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Economics

# **The development and commercialization of women's football**

International Business  
Bachelor's thesis

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This paper examines the commercialization of women's football, tracing its historical development, exploring value creation dynamics, and addressing key challenges. The historical development of women's football is highlighted in order to stress the difficult path the sport and the players have went through fighting societal norms.

The paper explores value creation within the women's football industry, emphasizing especially sponsorship marketing's role in revenue generation and visibility. Challenges, such as gender inequality and risks of commercialization, are discussed, with a focus on their implications. Solutions for sustainable commercialization are proposed, emphasizing the sport's unique traits and offering actionable suggestions. The positive traits linked to women's sport are being accentuated in order to give insightful thought about how the commercialization of women's football can be developed in the future.

**Key words:** sport commercialization, women's football, sport sponsorship, sport marketing, gender equality in sport, football commercialization, partnership, women athletes, sport inequality, commercialization of women's sport

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Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan naisten jalkapallon kaupallistumista, seuraten sen historiallista kehitystä, tutkien arvonluontidynamiikkaa sekä käsitellen keskeisiä haasteita. Naisten jalkapallon historiallista kehitystä korostetaan, jotta voidaan painottaa vaikeaa polkua, jonka laji ja pelaajat ovat kulkeneet taistellessaan yhteiskunnallisia normeja vastaan.

Tutkielma tutkii arvonluontia naisten jalkapallossa, korostaen etenkin sponsorointimarkkinoinnin roolia tulonhankinnassa ja näkyvyyden luomisessa. Haasteita, kuten sukupuolten välistä epätasa-arvoa ja kaupallistamisen haasteita käsitellään keskittyen niiden vaikutuksiin. Kestävälle kaupallistamiselle esitetään ratkaisuja painottaen lajille ainutlaatuisia ominaisuuksia ja niihin perustuvia ratkaisuja. Naisten urheiluun liitettäviä positiivisia ominaisuuksia nostetaan esiin, tarjotakseen oivaltavia ideoita siitä, miten naisten jalkapallon kaupallisuutta voidaan tulevaisuudessa kehittää.

**Avainsanat:** urheilun kaupallistaminen, naisten jalkapallo, urheilusponsorointi, urheilumarkkinointi, sukupuolten tasa-arvo urheilussa, jalkapallon kaupallistaminen, naisurheilijat, urheilun epätasa-arvo, naisten urheilun kaupallistaminen

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# 1 Introduction

This thesis concerns the development and commercialization of women's football. The economic viewpoint is one of the main interests of the study, but the history of the sport is also widely taken into consideration, since it has had a huge impact on why and how women's football has developed until today. The researcher sees the history as an important part in order to understand the situation women's football is in nowadays and this thesis approaches the topic in both global outlook and from the perspective of Finland. One key motivation for the research is the researcher's personal connection to the sport as a woman football player who has experienced some of the discussed phenomena personally. Since the researcher has grown up playing football in Finland, the viewpoint of Finland is largely an area of enthusiasm. This thesis faced some modifications in the theory parts and in the overall appearance of the work due to the limitedness of suitable, reliable and accessible scientific source material, especially in the Finnish context.

This research is crucial as women's football in Finland and globally faces considerable commercial challenges. According to the development manager of Finnish Football Association Heidi Pihlaja, there is only under 20 women in Finland, who make at least 12 550 € as a football player per year. As a comparison, in men's top division in Finland, the number covers almost all the players. (Murtomäki 2023.) Enhancing commercial aspects is seen as way to foster a professional environment, providing athletes the opportunity to focus solely on their sport. Increased commercialization benefits all stakeholders by promoting player and spectator well-being, contributing to people's identities, and creating entertainment value for audiences and business opportunities for companies.

To understand the situation of women's football and its commercialization today, it is important to understand the complex history the sport has been through. Women's football has faced many barriers and even complete bans by law over the years. The difficult and phase rich history of women's football should not be overlooked or belittled when looking at the sport today. The sport has developed a lot both athletically and economically, but there still needs to be a huge amount of work done to reach the full potential. Especially Finland, in a global context, lags a lot behind numerous other countries. For example, in 2017 there were around 30 000 registered women players in

Finland of all ages, while in Sweden there were almost 100 000 registered women players, over the age of 15 alone. This makes the overall difference even bigger. This data was based on both countries' football association's data. (Väisänen 2019, 4.) The percentage of girls who are registered in football clubs in Finland is lower than the percentage of boys and there has been trouble to get the percentage of girls in football to grow in order to also have more adult players in the future (Väisänen 2019, 15).

