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Playing football in Cameroon as a girl: a match for equality

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ABSTRACT

Football, whether played competitively or as a leisure-time activity, is a veritable social institution in Africa, that commands a strong physical and symbolic presence. It gives shape to social bonds and occupies a special place in the public's imagination – globalized modernity, success – that is highly valued, in particular because of the great international careers of some African players. It thus creates opportunities for experiences that involve a political dimension: in the realm of football, social and cultural norms can be negotiated, and economic as well as cognitive resources circulate. Using ethnographic data gathered in the context of a study under way in Cameroon, we examine the ways in which girls gain access to the practice of football through a range of practices and strategies within a context characterized by multiple constraints.

Introduction

Football, ubiquitous in African public spaces, is a major component of the urban cultures of the continent.¹ Players, coaches, fans and officials have not ceased, since long before independence in many countries, to make this sport their own and to shape “African Soccerscapes”,² thus bearing witness to the interconnections, in the realm of football, of local and transnational relations as well as to their impact on social and cultural practices.³ High-level football games are followed by extremely high numbers of fans, in the stadiums as well as, these days, more and more frequently in the new “fandoms”, the bars, video-clubs and other spaces where the matches of prestigious clubs in the European leagues, in which African professionals play, are transmitted live.⁴

Leisure-time football is also a very common practice, in particular for youth from working-class backgrounds, in the context of clubs but also, more frequently, in ways that go far beyond the frameworks of federations and football stadiums. It is played from early childhood in a spontaneous manner, in the street and in other public spaces.⁵ Informal variants – free from any affiliation to national federations – are highly popular and exist in each country, such as “holiday championships” or “two-zero” football in Cameroon,⁶ or in neighbourhood clubs that compete in “navétanes”, tournaments that sparked the creation of an extensive youth association movement in Senegal.⁷

Football, played either competitively or for fun, is a veritable social institution in Africa, that commands a strong material as well as symbolic presence. The locations in which it takes place, be it stadiums, streets or urban vacant lots, are spaces where social connections are made and grow⁸; moreover, it carries a specific social image – globalized modernity, success – that is highly valued, in

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particular through the international careers of African players.⁹ It contributes, for those who play it as well as through the involvement of many actors in associations related to it, to an increased access to a wider world of networks and exchanges of knowledge.¹⁰

Girls and women, as players and as fans, are far from absent from the African world of football. However, this sport remains a masculine bastion, as discrimination against girls takes place in a plurality of ways. In the realm of institutions and of the media, the situation in Africa is not very different from what we can observe in Europe. International and regional authorities of the sport claim they have the political will to promote women's football; yet, in fact, the place women occupy in the decision-making circles of the sport as well as in its practice is still minimal.¹¹ From an early age, girls are kept out of spaces that are primarily occupied by boys; for competitive women's football, financial support is hard to come by, as male teams attract most of the sponsors.¹² Finally, even though the media coverage of African women's football has increased, it still receives much less attention than men's football, women's competitions being covered in a haphazard manner.¹³ As it symbolizes virility and power, football is viewed as male in essence, and women's football is assimilated to a form of deviance.¹⁴ As the sport of popular masses, played in the street and in public spaces where girls' bodies are freed from familial control, football does challenge gendered norms.¹⁵

Despite these obstacles, more and more girls get involved in football both as a sport and as an opportunity for experiences in the world of associations; the political will of some countries, such as Cameroon, for the development of elite female football, is now bearing some fruit. Women's teams participate in national and international competitions, inspiring true enthusiasm when they do well.¹⁶ International transfers of female players from Africa to Europe¹⁷ as well as regional transfers among African countries¹⁸ contribute to the heightened aspirations of young female players for social and economic mobility.

On the basis of ethnographical data gathered during an ongoing research project, we conduct an analysis of the ways in which girls, in Cameroon, gain access to the practice of football both in its sportive and its collective dimensions through a wide range of modes of involvement within a context characterized by high levels of constraints.

Our approach is founded upon the theoretical and conceptual orientations defined in the above-mentioned ongoing study that focuses on the participation of girls in football teams in Senegal and Cameroon.¹⁹ The primary hypothesis underpinning this project is that football, as an important social institution in Africa, is a gateway to experiences that have a political dimension: in the realm of football, social and cultural norms are negotiated and economic and knowledge-based resources circulate. When we study the participation of girls in football teams and their involvement in clubs, we get to question their access to resources and, more generally, their participation in the broader public and social sphere.²⁰

We view our research as following in the footsteps of Dorothy Smith,²¹ a sociologist who "gave herself the task of ethnographically studying the social world on the basis of the way in which individuals experience it" and for whom "the standpoint of women is the most significant focal point of ethnographic observation"²². In this perspective, Malatesta and Jaccoud write that:

[...] women being confronted with officialdom, constraints, assignments and injustices is not only a cause of sadness and renunciations, but actually constitutes a broader experience of the world, a *standpoint*, that makes it possible to start mapping social relationships. And, in this way, to gain access to a reflexive inscription in public life.²³

Thus, we think that the involvement of girls in football teams enables them to:

[...] fully take part in society, that is to be a part of and to have a place in society, while also developing a critical look at the world, its organisation, its power relations, and creating reflexive, and therefore affirmative, identities.²⁴

In this article, our specific focus is on the changes that the experiences of female players, in the context of the practice of football, bring about in the definitions of categories and

normative elements such as “girls”, “women” and “femininity”. We study the ways in which these categories are used, contested and performed, in this context, by the young women who play football, in relation to their families, coaching staff, official bodies of the sport and society in general. The way we approach the feminization of football is founded upon the view that participation in this sport activity is *won* by girls rather than granted to them by existing institutions, that working on categories of meaning is an important part of the process, and that it can be articulated with political experience.

