

# Is gender a sustainability balance driver in football?

*Nicola Davola\**, *Rita Mura\*\**, *Francesca Vicentini\*\*\**

*Can soccer, as a globally shared cultural form, actually do good in the world?*  
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## Abstract

The paper focuses on the possibility that differences between men's and female's football (not only considering players' physical attributes and technical performances, economic aspects as ticketing, sponsorships, tv rights, merchandising, but also behavioral insights) could lead clubs to enrich their CSR goals. Literature underlines how women's football shows behavioral and psychological characteristics that make it unique and requires focus and tactics more tailored to the female interpretation of this sport. This could attract the segments of the market which care about cooperation, trust and inclusion without forgetting profitability: investing in females' soccer could constitute, therefore, a way for football clubs to signal how much they care about inclusion and to improve their overall image. Moreover, educating girls to cope with a traditional "old boy game" like football could train them to better face situations of real world unfair competition. Results from an "ad hoc" built questionnaire handled to a sample of nonprofessional (male and female) football players hopefully will contribute to build up a "new model" of CSR in football.

*Keywords:* Football, sustainability, corporate social responsibility.

\* Ph.D Student. University of Rome "Foro Italico". Department of Movement, Human and Health Sciences. [n.davola@studenti.uniroma4.it](mailto:n.davola@studenti.uniroma4.it)

\*\* Assistant professor. University of L'Aquila, Department of Industrial and Information Engineering & Economics. [rita.mura@univaq.it](mailto:rita.mura@univaq.it)

\*\*\* Associated professor. University of Rome "Foro Italico". Department of Movement, Human and Health Sciences. [francesca.vicentini@uniroma4.it](mailto:francesca.vicentini@uniroma4.it)

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## Sommario

L'articolo si concentra sulla possibilità che le differenze tra il calcio maschile e quello femminile (considerando non solo le caratteristiche fisiche e le prestazioni tecniche dei giocatori, gli aspetti economici come biglietteria, sponsorizzazioni, diritti televisivi, merchandising, ma anche approfondimenti comportamentali) possano portare i club ad arricchire i propri obiettivi di CSR. La letteratura sottolinea come il calcio femminile presenti caratteristiche comportamentali e psicologiche che lo rendono unico e richiede concentrazione e tattica più adatte all'interpretazione femminile di questo sport. Ciò potrebbe attrarre segmenti di mercato attenti alla cooperazione, alla fiducia e all'inclusione senza dimenticare la redditività: investire nel calcio femminile potrebbe costituire, quindi, un modo per le società calcistiche di segnalare quanto tengono all'inclusione e di migliorare la propria immagine complessiva. Inoltre, educare le ragazze ad affrontare un tradizionale "gioco da vecchi ragazzi" come il calcio potrebbe addestrarle ad affrontare meglio le situazioni di concorrenza sleale nel mondo reale. Si spera che i risultati di un questionario "ad hoc" somministrato ad un campione di calciatori non professionisti (maschi e femmine) contribuiscano a costruire un "nuovo modello" di CSR nel calcio.

*Parole chiave:* calcio, sostenibilità, responsabilità sociale di impresa.

## 1. Introduction

Women's football is nowadays very popular worldwide: around 40 million girls and women are playing football (Pappalardo *et al.*, 2021).

However, especially in Europe, it still suffers from a lack of attention from followers (Valenti, 2020) that generates less profits for clubs and reflects on lower wages, investments, and an unfair allocation of resources between females and males' teams that leaves female soccer lacking behind.

Investigating about the motivation of this lack of interest shown by followers and media (difference in physical performance, weaker competitive balance, social relevance) allows to understand how this gap could be overcome and if both society and clubs could take advantage from a new perspective of female football (Guest, 2021).