The inquiry to study women's football to broader issues within the commercialization of sports, addressing challenges and opportunities, particularly in the context of women's sports. This thesis approaches the topic from the perspective of football and sport overall simultaneously, looking into men's sport besides women in order to compare and see the overall market situation. Marketing perspectives play a significant role, and considering the global scale of commercialization adds an international dimension to the investigation. Furthermore, given the limited existing research on this topic in both Finland and globally, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights, bridging the gap in the literature. By catalysing positive change and growth within women's football, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing evolution of the sport and its place in the global sporting landscape. The enhanced commercialization of the sport will hopefully lead to many positive offsprings, such as improved player and spectator well-being, the development of a strong sports identity, and the creation of entertainment value for diverse audiences.

This research also wants to give potential answers and solutions to questions about how the gender equality gap in football and sports could be narrowed, especially in the viewpoint of enhanced commercialization of women's football. The beneficiaries of the study extend beyond the researcher to female football players, women athletes in general and businesses involved in sports sponsorships or other commercial ventures. Additionally, the findings of this study may provide insights applicable to footballers in general, transcending gender boundaries.



## 2 History and development of women's football

Originally football started to gain wide popularity in Europe amongst women in the 1910s and 1920s, specifically during and after the first world war. Naturally women taking over factories and other workplaces led to them to enjoy football while there were mostly men fighting in the war. (Oonk 2023.) However, there were already attempts before the world wars for women to play even official matches. In 1881 Helen Matthews organized two women's football matches in Edinburgh under English football association's laws. Unfortunately signs of the upcoming rough path women's football has had to pass through were already in the air back then, since the second match had to be discontinued after 55 minutes due to crowds of men invading the pitch. (Football Makes History Editorial 2021.)

After the second world war, football was banned for women in England and women were prohibited from using the fields at all, part of the reasoning behind this was because football was considered unsuitable for women. It was even said that "women were not built for such violent exercise". The ban was formed in 1922 (Wrack 2022) after a successful match in Goodison Park with 53 000 spectators in 1921 (George 2023). It is even stated that further 10 000 to 15 000 people had to be turned away from the stadium due to the limited capacity (Wrack 2022). This ban also reflected onto other countries and playing football was forbidden in many countries in Europe and all over the world for women. The new rising of football for women happened in 1950s and 1960s in many countries. (Vehviläinen & Itkonen 2009, according to Väisänen 2019, 1.) The ban of women's football reached further away from Europe, for instance in Brazil football for women was prohibited by law between 1941 and 1971 (Elsey & Nade 2019, 61; Oonk 2023). These broad bans had long lasting effects on women's football and can be held as one of the reasons why women's football is not as developed in both athletic, economic, and other viewpoints as it could be today.

Before banning women's football in England, there were already economically profitable women's matches. At first, the profits gained were used mostly towards war-related charity, such as funding those who were wounded. But as the interest towards women's football grew, the sums weren't used to solely this purpose anymore, which was not appreciated by many, and this has been speculated to be one of the actual reasons behind women's football's ban in England. For example, there are estimates

saying that the women's record match in Goodison Park raised would be equal to 140 000 pounds today. (Wrack 2022.)

A good case example about how women's football exploded after the bans were lifted is Mexico. The sport became popular in the country in the late 1960s, especially in Mexico City but also around the country. The boom was fed by a few supportive men who set the organizational pillars for the women's sport. Some saw it as a business opportunity, some as an opportunity to better Mexican women's physical education but there were also other motives to help this movement. Whatever the motives, the women eventually got media coverage that helped them fund their playing even further. However, some early signs of the upcoming collapse could be seen when some of the men supporting the growth of the sport still wanted the women to play for free while they claimed the financial benefits. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 192-193.)