We shall present our arguments in four successive steps. We will first examine a few historical, institutional and political aspects of football in Cameroon. This will help us to emphasize the discrepancy between a context officially favourable to the expansion of the practice of women’s football, and the very real adverse local realities. We will then focus on the current modalities of involvement of female players in a sport that remains characterized by male hegemony as well as steeped in heteronormativity. In order to do so, we examine three themes that emerge in a particularly salient manner from our field study. First of all, we shall see that gaining access to the practice of football entails negotiating playing time and legitimating one’s participation in a regular leisure activity outside the home. We will then look at the ways in which female players and training staff interpret and handle the lack of funds and the inequality of resource allocation to women’s versus men’s football. We shall subsequently explore the issues of “feminine masculinities” adopted by some women players, suspicions of homosexuality associated with their football practice, and their responses to these suspicions. In conclusion, we will return to the ways in which these involvements, and the standpoints elaborated about them, fully participate in the construction of football as a social and political space by the female actors concerned.

Materials and methods

Our analysis is founded upon a field study that we have been conducting from 2019 onwards in Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon. Due to the almost complete lack of published data on the topic of the practice of football by girls and women in Cameroon as well as on its organizations,²⁵ and in view of difficulties encountered in approaching formal instances such as the Football Federation of Cameroon (FECAFOOT) and gaining access to relevant documents, we opted from the start for a direct exploration of the playing fields and neighbourhoods, in order to identify the teams and the spaces in which female football was being practiced. Data collection was implemented along ethnographic lines. Integration into the field consisted of frequent visits to several female teams and their coaches during their training sessions and their matches, and involved establishing relationships with them, and sometimes with their families. Formal interviews as well as informal exchanges took place with first division female players, school team members, coaches, physical education teachers, previous members of the Cameroon women’s national team as well as with a previous club president who was one of the pioneers in the field of women’s football in Cameroon. Observations were also conducted during training periods and competitions at various levels: school competitions (FENASSCO), first division championship matches and international games. After the beginning of the first lockdown due to the coronavirus crisis in March 2020, digital ethnography enabled us to continue communicating and exchanging with our interlocutors in the field and to follow up through websites and dedicated Facebook accounts. Materials cited in this article are drawn from observations carried out in the context of this study and consigned in field notes, as well as from semi-directed interviews recorded and transcribed, conducted with eighteen female players currently active in a first division team, as well as two women players who previously played in the Cameroon championship as well as in the national football team.

Women and the practice of football in Cameroon: an ambivalent environment

The development of sports, especially for youth, is viewed as priority by the government of Cameroon and active life styles are considered a physical and moral imperative by the authorities.²⁶ Since the 1960s, central government has issued, via the Ministry of Youth and Sports (known since 2009 as the Ministry of Sports and Physical Education), official guidelines for sports policies and for the development of infrastructures for both elite and popular sports practice; the most popular sport at all levels is football.²⁷ Policies aimed at developing physical and sport education in schools and universities are implemented under the guidance of the National Federation of School Sports (FENASSCO) that organizes yearly competitions at the local, provincial and national levels.

However, an obvious and marked discrepancy exists between the political will expressed in the highest reaches of the State and its implementation in institutional and budgetary terms; in fact, infrastructures and sports installations are insufficient and largely inadequate, including for football.²⁸ For instance, in Yaoundé, outside of a few stadiums used for prestigious competitions such as the Amadou Ahidjo stadium and its annexes, the Presidential Guard stadium and the military stadium, no natural turf pitches exist; most players, including members of first division teams, practice on gravelly pitches devoid of changing rooms and of any facilities. On the one hand, the resources devoted to the sport are too limited to attain the avowed ambitions. On the other hand, sport in Cameroon is particularly associated with opportunities for corruption at all levels (State sports administration, FENASSCO, offers made to referees during competitions, etc.). A large part of the investments granted by the State and by football institutions thus never reach the field in local areas.²⁹

All sports, including football, are open to girls in Cameroon.³⁰ Historically, the role of schools was of greatest importance – as is still the case today – since they offered a protected environment enabling “to practice whilst partially sheltering from disapproving gazes”.³¹ Secondary school teams, in the context of FENASSCO competitions, thus represent “breeding grounds” for the recruitment of women players in first and second division teams.