Broad consensus exists on the evidence that physiological performances of female and male players differ. For instance, Bradley *et al.* (2014) shows that, during a game, women cover more distance at a lower speed but men at higher speed levels have better performances; on the same vein Perroni *et al.* (2018) show that the speed of dribbling is higher in male players with

and without the ball. De Araujo (2020) reports that women have less sprint performance, jump height, intermittent endurance, sprint performance and lower blood lactate, maximal heart rate and distance covered during incremental endurance. Competitive balance is weaker in women's football (Groot, 2008; Kringstad, 2018, for Scandinavian football): lower uncertainty of outcomes, win dispersion, higher performance persistence and prize concentration could reduce interest (Kringstad *et al.*, 2007). Bias related to physical showing up, or spectacularism, and gender prejudices about capabilities (Plaza *et al.*, 2017) could also reduce followers' capability of enjoying from females' matches (Csizma *et al.*, 1988). Griffin *et al.* (2014) reviews the literature on the physical and physiological characteristics of female football players from 2010 to 2019 to reflect their recent changes in professionalism. Characteristics investigated include anthropometry, strength, speed, endurance, power, change of direction and repeated sprint ability. Moreover, they find that international players have significantly greater speed, repeated sprint ability, power and endurance characteristics. By identifying influential factors, coaches may be able to optimize female training and physical assessment practices, to better expose players to the required stimulus and develop the characteristics considered crucial to improved performance. However, female football presents also many individual and interpersonal characteristics that can be used to improve both stakeholders and governance aspects driving football to a more modern view to interpret CSR. This does not involve only social activities, but also the possibility that football has of influencing people' lives not only from an economic point of view but especially pursuing actions which are desirable as values in the society (i.e., respect, inclusiveness, resilience, and trust). Deloitte and Touche (2005) recommended that football clubs apply more broadly CSR approaches to ensure healthy relationships with their community and to implement moral integrity. Moreover, introducing CSR through female football has also youth appeal and an educational crucial role.

Female teams, and their matches, are in fact characterized by different characteristics in terms of teams' values, role of emotions and social norms. For instance, Van Lange *et al.* (2018), observing the behavior of 157 female and 207 male young Dutch footballers, reported that women are on average more willing to help during a match: they show a higher tendency to stop the game to permit a teammate, but also an opponent, care on the ground.

These differences in approaching the game are rooted in the past of females' football and show a deep contact with the dominant values of different societies: female football took origin at the beginning of last century

from the *Kerr Ladies* team in charity competitions, later it represented a source of entertainment in situations where, as in families' and schools' events, less aggressive social environments were appreciated. More recently, the attention of women on sports, especially on soccer, worldwide has grown thanks to gender equality issues and to the need of greater social inclusion.

Looking at gender differences in psychological traits, preferences and social norms, experimental literature shows different behavior under uncertainty (see Gneezy *et al.*, 2003, 2004; Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007, 2008), different levels of aspiration, competitiveness, and fairness. This reflects not only inherent gender traits, but also social learning (Casarico and Profeta, 2015).

If females' football could be considered a way to introduce in corporate activities a greater attention to heterogeneous characteristics and behaviors to sustain cooperation and trust in business (ESG), and to increase resilience, it will greatly contribute to the sustainability of football. Moreover, it could contribute also to reduce gender gaps in the society and not only in sports (Kerwin and Leberman, 2022).

Recently Piasenti *et al.* (2023) showed that man and woman differ in their persistence after experiencing failure in a competitive environment: both exhibit a significant decrease in subsequent tournament entry, however, when the prior tournament is unfair woman seem more discouraged than man. These results suggest that transparent and meritocratic criteria matter more for woman and impede participation. Since many labor markets and real world situations are characterized by unfair competition this could in turn explain the existing gender disparity. However, the authors found that the only case in which gender differences in the response to losing a competition do not exist, occur within athletes.

We interpret this evidence as a possibility that being trained in an old boy game like football become for girls an opportunity to sustain entry barriers and unfair competition that exist in many corporate activities and especially in board of directors. This could enforce the social positive effect of female football as a CSR practice.