League of 17 teams was established almost out of nowhere in 1969. The following year there were already several other leagues formed and the first league called Liga América already consisted of 28 teams and the sport started to spread nationwide in Mexico. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 203). Mexico held the second ever women's world cup in 1971, even though it was not known as the FIFA (the Federation Internationale de Football Association) World Cup yet, and it was a major event in the country and even got daily news coverage in the mainstream media. The women's world cup drew more spectators than men's professional matches in the country at that time, for example Mexico versus England was followed by 80 000 to 90 000 spectators, and Mexico versus Argentina got almost as many viewers. The final where Mexico played versus Denmark had approximately 110 000 to 112 500 viewers, which is way more than the capacity of the stadium, that was overbooked. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 233.) One interesting thing to note about the tournament is that rather than getting back to England as heroes, each of the English national team's players received a six-month ban from their national football federation after the tournament (Oonk 2023).

Mexico is an unfortunate example because of the way how the development the sport crashed, but a good example about how rapidly the sport was able to grow after the bans were lifted around the world and investments made. In 1972 the sport almost disappeared from the media, even after the popular world championship tournament the previous year inspired many girls and women to get in touch with football. The

Mexican football federation has been tied to this disappearance from the media. Mexican men's national team was not doing very well at the time, and the fact that women's football was so popular, was threatening the masculinity of the game. The federation did not give a lot of support to women after the tournament and even reduced the small amount they had given before. It was hard for women to find stadiums to play in and there were no official leagues. The next time women's football really arose in Mexico was in the 00s. (Elsley & Nade 2019, 239, 244.)

What had started in England ended up affecting women's football worldwide. The influence reached all the way to Oceania. In the 1920s football was banned from women in New Zealand, in this case the next recorded match wasn't played until 1960s, so the ban lasted over 40 years. One of the main lessons to learn from these worldwide bans is that "women and girls are still paying the price" for them. (George 2023.) Prejudice and stereotypes, amongst other challenges, still exist today (Oonk 2023).

Another example from another part of the world, in Saudi Arabia, it was not possible to officially licence female-only gyms until 2017, which made it very hard for women to access gyms. Saudi Arabia was also the last participating country to send female athletes to the summer Olympics with this happening in 2012 (Lysa 2018, 844). The conservativeness of the country has been one factor to create these difficulties over the years. First effort to create a nation-wide league was in 2008, with eight teams participating. The participating athletes had learned football by playing for fun while growing up and watching it on the television. Another problem they faced was that male coaches were not allowed to coach the female teams, but there were no qualified female coaches available in the country, so the players had to educate themselves in YouTube or in other ways. Another issue was that they found it difficult to attend the pitches, since almost nobody wanted to rent theirs to women. (Lysa 2018, 846-847.)

### **3 Value creation in football**

#### **3.1 Value creation in sport and football**

For the purpose of understanding commercialization and its development in women's football, comprehension on value creation in football and in sport overall is pivotal. Huge amounts of money circle around the football business worldwide. Besides FIFA World Cups and other international matches and tournaments, there are also series going on nationally and internationally. The worldwide revenues from ticketing, media and marketing of professional football events totalled at 28 billion US dollars in 2011 (Zygband, Collignon, Sultan, Santander, & Valensi 2011, according to Pitts & Zhang 2018, 7). Nearly 79% of this, which comes to a total of 22 billion US dollars, could be traced back to Europe back in 2011 (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 8). Sports marketing in general could be defined as "consist(ing) of all activities designed to meet the needs and wants of sport consumers through exchange processes" (Mullin, Hardy, Sutton 1993, according to Coleman et al. 2001, 196).

During the 2014 men's World Cup in Brazil, an estimated 3.2 billion people tuned in to watch the 64 matches that were played throughout the tournament, the final alone got one billion viewers worldwide. The FIFA world cup is only once every 4 years (both men's and women's) which makes the event more exclusive than if it was held yearly. Television networks engage in huge bidding wars to secure the rights for the games and many different advertisers and commercial sponsors pay large sums to get their name associated with the world cup. For the men's 2014 World Cup alone, commercial sponsors ended up paying FIFA over 1,6 billion US dollars in revenue, the broadcasting rights added 2,4 billion more to the sum. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 6.) In 2010, an average football fan in Germany spent around 387 euros on their passion, which totalled to 5,5 billion euros in Germany alone (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 70). This study was however done without specifying whether the fans followed men's or women's football and at what level.

Today, for a football club to be able to withstand the high levels of competition in the industry, there are many problems they face on the way. They must be able to promote the brand, innovate their products and services, meeting the needs of business partners and keeping a good public image in the world of constantly rising expectations.

(Chanavat et al. 2017, 9.) There is a lot of competition of potential partners and sponsors that could be very crucial for the club to achieve in order to survive economically (Dodds et al. 2017, 138).