The first “civil” (i.e. non-school based) women’s football team was created in Douala in 1968, as a section of a large men’s football club. Several other women’s sections are set up in the next two years in the same city, and then in the capital Yaoundé early in the 70s, “making it possible to organize the first large scale competition in 1974 in Douala”.³² A national body is created to organize these competitions, separate from FECAFOOT, that opposes any integration of women’s football. This lack of recognition and denial of financial support considerably slows the progress of the women’s game, as a national championship cannot be envisaged for lack of resources to cover the transportation and accommodation costs for teams from different regions.³³ Finally, in 1991, direct pressure from the International Football Association (FIFA) forces FECAFOOT to assemble a national team to participate in the first women’s World Cup taking place that year. After some initial difficulties, the national team – called the *Indomitable Lionesses* – is now ranked among the best in Africa: for the past three years, it has been ranked second behind Nigeria.³⁴ It was selected for the past two editions of the World Cup and reached the eighth finals. At the level of the continent, the African Cup of Nations in 2016 gave rise to an unprecedented level of popular enthusiasm for the team during the final between Nigeria and Cameroon that took place in Cameroon, thus opening the way for a truly public and national recognition of women football players’ skills. Simultaneously, the international football bodies – FIFA and the African Football Confederation (CAF) – are implementing an agenda for the promotion of women’s football that notably has led to the creation of a women’s league within FECAFOOT in 2019.

However, and in contrast to official announcements, the situation at the local level is far less bright and women’s clubs face many difficulties in terms of financial resources, game programming, championships and training. The first women’s football academy, the *Rail Football Academy*, only opened in January 2019 in Yaoundé, thanks to an initiative by the international star player Gaëlle

Enganamout; practice takes place on a stony pitch with no facilities, in the neighbourhood of the same name. Programming championships remains challenging and perpetually uncertain, and national women's and girl's teams (seniors, cadets and juniors) can only get together right before competitions, with schedules frequently interfering with the games of first or second divisions in which the team members play. Finally, the women's football clubs as well as the players themselves regularly have to fight FECAFOOT in order to receive the financial support to which they are entitled, particularly subsidies to cover the cost of transportation across the country for their teams, as well as match bonuses for players.³⁵

Negotiating for time to play: transgressing gender roles

The coach named Michael³⁶ gave me an appointment to accompany the girls' team from Nsam Efulan High School to a small tournament in an American school. After morning training for the first division team for which he is in charge of physical preparation, we leave for the Nsam roundabout, where he told the girls from the high school team to meet at 8 am. We get there around 9 am; a small group has gathered, including the team captain, a 17-year old in her senior year. They are waiting in the middle of traffic. We are missing four team members and cannot get going until the team is complete. Coach Michael is calling the missing players and encouraging them to join us. He negotiates with a grandmother, an aunt, an older sister, asking them to let the girls go and come to play. The girls gradually show up. At 10 o'clock we finally leave, very late for the tournament's schedule. (Excerpt from field notes, Saturday March 14, 2020)

This excerpt, while highlighting the difficulty of gathering the members of the team, suggests that delays at the meeting point were not primarily due to a lack of motivation on the part of the players; rather, it indicates that negotiating for time represents, for these school age female players, a major challenge to be able to get to the football field. The sexual division of labour means that African girls and women are assigned most of the reproductive tasks within the domestic realm, these chores being added to productive activities outside the home that also contribute to the economic viability of the household. This sizable workload generates an inequality between men and women in terms of time available for leisure-time activities, automatically causing a lesser investment in sports. A quantitative study of sport activities by socio-demographic categories, carried out in Yaoundé in 2006, shows that 82% of men state that they engage in some sport activity, versus 60% of women.³⁷

Cultural specificities of African societies are frequently used to explain the ways in which the development of sports practice by girls and women is hampered.³⁸ However, as Martha Saavedra points out, on the one hand these "cultural inhibitions may be just variants of the patriarchy and sexism that women face elsewhere", and on the other, it is likely that economic factors reinforce the reluctance to let girls have free time.³⁹ Girls who play football do come from working-class neighbourhoods and from communities in which their productive and reproductive activities are important for the economic stability of their families. A girl who is regularly absent from home because of leisure activities deprives her family from her work, as Nelly, an ex-international player who is now thirty, points out when talking about her own childhood and her initial steps into football: "When I would go out to play, I would come home and [my father] would slap me because I should have been out picking coffee. When you are not picking coffee, you know you will get whipped in the evening when you come home. But it does not stop you from going out to play".

Families with higher financial means can hire *petites bonnes* - little maids - to take over the work of daughters who are involved in sports and leisure activities, but families with more limited resources cannot afford it, thus making the experience of confrontation to gendered norms strongly related to social status.

Whatever the weight of economic, cultural or social factors, with which they have to cope, girls who are involved in football teams are challenging the gendered norms associated with use of time and freely chosen recreational activities. How do the girls themselves view the issue of the necessary reorganization of their time and activities in order to have access to the practice of a sport? The football players active in a club whom we interviewed expressed a broad range of views on the subject

of the gendered division of labour. The ways in which they reorganize their schedules and cope with daily social and familial obligations is just as varied. These players are part of a first division team, one of the best in Cameroon, and they do get some financial compensation per training session and per game. Although the amounts they receive are modest compared to the compensation male players at an equivalent level would be getting, this income does provide them with some degree of financial autonomy and increases their ability to be released from other obligations.

