation in women's football, but they won't be able to stop it.



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