Football has a long history even as a registered and officiated sport, for example in Great Britain, a national governing body for football was already established back in 1863 (Horne et al. 2012, 179). Some other sports over the world that attract big crowds, both television and live, include American football, baseball, ice hockey and basketball. These sports make millions of dollars of revenue in the USA alone, featuring famous leagues such as the MLB (Major League Baseball), NBA (National Basketball Association), NHL (National Hockey League) and NFL (US National Football League). (Slack 2003, 11.) One thing that sparks conversation in men's football especially is the fact that there is no salary cap. For instance, in North America the NFL and NHL both have salary caps. This makes the transfers of many millions of dollars or euros possible in the football world. It also makes athletic competing revolve more around money; you can say that for example in the English men's top league you can buy success. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 11.) There is even a term that has become known from this "success buying" by paying high transfer fees and high salaries for players: "financial doping" (Dodds et al. 2017, 139). Few of the most important things that top league football clubs spend money on are transfer fees and wages paid for the players in order to attract and retain good players in the squad, to obtain wins in the future (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 9). So far commercializing of sport has generally been revolving mostly around commercializing elite sport (Horne et al. 2012, 190) rather than focusing on amateur sport.

Sport in general can be associated with spare time, leisure, exercise and just regular people doing things for fun, but on the other hand it has grown to a multi-million-dollar industry (Horne et al. 2012, 177). Sport has reached the point where sporting goods are produced by large, mechanised factories and the phenomena grew at the same time as industrial revolution (Slack 2003, 29-30). The sales of sport goods exceeded the sales of 11 trillion US. Dollars already in the beginning of the 21st century (Slack 2003, 37). Instead of just famous sport clubs having their own merch, also tournaments or international competitions such as the Olympic Games have their own merch and spinoffs. These can consist for example of official Olympic beer, official Olympic

clothing and official Olympic toys. The Olympic Games have also licensed their symbols. (Slack 2003, 180.)

One way for a football club or a sports club in general to get funding would be to receive capital funding. These funds can be federal, state or local and might include some kinds of legislative frameworks or other requirements that need to be fulfilled in order not to lose the funding. This type of funding could for example include a short-term or long-term loans. (Hoye et al. 2018, 221.) There can also regularly be fundraising efforts seen by sports clubs or teams. This however creates a burden that might accumulate to some volunteers that are not paid in case the financial situation of the organizing party does not accommodate hiring paid staff. (Hoye et al. 2018, 222.)

When commercializing any type of sport, it is important to also see the opportunities besides just the game events, like in the example of the Olympic Games. Clubs and sponsors can invest in commercializing the whole event. For example, individual games can be labelled as “family games”, for instance, where during this specific game there is different activities offered for families to potentially better reach those who are not so interested in the football alone. Consumers nowadays are looking for rich experiences that have a lot to offer, and this could be one way to utilize this in the football world. (Hakala 2020, 68.) The industrial revolution has helped sport commercialize in a bigger scale, whereas the development of television, different media and the internet has also been a big help on the journey (Horne et al. 2012, 182-183).

Basic aspects of sports are interest, uncertainty and a passionate involvement. When a competition is always won by the same team, it reduces the interest of the fans, at least temporarily. This is one reason why when the economic capital of the competitors become greater, it usually helps everyone in the series in a long run. Even though you could compare bigger sports clubs to how medium or even big companies operate, the competition in sport is very different than the competition that companies face outside of sport, since the aim is not to eliminate the weaker rival. For example, a team that wins the Champion’s League (a European club competition) does not only get benefits for the club that won, but also for the whole country of the club. (Gómez et al. 2010, 7-9.) However, the bigger the size of the sport organization, the more professional the management also needs to be, which also increases the amount of administrative expenses, such as salaries (Gómez et al. 2010, 10).

Four dimensions can be defined to help increase the value of sport clubs. These dimensions are economic, sport, social and communication. For example, the sport dimension creates historic capital, which can be conquered by winning sport matches or hiring talented players. The economic dimension creates economic capital, social dimension social capital and communication media capital. Economic capital is interesting in the sense of commercialization, and ways to achieve it could be increasing the stadium capacity, which explains why for instance Real Madrid and FC Barcelona fought for the biggest stadium in men's football. Merchandizing and television and other media money is another way to increase the revenue of the club. (Gómez et al. 2010, 23.)