The stances we identified range from more to less assertive in terms of demands for change. Positions also vary depending on the context and on situational characteristics. Some players express an agreement with the existing gendered division of labour and state they never wished for a transformation of gendered roles:

When I played, it was only because I loved football. I didn't have any other goal. I just wanted to have time to play. So I would do my household chores, then I would go play football. I always liked to work, even when I was little. I was cooking when I was eight years old, and sweeping the floor of the house was one of my favourite activities (19-year old player)

Talking about her, this player's best friend adds that "she said that if we learned to be good cooks and how to wash clothes properly, we would get good husbands that would take good care of us".

In contrast, some players' discourse and actions express a frontal opposition to the notion of submission to their brothers or to a future husband:

I couldn't stand seeing all the injustice going on at home. My mother would take care of everything while my father would spend the day with his friends and only come back late at night [...]. That used to be hurtful to me. But later on I didn't even pity my mother any more (...). Why was she so submissive? In any case, me, I would refuse to work. My younger brother wanted to be like my father, which meant going out to play with his friends and let the women do the work. But I didn't accept it. So every day there was a fight at home. (20-year old player, 2019)

The work that my parents imposed on me, I always did badly. So everyday there was war at home. It was hard, but I couldn't let them win. So I continued to play. And the neighbours used to say that my parents failed to educate me properly. (19-year old player, 2019)

Beyond the issue of the time allotted to chores and to leisure, the good reputation of families is also at play when educating girls to carry out household duties.

Some players adopt conciliatory strategies while expressing the injustice they feel about the division of labour:

I would always do my chores before going to play and I would never complain. Yet my brothers did nothing. And since I was the only girl in the family, I always had a lot to do. Actually, I hated it. But I didn't say anything because I wanted to prove that I was a *worthy* girl, despite loving the ball game. I would do my best. All of this so that they would let me play. Otherwise, why would I have to be the only one to work? My brothers would do nothing, except for washing the floor. Am I not a human being like them? Really, I wanted to grow up and change all that. (23-year old player, 2019)

The use of the expression *une fille digne*, - a worthy girl - a term used in the community to designate those who conform to dominant gender norms, brings to light the narrow path that has to be walked by the players. In order to be viewed as "worthy", football players get organized and negotiate their schedule with their families; they may - or may not - be supported by family members - including male ones - to carry out their chores, or they may hire a younger girl to do their work for them once they start earning some money. Directly or indirectly, the position they adopt does contribute to shifts in the social acceptance of gendered roles.

Playing football 'just as a passion'

I have an appointment at the home of Victoire, who trains the goal keepers of a first division girls' team. Victoire also coaches a first division boys' team. She coaches the boys from noon to 2 pm, then goes on to coaching the girls on a different pitch from 3 pm to 5 pm. However, she points out that she is most motivated

by women's football, even though "it doesn't pay". In order to support her claim, she details the amounts girls receive, in comparison to boys, per practice session and per match. The figures she quotes show that the ratio is one to three, or even one to five, in favour of boys. For instance, the amount paid for a home game this year is FCFA 8.000 for girls, and FCFA 30.000 for boys.⁴⁰ The ratio for coaches is about the same. (Excerpt from field notes, March 10th 2020)

An expression we frequently heard from all our interviewees in the field summarizes their views about women's football: "it's just a passion". The register of *passion*, especially from the standpoint of team staff, refers to the notion that women's football is played for pleasure only, that no material advantages should be expected from it. The founder of a first division team and his wife, who both retired from sports about ten years ago, point out that "women's football, you get into it because of curiosity, you stay in it because of passion (. . .)". "We have given it a lot and we haven't gotten anything back" is a leitmotiv that came up repeatedly in our exchanges. This is also the register and the formula used by Adam, the coach of a first division women's team, to characterize the problems of women's football: "it's all about passion". This forty-year old man was initially the assistant coach of a men's team; when he was asked to take on a women's club, he hesitated because "there is less recognition, less resources, and no pay". It is a fact that the male teams get most of the funds available for organizing competitions, whether from private sponsors, from the State or from the official bodies of the football world. Training conditions are difficult and access to pitches – often of very poor quality – requires difficult negotiations with men's teams. As far as financial recognition is concerned, women players in the top league do not get a salary, and neither do their coaches; this is incomprehensible, in the coach's view, since players in first division teams should be able to make a living from their sport.

Women's football thus represents an investment with no returns; this is true for the club presidents who inject large amounts of money into their clubs, for training staff members and coaches who are underpaid, and for players who get much lower match bonuses than male players.

The discourse about "passion" can also be interpreted in a more literal fashion. Thus, it is their "love of the game" that is put forward by players, or ex-players, as the prime motivation for getting into football and remaining involved in the game long-term. Asked about what she likes about football, a 17-year old girl player from a high school team says "it's because it inspires me", and one other member of the same team adds "me, I'm in love with the ball". Nelly, the 30-year old woman who used to be an international team member, calls upon similar arguments when she describes how she had to battle her parents' will as a child:

I was 10. I used to walk along with the boys. All my friends were boys. So each time they went off to play I would go . . . I would get near them, right behind them, every day, every evening, every time they would get to go play I'd be hanging on to them. So you see, that enabled me to progress in football as I was going to school. Sometimes I was even hiding away from my parents. I know I'm going to go play, come home and I'll get slapped. But I put up with it because I love to play. I loved the ball.