Accordingly, to investigate if it exists a "woman way" to football that is more compatible with CSR policies, we build up an "ad hoc" questionnaire that has been distributed to a large population of nonprofessional football players (both males and females) playing in different teams in Italian football clubs. Aspects like involvement, respect of differences, inclusiveness, and behavioral traits have been analyzed to the aim described above.

Answers to the questionnaire will be analyzed to understand if we can indicate a new path to account for gender differences in order to show that

investing in females' football constitutes a profitable direction for all football clubs. To this aim we should in fact previously demonstrate that female football could generate a different appreciation in terms of CSR and that such consensus is a value added for clubs and society (Panton, 2012; Irwing, 2023).

The results of our preliminary survey show significative differences in terms of the relevance of the cohesion of the group, the attachment to the club, the respect for opponents and the attitude to sacrifice between females' and males' teams. This is related not only to individual characteristics and perceptions, but also to the motivations underlying the participation in a game, the involvement in group activities and the training relevance.

From the methodological point of view understanding how mentality, competitiveness, inclusion, and trust attitudes affect female football both in terms of performances and training, represents a way to endogenize CSR characteristics that is a new a strategy model to be tested in a further analysis.

## 2. The relevance of CSR in football

Nowadays, a greater social responsibility attitude is not only an imperative for companies, either for reasons of moral adhesion or due to pressure from stakeholders (Bradish and Cronin, 2009) but also an opportunity to increase revenues, improve the image of a brand, and facilitate fund raising (Katz-Benichou, 2004; Tribou *et al.*, 2006).

The different levels of responsibility consistent with the concept of CSR (Carroll, 1979, 2004; Carroll *et al.*, 2008) could be suitably applied to sports' business, such football, in which human capital constitutes the core (Rubio *et al.*, 2021) and the massive economic gains reflect both economic and sportive performances (Blumrodt *et al.*, 2013). It is also relevant to understand how followers, and potential investors, perceive the commitment of sports clubs to corporate social responsibility (Corporate Social Responsibility) (Bourg and Gouguet, 2007).

Football not only represents a relevant entertainment game but also could generate "leading by example" behaviors in the society. Recent events (such as Qatargate) have raised questions about the ethical aspect of a so popular game: the shadow of corruption (CSA, 2002, 2007), financial and doping scandals (Chantelat, 2001), illegal gaming by football players, affected negatively followers' loyalty (see Liu *et al.*, 2018, for Chinese football) and sponsors involvement (Chantelat, 2001). This reduces also the formative role of fair play (Fernandez-Villarino, 2021) to community stakeholders (Kulczycki and Koenigstorfer, 2016) and to young genera-

tions. A number of initiatives leading to a greater adherence to corporate social responsibility in football have been implemented (Walters and Tacon, 2011; Walters and Panton, 2017; Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 2013; Suokas, 2022; Blumrodt *et al.*, 2013) by the German Bundesliga with social initiatives through foundations and school projects (Reiche, 2014), by English football (Rosca, 2011; Hovemann *et al.*, 2011), and by US leagues, intended to “engender mass feeling..., invoking... family values, suburban comfort, national sentimentality, soft masculinity”, ...“reducing racial marginalization” (Benson, 2017).

The actual and perceived linkage between CSR and football industry has recently been evaluated on the light of sustainability and resilience (Irving, 2023; Fifka and Jager, 2020; Jaeger, 2023) also through several indicators: Birkbeck interviews (2012) show that most clubs see themselves as part of their local community, while Nexis online database (2011) found very little evidence of joint use of the two words in English press.

Therefore, gender differences can be utilized as a “nudge” (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) in football towards an increase of ethical and training involvement. This will dismantle and/or de-weight physiological and technical gender differences giving birth to a “new gender order” that includes and benefits from diversities. Focusing on the consideration of dual gender hypothesis in sports, this would render more valuable their expression and their characteristics (Cunningham, 2008). Females’ football will create at the same time positive externalities in males’ football, inducing a more cooperative environment, and will produce a females’ “approach to the game” (Pfister, 2010; Hawkins and Bishop, 2016).