Sport consuming has changed its shape fairly rapidly over the past years. Consumers have an endless number of activities to choose from to decide how they are spending their free time. The number of spectators viewing the games live on site has decreased, and many have moved online or to watch the games from television. This can influence the ticket sales and can potentially be seen as a reduction in the revenues. (Hakala 2020, 72.) Football clubs in general are economically fairly fragile and changes in the number of viewers and fans they got can create drastic effects (Kennedy & Kennedy 2012, 337).

Deals with the equipment distributors can also be very valuable for football clubs, both for the biggest clubs in the world as well as for small clubs that might even only have junior teams. Some of the most valuable kit deals in the season 2015-2016 consisted of Manchester United and Adidas with a revenue of 117 million US dollars and Arsenal and Puma with 47 million US dollars. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 9.) One commonly known example of sponsorship could be considered EA Sports, the maker of the video game commonly known as FIFA, in cooperation with the football federation FIFA (Hoye et al. 2018, 70). A good example of a company that has managed to seamlessly combine sport and business is Nike. Nike has had a huge impact on popular culture and the sports world during the last decades. They have succeeded with creating a brand that can offer something both for the professional and those who have sports as hobby, as well as making some successful sponsorship and kit deals with big clubs. (Slack 2003, 5-6.)

National and international sports competitions bring opportunities for cities and countries besides the sport clubs. While doing cooperation between sports clubs and cities or countries, the usage of the sport facilities could also be maximized and

commercialized better. Major national and international competitions could have a significant impact on both regional and national GDP, which is a factor that should not be forgotten. Sports also create the feeling of community and belonging, which can help to reduce problems related to alienation for example. (Gómez et al. 2010, 12.) This is one reason why also cities could be considering sponsoring sports, for example some cities might own sport infrastructure such as fields, and the utilization of them in a more affective way could be one goal of the sponsorship. For example, In Finland, PK-35 Vantaa has had cooperation with the city of Vantaa where the city has financially supported both men's and women's teams of the club (Iltalehti 2008).

Sometimes the commercialization of sport has also faced critique. For example, the Greek National Olympic Committee (NOC) strongly objected a 3000 US. dollar payment for the "honour of carrying the Olympic flame". It was accused of being a tool for simply collecting money for athletic resources. (Slack 2003, 181.) The importance of politics should not be belittled when it comes to football and its commercialization. Israel is an example of a country where, especially during early years of football, the political ideologies of the founders of a club had a big impact on the functioning of the club. In Israel football became more commercialized in the 1950s and that is also when the importance of politics was at least publicly reduced. (Kennedy & Kennedy 2012, 335.) Also considering the possibility that a country, region or city can possibly sponsor sports in general or football, politics are somehow always related to these financial questions when decisions are done by the public sector.

FIFA is prohibiting political, religious or personal messages and slogan of any nature in any equipment worn in the official tournaments hosted by them. Commercial messages and slogans are also banned from official training sessions, press conferences and other events during official tournaments. (FIFA 2023a, 41.) Captain's armbands are also provided during the Olympic football tournament by FIFA (FIFA 2023a, 44) which obstruct captains from wearing messages on the armbands, such as a rainbow armband.

FIFA has created a Legacy Fund that provides the hosting association of men's World Cups with \$100 million to help cover developmental and infrastructural costs that last beyond the duration of the tournament (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 7). However, it is good to notice that FIFA faces criticism about the long-term negative effects these events have on their host countries. FIFA attempts to downplay these issues by highlighting the



Legacy Fund even though the money might not be able to compensate the negative effects, or they might not succeed with positioning the World Cup as a key factor for societal change. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 25.)

There are other stakeholders in both men's and women's football besides just the players, coaches and possible sponsors, like in sports in general. There can for example be agents, event managers or public relations consultants involved in the sport. In these cases, the income of the people is also based on how well the team, club or player can create revenue and value. On a simple level, these specifically mentioned stakeholders are selling their negotiation or other skills, which differs a lot from how the athletes themselves for example are able to create value. (Horne et al. 2012, 187-188.) Like in other aspects of the labour world, in sports world there are also higher and lower paying positions, and sometimes the effort or skills required does not meet with the designated salary offered. Workers in sport industry might face many problems such as poorly organized organizations which can have an effect on the efficiency of the organization. (Horne et al. 2012, 191.)