Love is also what is brought up to justify the fact that women players continue to play once they retire from the national selection, in leisure-time football, for instance by becoming members of a "two-zero" team. Love of the game is reinforced by the feeling of belonging, associated with the team and its atmosphere, as Nicole, a 40-year old ex-international player, explains:

Yes, to start with, we loved what we did. Everybody wanted to be the best, as a team. So we always had to do better, to excel, that meant the atmosphere was great. Good atmosphere. No problems! In the C. especially, it was a very good team! [. . .] When we had to go our separate ways, sometimes, I didn't want to stay home, I just wanted to stay with my teammates. Chatting, having discussions, laughing. I was much happier with my teammates than at home.

Yet, as the training staff we interviewed did, these two ex-players also call upon the register of a "passion" for the game that does not require material and financial recognition to stay alive. When comparing the conditions under which they played with the current situation of women players, they highlight the disinterested dimension of their involvement and stress their role as pioneers who opened up the field for younger girl players:

We played because we loved it. Me, to this day, I love football. We didn't have any income, we did it for love. If it had been like it is today, I think we'd be richer. Because, with the qualities I had . . . (Nicole, 40 ans)

Well now today, it's the little girls, it's women like Enganamouit, like Cécile, that make a bit of money. For us, there wasn't any money. But we didn't mind! Us, we cleaned up the field and prepared it, as we say, so that these girls can bring in everything they know. (Nelly, 30)

The financial aspects of football are sensitive, lack transparency, and data is both difficult to obtain and fragmented; thus, it is difficult to grasp to what extent the economic and material conditions under which women's football operates have actually evolved in the recent past, as ex-players imply. Being called up for the national selection or joining a foreign club does, of course, provide financial opportunities for women players. Also, with the advent of a professional league and with a sponsor coming on board in 2020–2021, the situation may improve quickly for teams in the first and second divisions.⁴¹ However, the fact that women players periodically go on strike to obtain the bonuses due to them at championship level as well as for international matches should remind us that this progress is fragile.

The strong feelings expressed about the love of the game, and the pride of having played, or coached, “for nothing” reflects the ambivalent nature of the feminization of football that is under way. This discourse reveals, in counterpoint, the weakness of the institutional means dedicated to the recognition, the accessibility and the development of women's sports. It may also feed into the notion that football, once it is practiced by women, could lose its value and its high level of social recognition. However, the players and those that support them – training staff and other promoters of women's football – also do propose an alternative point of view on the sport when they hold this discourse – one that attributes an intrinsic value to the game itself.

'Girls mustn't forget themselves': facing gender panic

Looking for the training ground of the L.M. team, I am wandering around the Mvolye hill. I finally get to the grounds of the Catholic University Institute St Theresa of Yaoundé, where I have heard there is a sports field. It is actually only a vacant lot surrounded by trees. Four young men are playing with a ball and we start to talk. They are members of a football academy and play in 3rd division. One of them is telling me about his dreams, his hopes of becoming a big player. He asks me if I am a talent scout. I explain that I'm not, that I am a researcher, and that I am trying to understand what motivates girls to play football. He answers that yes, some girls also play on this field, and that he also wonders what motivates them. He doesn't understand. I ask him if girls play well and he says yes, some even play very well, miming a move. Then he adds “the problem is when girls forget themselves”. I ask him what he means and he explains, “when they are not thinking about starting a family and having kids. Me, I don't like that”. (Excerpt from field notes, January 25 2019)

We have shown that, in order to enter the practice of football, girls must be able to overcome strong constraints to obtain free time to get to play, and that while doing so, they destabilize gender norms associated with use of time and division of labour. Following on from this preoccupation, the fear that girls might “forget themselves”, heard on multiple occasions in the field, is associated with a preoccupation that is widely shared by the female players' entourage (families, training staff in clubs and schools, etc.) as well as by society at large. This worry, that refers to the charge of “virilisation” that high-level sports women and women who are active in a male-connoted sport do all face,⁴² is based upon the notion that the practice of football might damage the “femininity” and the reproductive capacities of girls,⁴³ and could lead to “sexually deviant practices”.⁴⁴

Re-feminising girl football players: the opinions of coaches

In their role as actors attempting to promote the practice of football by girls, it is important for coaches to demonstrate that one can be a football player and remain “feminine”, with reference to a very traditional and heteronormative view of “femininity”. At the same time, most of the coaches

we interviewed hold the presumed homosexual activities of some girl players for actual fact, and do not necessarily disapprove or express a moral stance on the subject.