### 3. The Hypotheses

Experimental literature shows relevant gender differences in trust, inclusiveness, equity concerns, respect, and reciprocity (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2004; Croson and Gneezy, 2009). Applying this evidence to football we assume that:

**Hypothesis 1.** *Female football players’ behavior is more related to CSR issues than males’ one.*

The greater presence and participation of females in football induces different developments of expertise and team building (Hawkins and Bishop, 2016) that are more in line with a new concept of CSR, where acceptance of heterogeneity and different behaviors eventually leads to fill

the gap between ethics and profitability and between voluntary contribution to its own group and individual spectacularism (Solow and Kirkwood, 2002; Andersen *et al.*, 2008) in this sport. We assume therefore that:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Female's football is more able to generate appreciation and approval stemming from CSR than the male's one.*

If females' way to play football increases the reputation and the market evaluation of a firm (and its financial appeal) then a virtuous circle of social engagement and profits will result (Manoli, 2015). This leads to the conclusion that:

**Hypothesis 3:** *Investing in female football teams could become a way for the more prestigious football clubs to increase their profitability thanks to the better reputation stemming from in the field CSR' behaviors.*

Supporters' fidelization through leading by example politically correct behaviors implemented in female football could improve the capability to financially support them (as example through crowdfunding) and to improve the club image for other investors in order to attract new investments.

## 4. Methodology

To check for the validity of such hypotheses we develop a purpose build questionnaire.

Participants anonymously face 26 questions presented in different scales: yes/no, multiple choices and like scale depending on the different subjects described in the Appendix. More specifically, we divided the questionnaire in two main section. In the first section, we collected demographic information of participants in terms of (gender, age, geographical origin, level of education. In the second part, we gathered data in terms of seven main items:

The first item involves the *Participant feelings football activities* (sport or work, effort and physical attitude effects on performance).

The second item consider *Perception of Gender differences in football* (physical and mental attitude, technical abilities, involvement capability and spectacularity, by media and followers.

The other items are predicted of *Trust attitudes*. *Cognitive capabilities* (Friederick test 2005) *Ambiguity aversion* (Ellsberg, 1961) *Personality traits* (Lewis Goldberg, 1993) and *Inclusiveness* (Gaechter *et al.*, 2015).

More in details the questionnaire compares *mental attitudes* and *game components* related to players' team feelings and individual characteristics by gender. In the first part of the questionnaire, subjects declare their *basic demographics* (sex, geographical origin, age, education, occupation), (Questions 1 to 4); in the second part, they answer questions related to their *activity as football players* (time devoted to the activity, effort, psychological relevance attributed to their tasks) and their *perceptions and opinions about the characteristics of physical and technical performance and spectacularism* of the two gender activities and about the social versus professional (actual and expected) role of football. (Questions 5 to 11). In the third part, participants answer to multiple questions and assess their own decisions in several games that allows to evaluate their trust and cooperation attitudes, their risk perception and cognitive abilities, their personality characteristics and feelings of inclusiveness (Questions 12 to 26).

In order to investigate if gender differences actually exist, we firstly divided data collected by gender and secondly we compared them through T-test statistics.

We collected data from two 11-a-side football teams of players aged between 18 and 22 with a similar balanced training (2 training sessions per week, plus match) in the same university championship, for males' players.

## 5. Results

The preliminary results of the survey show some evidences that confirms those of the literature on football by gender but others that are interestingly quite different. Specifically, results confirm that cooperation is an important component of the different approaches to football by gender. Data confirm that, women seem more willing to collaborate both in terms of mental attitude and in terms of the style of play than males. With regard to the *Risk attitudes and Trust*, we state there is no discrepancy in the two samples: this could be probably explained on the light of the similar age and the embeddedness in the team. Conversely, *Inclusiveness* is relevant for females while males seem do not care about this. Significant differences by gender arise in the evaluation of Spectacularism and capability of followers' Attraction: males believe that just male soccer is attractive, while females think that gender does not matter. More in details, answers to *Question 4* do not show a statistically significant difference (p-value = 0,723) in the evaluation of physical and mental attitudes between male and female soccer players. In *Question 5* there is a significant difference (p-value=0,001) in the evaluation of the relationship between gender of play-



ers and spectacularism. In *Question 7*: it exists a significant difference (p-value=0,003) in the interest devoted to male versus female football as spectator. *Question 8* did not report a significant difference (p-value=0,214) in the beliefs of the different capability to attract followers between male and female football.