### **3.2 Overview of sponsorship marketing**

Sponsorships are one common way for a football players, clubs or teams to make earnings, benefiting both the sponsoring and the sponsored parties. This phenomenon can be recognised both in football and sport in general. (Smith & Stewart 2015, 200). Sponsorship marketing in sports have the strengths of offering possible spectator enthusiasm, high visibility and brand loyalty (Coleman et al. 2001, 197). In sponsorship marketing, both parties have resources that together create commercial value (Hakala 2020,13). One example of sponsorship is one-way personal sponsorship, which is done is by the sponsor providing the athlete equipment and clothing, that they are supposed to market by posting photos on social media with the gear in use (Hakala 2020, 51). It is good to notice, that in sponsorship marketing the sponsoring party does not necessarily have to be a company, it can also be an individual person (Smith & Stewart 2015, 200). Even though there are several definitions to the word, one common definition for sponsorship is that "it relates to the purchase of an association with a team, event, etc. in return for the exploitable commercial potential linked to that activity" (Thwaites 1995, 149, according to Hakala 2020, 11). Sponsorship has many similar traits to other forms of marketing and marketing tools (Hakala 2020, 11). It is good to notice that not only

sports-related companies sponsor or partner up with sports teams, clubs or athletes, but also non-sport-related companies have traditionally been doing this (Coleman et al. 2001, 202).

One of the key points for the sponsoring party is to reach as wide audience as possible (Hoye et al. 2018, 69). In practice, one example of sport sponsorship, applicable for both grassroots and pro-levels, is a company paying a sum of money in exchange of their logo in the players' playing kit. Many big enterprises have decided to make effort to better their sponsorship within women's football. For example, in the 2019 women's world cup Adidas gave the players that they sponsor in the winning team a bonus, that was the same amount for the men's competition, which influences the image they want to create about the company. (Väisänen 2019, 5.) Sponsorship can be used as a tool to reach variable goals the company might have, such as gaining public attention, improving brand image, forming valuable business networks and even as a method to better employer motivation (Hakala 2020, 18). An example of the employer motivation could be that sponsoring women's football could lead to especially women employees to better identify themselves with the company and its values (Hakala 2020, 74).

In order to take the most out of the commercialization process, it is crucial to understand how sponsorship works also from the sponsor's point of view. The sponsor needs to take many factors into account when making decisions about sponsorship, such as how does sponsorship differ from other marketing methods and how can they concretely benefit from the sponsorship relationship. Sponsorship deals usually tend to gain more dimensions than just the sponsor paying the money for a logo in a shirt, but they might try to form a deeper connection with the other party by for example potentially producing social media material together and holding events or campaigns together. (Hakala 2020, 30.) This also leads to the growing importance of "authentic engagement" and genuine interest from both parties for the partnership to succeed (Cornwell 2020, 278).

The targets of sponsorship relationships need to be in line with the other communication strategies of the company, for example the values of the company. In sponsorship marketing the sponsor has weaker control over the sponsored party than if they were to produce the marketing inside the company. Therefore, it is crucial to select a trustworthy marketing partner that will not create reputational damage for the company.

It is also important to try to find a great fitting sport for sponsoring for also financial reasons and to be able to reach a desired audience through the sponsorship easier. (Hakala 2020, 15-16.) The values of both partners can be critical when considering whether a sponsorship would benefit both or not (Hakala 2020, 48). Whereas sponsorship marketing can bring positive outcomes, the risk of negative ones should not be belittled (Cornwell 2020, 279). This risk goes both ways, since the reputation of the sponsoring party getting flawed might affect the sponsored party harmfully and can lead to for example losing fans (Hakala 2020, 20). Negative publicity could be, for instance, caused by scandals, such as the Salt Lake City Olympic corruption scandal. In this case the scandal may have affected the whole revenue of the 2000 Sydney Olympics. (Coleman et al. 2001, 198-199.) In the case of a potential scandal or crisis, the reaction of the organization and the actions have a strong impact on future effects (Schafraad & Verhoeven 2018, 547). There is usually some type of contract made between the parties in a sponsorship relationship, which is juridically binding, and the goal is to prevent unwanted behaviour from both parties. One example of what the contract could include could be that an individual athlete sponsored by company "X" is not permitted to wear athletic wear by brand "Y" in any official sports events. (Smith & Stewart 2015, 230.)