Discussion with Adam, the head coach of a first division women's team. He spontaneously brings up the issue of homosexuality in teams, and immediately states that as far as he is concerned, girls can do what they want, he leaves them alone. In his view, he doesn't need to intervene, it's personal, as long as it does not affect the game. (Excerpt from field notes, February 5 2019)

Follow up on our tracking session of high school female teams. We are at the Lycée L. My colleague mentions the issue of homosexuality to the coach, who is the high school's Physical Education teacher. His response: "Ah yes, you could say it's just about official!". (Excerpt from field notes, February 6 2019)

The stance of coaches is based on a pragmatic approach, and takes into account a dual challenge associated with the social acceptability of women's football. On the one hand, and in a very similar way to what can be observed in other contexts such as France,⁴⁵ the goal is to convince parents to let their daughters play without fearing that they could be "perverted" by other players. This issue is taken seriously by the official bodies of the sport. For instance, the agenda of an August 2020 training session organized by FECAFOOT included an item entitled "Management of claims about issues of *mores* in women's teams", *mores* being used as a euphemism to refer to homosexuality.

Training staff and club officials are also tasked with ensuring that women players have a future once their sports career is over, an issue that represents a major preoccupation in the realm of football. Many "old stars" of football in Cameroon actually do find themselves today without stable employment or in very precarious financial situations. The idea that they might also lack the support of a husband represents a fear-inspiring thought. The issue of the integration of higher education, professional training and high-level sports careers has not, to our knowledge, been tackled yet by the official bodies of the sport. However, operations aimed at raising consciousness on the issue, such as educational talks, are regularly organized for girl players. The goal of these sessions is to make the young women more aware of the importance of thinking about their life beyond football, about their future – i.e. as coach Adam explains, "husband, children, job re-training". In a sociological context that places a high value on procreation and maternity,⁴⁶ the coach points to a specific gendered inequality in conducting high-level careers in sport:

Some women have babies while they are still playing. They stop for five months and then come back. That way, at least, when retire from playing, they have people to take care of. The problem is, at the age where men perform best in the sport, around thirty or thirty-five, women must leave to get married and have children. I actually advise them to do that. So they leave their team at the worst time for their career. Although there are exceptions, of course.

The measures taken by women's football governing bodies also involve, in a rather similar way to what can be observed in France for instance,⁴⁷ giving injunctions to players to conform to the local standards of femininity; this may include pressure to wear dresses, African cloth skirts and high heels in some public circumstances. This preoccupation is mirrored in the French Federation's policies for the promotion of women's football. Control over the feminine appearance of women players, their gender expression and their sexuality thus represents important elements of the environment of the sport.

Feminine masculinities . . .

In Cameroon, just as elsewhere in Africa, many women football players adopt and deliberately cultivate a type of "feminine masculinity" that is embodied in their fashion choices, their hair styles, their gait and their demeanour.⁴⁸ The adoption in the public arena of such a transgressive style that does not conform to local standards of femininity (the latter being defined in terms of making women as attractive as possible in men's eyes) is especially strongly criticized. In the South Africa context, Cassandra Ogunniyi has shown how public opinion can gradually slide from seeing women 'playing a "man's game", and looking like

a man, to having sexual relations like a man (with other women), thus linking their lack of feminine features with not being fully female and therefore positioning them as “mannish” both in sport and sexual choices’.⁴⁹ Stereotypes about the supposed lesbianism of women football players are of course not limited to African countries, but they have a particularly strong echo on this continent. A veritable moral panic has developed about homosexuality on the African continent over the past two decades. In Cameroon, this moral panic is manifested by very grave consequences, since having sexual relations with a person of the same sex is against the law, and can result in a prison sentence of 6 months to 5 years.⁵⁰ This risk is real, as persons suspected of homosexual practices are regularly arrested and charged. State homophobia is reinforced by popular homophobia – that also legitimizes it – and LGBT persons and militants are frequently assaulted and even murdered, while the perpetrators of these crimes remain unpunished.⁵¹

Whether they are practicing lesbians or not, and whether they adopt the codes of feminine masculinity or not, women players must deal with these suspicions and have to take a stand on the subject, since the stereotype of the “butch lesbian” is used as a marker of gender and sexual orientation: “Players, regardless of their own sexual identity, appear to understand sexuality as it relates to sport and masculinity. As a consequence of this, the figure of the butch player represents a site where anxieties surrounding women’s gender and sexuality rest”.⁵²

Ajara Nchout, who is an international player and member of the national selection in which she plays forward, is particularly well-known to the Cameroon fans since she scored two goals against New Zealand in the eighth final of the 2019 World Cup. In May 2020, she was answering questions from journalists from the information website called Forum Afrique Football Media.⁵³ During this interview, she was invited to respond to the following statement: “fingers are always pointed at women football players about homosexual practices”:

In the world of women’s football, people always think that players are tomboys. However, I’d like to remind you that some players just have more masculine morphology. People should stop thinking that women players are lesbian, because there are lesbians in all walks of life. There are homosexuals in all walks of life. Sometimes, you might see a person that is not even active in sports and if you are not told that the person is homosexual, you would never think it. But I think that people point to football players a lot more because women players are a bit tomboyish in terms of their morphology. So this is also what makes men more actively wonder. I would say people should stop thinking that, because you are playing football, you are a lesbian. It doesn’t necessarily follow. (Ajara Nchout)

Re-posted in January 2021 on the official Facebook account of support to the women’s national team, this quote generated 447 comments, though the usual number of comments posted on this account varies between five and twenty or so. A lively debate started in the discussion thread that we cannot summarize here; however, it bore witness to the fact that women players are required to take a stand and justify the options they take, regardless of their sexual orientation and of their personal style choices.