In *Part 2, Question 10* shows a significant statistical difference (p-value=0,000) in the capability of football to be socially inclusive: females consider it highly inclusive while most of the males declare not to be able to evaluate this issue. In *Questions 13* and *18* there is not a statistical difference in trust versus teammates by gender (p-value = 0,525; p-value = 0,687, respectively). In *Part 3* answers to *Question 20* did not show any statistical difference in risk and ambiguity attitudes by gender (p-value = 0,429), while those to *Question 21* report a significant statistical difference between male and players in self evaluating as cooperative and capable to benefit from the support of their peers (p-value = 0,057).

## 6. Conclusions

The idea that soccer can be fashioned as “a social good” and the hope that the game will “prioritize people and places over profit and performance” is probably an “utopia”. However, the practice to connect soccer’s appeal to education, health and to address it to fight structural unfairness is a great possibility.

The evidence of the different diffusion in the world of female football could be considered an indirect proof of the social role need of the reference societies: female football is more widespread in the United States than Europe, and more popular in rich developed countries. Playing football among females in Iran, as an example, represents a way to defend women rights and escape segregation and unfair prejudices (Steel and Richer-Devroe, 2003). Lago *et al.* (2022) find that women’s teams do better when women are empowered in a country and where a women’s domestic league in the country exists.

The proposal to utilize genders’ differences to promote Corporate Social Responsibility in football could take advantage from the existing gender differences to approach the game to present a new CSR way for football (addressed to clubs and followers). The greater attention shown by female football to values as feeling of belongings, equality in opportunities, fair play and respect of differences and capability to include and training resilience could have a great impact on behaviors in societies where opportunism and inequality are dominant.

Addressing females' football towards socially sustainability issues could guarantee more successful outcomes both from an economic and ethical point of view. This will help also to build up a framework for female soccer able to compete in attention with the male one from a perspective that better respects own characteristics and relative strengths.

We investigate whether women perceive football more as a team sport (emphasizing cooperation and trust aspects) than a business (enhancing individual capabilities and personal gains). We found that women seem more willing to collaborate than men both in terms of mental attitude and in terms of the style of play and that recognize themselves better embedded in their group as teammates. No significant differences are found in terms of risk and trust attitudes between gender players. Moreover, while females find interesting and entertaining both female and male football, males' players seem to be interested just on their own play, showing some form of a "piori" concerns on the females' one.

However, the overall picture from the answers collected through the present survey and questionnaire offer an interesting approach to football in terms of gender. Our findings show that: females' players are more cooperative and more willing to contribute to the welfare of their group rather than to their personal affirmation than male players. they care more than males about the capability of football to be inclusive.

Being aware that gender physiological differences affect its performance and spectacularism, they strongly believe in their capability to entertain and attract followers, even if in a different way. So, our first and second hypotheses seem to be confirmed by the survey.

### *6.1. Limitations and future research stream*

We are aware that the numerosity of our sample is still preliminary to address to our research question, since our sample selection strongly affect reliability and validity of the analysis (sample bias). We are extending the sample to get a more powerful significance respect the pilot that we are presenting here and controlling for football characteristics respect other sports activities.

Moreover, to strengthen the validity of our methodology we are thinking to enriching it with complementary methods as interviews or focus group that will allow us to capture nuances that the questionnaire could not reveal. The use of different qualitative methods will enrich our analysis and complete it with a more integrated approach.

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