One thing that could offer both pros and cons for a company is sponsoring smaller clubs or teams, since with less investment you can possibly get more personal cooperation. The price tags in men's sponsorship deals are usually significantly more expensive in comparison to women's equivalents. The fact that there are fewer spectators and therefore fewer benefits also influences this viewpoint. (Hakala 2020, 54.) One potential con of sponsorship marketing might be the difficulty to measure the success of the cooperation (Chanavat et al. 2017, 2). One of the most common tools that are used to try to measure the successful of sponsorship relationships is media exposure monitoring. This can be done by for example observing how many times can the brand logo be recognized from print media. Larger corporations might have their own programs to collect and analyse this type of data. (Smith & Stewart 2015, 217.)

The concept of *goodwill* is widely used in sponsorship literature. This means that sometimes the sponsor's commercial objectives are not fulfilled, but the sponsorship relationship is still extremely important especially for the sponsored part. (Hakala 2020, 17.) Goodwill in sponsorship can even be seen as a form of corporate social responsibility (Smith & Stewart 2015, 202). According to the development manager of

Finnish Football association Heidi Pihlaja (Murtomäki 2023), about half of women in football in Finland made less than 2000 euros per year in 2017, which comes to a total of less than 200 euros per month. Sponsorship funds can often be the economic lifeblood of a club (Hakala 2020, 18). It is still good to note that sponsorship can be a real business opportunity generating value for both partners (Hakala 2020, 30) even though the concept of goodwill is widely seen in the literature covering the area.

## 4 Challenges in women's football

### 4.1 Gender inequality

In the case example of Mexico's women's football boom, one factor to explain the challenges women faced, argued by Hidri Neys and Juskowiak, was the fact that historically sports have been more masculine (2024, 5). For example, in Sweden in 1920s articles about women's football were published in the country's biggest sport magazine, *Idrottsbladet*, and they were made with a respectful tone. However, the shift of stances about women's football after the second world war in England and other countries also effected Sweden. Suddenly *Idrottsbladet* changed their viewpoint – football was not a women's game. They argued for example that the fragile body of a woman could not handle such a sport and women should focus more on sports like swimming and gymnastics. During this era, the power of media had a huge impact on how the people saw the topic, and the affects could be seen for many years after this. Women's football was forgotten about for decades in Sweden. (Väisänen 2019, 17.) Even though there were other factors impacting this, it is good to notice that around that time, there were less media outlets than today. So, the impact a single media outlet could have could also have been more significant than today.

Another explanation why women have not been as noticeable in football could be gender roles and different social norms (Hidri Neys & Juskowiak 2024, 5). Traditional gender roles such as women having to keep up with the housework while men work has had a huge impact on this viewpoint. Historically women have worked more at home and men more outside of home, so it was only natural that men had more opportunities to obtain sports outside of home. One example of this is how the sexual division of labour means that Cameroonian girls and women inherit most of the tasks in the domestic sphere, these chores being added to the productive activities outside the home that also contribute to the economic viability of the household. The time taken by these women to play football almost always appears to be time wasted on more serious things or household chores. So, the problem is both in simply time distribution for Cameroonian girls besides the issues with attitudes towards women playing football. (Hidri Neys & Juskowiak 2024, 9.) Also, as an example, in Iran the inequality overall in society between men and women makes accessing football as a hobby very hard for women. (Hidri Neys & Juskowiak, 2024, 10.) In Saudi Arabia women were not allowed

to play in stadiums until 2018 and there the legislation still affects women playing football today (Lysa 2018, 842, 853). These are just couple case examples of how the beliefs and mindsets of people today still very effectively affect the way women are able to access football as a competitive sport or even a hobby. Historically football has even been seen as a potential risk for women's fertility (George 2023).

A case study was done between two FIFA tournaments. FIFA U-20 World Cup is hosted every two years, and it is one of the most significant competitions FIFA hosts. This is a men's tournament, even though it is not specified in the name of the competition. In FIFA U-20 World Cup in Canada 2007, a total of 1 195 239 spectators viewed the games live on the spot. A cumulated television audience worldwide reached 469,5 million. The FIFA women's World Cup is held every four years. In 2015 it was also hosted in Canada. Part of responsibilities with hosting the FIFA women's World Cup is also to host the women's U20 World Cup in the previous year. The FIFA women's World Cup 2015 had 1 353 506 cumulative spectators, with a total of 45 million television viewers. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 242-244.)