When remembering their initial involvement in football, two ex-international players state that they deliberately adopted a masculine persona:

At 14, when I started to play, I wanted to look like a boy. I liked it when I was called a girl-boy, since football is a boys’ sport. (Victoire, ex-international player, now a coach, 35-years old)

Already I was shaped like a boy, you see? So I got called a girl-boy anyway. And since I was good at playing with the little boys, they encouraged me!. (Nelly, ex-international player, 30-years old)

Many girls who play football take on the names of famous male players as nicknames.

Technical High School in Nkolbisson. Touring around looking for high school girls’ teams, no luck here: there is no female team. As we come out of the gymnasium, we run into a Physical Education and Sports teacher who is interested in the topic we are researching. He tells us there is a girl football player in one of his classes. He sends somebody to fetch her. She arrives and introduces herself. Her name is Owen, she is 17 and has been playing football for 4 years. (Excerpt from field notes - February 6, 2019)

After having met “Owen”,⁵⁴ we crossed paths with, or heard about, other female “Bebeto” and “Ronaldo” on the fields of Cameroon, leading us to think that girl football players do not, at least not yet, pick the names of famous women players as nicknames. What are they telling us when presenting themselves as avatars of international male football stars? Are they acting out of mere admiration for these players and their extraordinary skills? Or are they demonstrating aspirations towards masculinity because of the association of male gender with recognition and sports career advancement?

The “imitation” of men has the potential to de-essentialize [womanhood], revealing that they can be embodied from different positions and can thus take on new and unexpected meanings. [...] they turn an alleged male leisure activity that women should stay far from into a valid option for respectable womanhood.⁵⁵

Studies conducted by Beth Packer and Loes Oudenhuisen in Senegal and by Anima Adjepong in Ghana show that women football players, when they adopt some of the codes of masculinity, are not simply “acting like men”, but actually producing new and different ways of being a girl or a woman.⁵⁶

Conclusion

With the exception of a significant corpus of works concerning South Africa, studies focusing specifically on football as practiced by women and on gender in African sports remain rare. Our contribution, based on the case of Cameroon and articulating the practice of football by girls and women with participation in public and social space, has the goal of contributing to this emerging issue whilst approaching it from an original angle. We are actually asserting that, beyond the sport performance in itself, being involved in a football team as a female player has real significance in terms of cultural and public engagement. Obtaining a more equal appropriation of space by women’s football as an activity does, in fact, require transgressing different social and cultural norms, even if this takes place without overt protests or loudly expressed demands.

In Cameroon, girls want to play, and do play football as a collective experience that takes place in a context that can be seen as both unfavourable and favourable. Unfavourable because girls are denigrated as well as disadvantaged in material terms within the practice of football, but also favourable because women’s football is actually available as a sport, and because it takes place within a general context of policies aimed at promoting gender equality. In this article, we have shown how girl players take on board the issue of broader structural changes through a wide range of strategies of involvement that include confrontation, adaptation, circumvention and subversion. Individual aspirations, often present from childhood onwards, become aggregated into collective action; girls are able to satisfy their desire to play, and they can give shape to their dreams for a bright future in the landscape of globalized football. Thanks to their perseverance and their determination, the reactions of girl players to situations of assignation, of restrictions and of injustice constitute a unique experience and thus represent a “standpoint”, to use the analytical prism proposed by Dorothy Smith.⁵⁷ When they demand time to play and, as a corollary, request the redistribution of gendered duties and chores in the domestic realm, girl players bring the issue of access to free time and leisure activities to the forefront. When they proudly state that they play “out of passion for the game”, while they are aware that the social and political norms attribute a lesser value to the practice of football by women and grant it less recognition, female players actually propose a different way of seeing the game and of emphasizing its intrinsic value. When they adopt the codes of masculinity in the public sphere, they are making the boundaries of femininity shift as well as providing models of new ways to be a girl or a woman.

The present article thus shows that the contours and significance of the practice of women’s football in Cameroon should be seen as stemming more directly from the actions and stances of the players themselves, with the support of their coaches and – sometimes – of their families and friends, rather than from the public policies and institutions of the football world.

Notes

1. We wish to thank Elisabeth Hirsch Durrett and the Faculty of Social Work, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO) for the English translation of the text, the editors of this special issue and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.
2. Alegi, *African Soccerescapes*.
3. Pelak, “Local-global processes”; Baller et al., “La politique du football en Afrique”.
4. Akindes, “Football bars”.
5. Baller, “Transforming urban landscapes”; Vidacs, “Visions of a better world”; Packer, “Breaking the Rules”.
6. Manirakiza, “Football amateur au Cameroun”.
7. M’Baye, “Les navétanes au Sénégal ou le football parallèle”; Baller, “Urban football performances”.
8. Baller, “Transforming urban landscapes”.
9. Künzler, “Des événements du Cabinda à la star Drogba”.
10. Manirakiza, “Football amateur au Cameroun”.
11. Saavedra, “Football feminine”.
12. Daimon, “The most beautiful game or the most gender violent sport?”; *Ladies’s turn*.
13. Saavedra, “Football feminine”.
14. Ogunniyi, “Perceptions of the African Women’s Championships: female footballers as anomalies”.
15. Lachheb, “Devenir footballeuse en Tunisie”. Packer, “Breaking the Rules”.
16. Adjepong, ““Are you a footballer?””; Onwumechili, “Urbanization and Female Football in Nigeria”.
17. Agergaard and Botelho, “The way out?”.
18. Baller et al. “La politique du football en Afrique”.
19. *Kick it like a girl! Young women push themselves in the African public space*, funded by the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development
20. Malatesta and al. “Studying commitment from the perspective of collective action”.
21. Smith, “Sociology from Women’s Experience”.
22. Gonzalez and Malbois, “La critique saisie par les sociologies pragmatiques”; Smith, “Sociology from Women’s experience”.
23. Malatesta and Jaccoud, “Des filles dans les activités de loisir organisé”.
24. Zannin and al., “Associative commitment by social investment”, 28.
25. The country does not even have statistics concerning the number of female players, as Marie-Thérèse Abouna and Pascal Bourgeois state in “Mondialisation et féminisation du football”. The case of Cameroon is not an isolated one: Martha Saavedra pointed out in 2003 that women’s football was absent from social science writing about Africa. Saavedra, “Football feminine”. As Anima Adjepong states, beyond South and East Africa, the situation has not really progressed since then, in particular when compared to men’s football. (Adjepong, “Are you a footballer?”). In Cameroon, the study of football as practiced by women thus remains a blind spot for academic interest, with the exception of the following two book chapters: Manirakiza, “Femmes et sport au Cameroun”; Terret et al., “Les Lionnes indomptables”.
26. Clarke and Ojo, “Sport policy in Cameroon”; DeLancey, Mbuh and DeLancey, *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cameroon*.
27. Clarke and Ojo, “Sport policy in Cameroon”.
28. Clarke and Ojo, “Sport policy in Cameroon”; Pannenburg, “Big Men playing football”.
29. Clarke and Ojo, “Sport policy in Cameroon”; Pannenburg, “Big Men playing football”.
30. Manirakiza, “Femmes et sport au Cameroun”.
31. Terretand al., “Les Lionnes indomptables”, 267. Our translation.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. https://www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/women?dateId=ranking_20201218
35. See for instance the strikes conducted by clubs in December 2019 and then in June 2021, during the championship, to demand the payment of financing instalments due by FECAFOOT. <http://www.cameroon-info.net/article/cameroun-football-feminin-le-championnat-paralyse-par-une-greve-des-clubs-qui-revendiquent-une-400191.html>. (Accessed August 3, 2021).
36. The names of all persons interviewed and teams have been anonymized.
37. Vignal, Terret and Champely, “Les pratiques sportives au Cameroun”.
38. The socio-cultural representations of women’s bodies are often cited as a major obstacle. See for instance the analyses of Manirakiza and Lachheb.
39. Saavedra, “Football feminine”, 31–32.
40. 8.000 and 30.000 FCFA correspond to 12 and 46 euros. These figures should, however be viewed with some precautions since the level of bonuses as well as the regularity with which they are given varies widely between teams.

41. Women players in the first division did receive monthly bonuses in the context of the Guinness Super League in 2021, and these bonuses should be doubled for the next championship (WhatsApp exchange, August 2021, with coach Victoire).
42. Louveau, "Sexuation du travail sportif et construction sociale de la féminité", 178.
43. Manirakiza, "Femmes et sport au Cameroun".
44. Saavedra, "Football féminine"; Dankwa "The One Who First Says I Love You".
45. Martin "Développer le football, moralizer les joueuses".
46. Yana, "Statuts et rôles féminins au Cameroun".
47. See for instance the dress code policy of "dress suit", "la politique du tailleur" issued by the French Football Federation (FFF) in the noughties, that imposed wearing a dress suit to national team players during their journeys to away games, Mennesson, "Être une femme dans un sport masculin". For analyses of the policies of development of women's football within the FFF, see Martin "Développer le football, moralizer les joueuses".
48. Dankwa, "The One Who First Says I Love You"; Packer, "Breaking the rule"; Adjepong, "Are you a footballer?".
49. Ogunniyi, "Perceptions of the African Women's Championships: female footballers as anomalies".
50. Several recent academic works show that homophobia on the African continent is, for the most part, a recent political and social construction, with the authorities exploiting it for their own ends. In the case of Cameroon, see for instance Awondo, *Le sexe et ses doubles*.
51. Awondo, *Le sexe et ses doubles*.
52. Caudwell, "Women's football in the UK", 401.
53. <https://www.camerounsports.info/42075-nchout-ajara-les-gens-doivent-arreter-de-croire-que-les-footballeuses-sont-des-lesbiennes.html> (Accessed January 4, 2021).
54. Michael Owen is a Liverpool and England national team football legend.
55. Oudenhuijsen, "Can women's football be a game changer?".
56. Packer, "Breaking the rules"; Oudenhuijsen, "Can women's football be a game changer"; Adjepong, "Are you a footballer?".
57. Smith, "Sociology from Women's Experience".

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