There were some clear differences found about marketing between these two competitions in these case studies. For the FIFA U-20 World Cup, clear national branding was done whereas in the women's tournament there was no obvious discussion of the potential impact of national branding for the event. You could see this as a sign that the tournament was not seen as a clear way to market Canada to the rest of the world. There were differences between the target markets of the tournaments also: the FIFA U-20 World Cup was marketed more for football enthusiasts, while the women's World Cup can be understood to have been marketed more for women, girls and (upper-income) families. The FIFA U-20 World Cup was able to secure higher-paying and more sponsorship deals than the FIFA women's World Cup. For the women's World Cup some sponsors were also criticized about not engaging with the tournament as much as hoped, but the organizers also faced the same critic for not offering the sponsors enough opportunities to engage with fans etc. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 246.) This case study offers some interesting insights about how the whole commercial potential of women's international competitions might not be utilized if the marketing perspective is not carefully analysed and taken into consideration.

When it comes to big scale international competitions, one competition differs remarkably between men and women because of the regulations. The Olympic football tournament has different eligibility for players between the male and the female tournament. For the male tournament, players must be under the age of 23 years, and three over-age players are allowed. For the female tournament, there is no age limit. (FIFA 2023, 35.) In the sense of this, you could see the men's tournament as a youth tournament (comparable to the FIFA U-20 World Cup for example), whereas the women's tournament could be compared to the FIFA women's World Cup when you just consider the players eligibility for playing.

Gender inequality is still a relevant issue in women's football today, for example the members of the United States women's national football team filed a discrimination complaint against the United States Football Federation on the unequal pay for equal work (Tulshyan 2019). The complaint focused, besides other things, on the fewer number of performance-related bonuses. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 27.) In Finland, the distribution of bonuses for both men's and women's national team is equally distributed proportionally to the amount (Koskinen 2022). The sponsorship deal with the national gambling company Veikkaus has entered into an agreement in 2022 about equal contracts for the Finnish men's and women's national teams (Veikkaus 2022b).

The same difficulties women football players face also apply to women football fans, whether they support men's or women's football. In countries where gender inequality is higher, such as Zimbabwe and Iran, women fans also face more issues related to being a football fan. According to a case study by Radmann and Hedenborg, the low gender equality index can correlate with the number of troubles the female football fan community faces. (Radmann & Hedenborg 2022, 242-243.) This phenomenon can be also detected within different stakeholders than just players and fans. In high-level football, it is very usual to terminate a contract of a coach in case the results and performance of the team are bad. It is more likely for a female coach in women's football to get fired for this reason than for a male coach. One example of a male coach that was, you could say, corruptibly the head coach of a national team was Leonard Cuellar. He coached Mexico's women's national team for almost 20 years and did a lot of good for the sport during that time also, but there were many incidents that you could argue would have led to him getting fired if it was the men's team. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 253-254.) This

could be seen as one more example to highlight the masculinity and gender inequality of the sport.

A gender gap can also be seen in how the scientific research on women's football lags a lot behind men's football. For example, in the *Soccer & Society* journal, between years 2000 and 2020 there was 93 articles published about women's football, while the number for men was 1057 (Hidri Neys & Juskowiak, 2024, 4). The media coverage of women's football is much less developed than that for men's football (Hidri Neys & Juskowiak, 2024, 5). Overall in sports, male athletes have historically covered a bulk of media (Coleman et al. 2001, 200). And when women's football has gotten media coverage, it has not always been in a very pleasant way. At around the beginning of 1970s, a Mexican news outlet *El Heraldo de México* reported the news of a Swedish footballer, Yvonne Stelvert, getting a professional contract offered from Torino in Italy. The article was titled "She's going to be a mother ... and they want to sign her in football!". In the end, the news outlet did not get the shock reaction they wanted but maybe made the sport look even more appealing to the public. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 207.) In the case of Brazil's women's football ban, when male footballers performed badly on the field they were referred to as "feminine" which made the images of women in the sport even worse (Elsy & Nade 2019, 110). Sometimes when women do get coverage in sports media, the focus is something completely different than the sports. For example, in Argentina in 2015 when a local team did not make it to reach the national cup semifinals, it was not notified in any sports media. Instead, there was an article ranking "hottest wives and girlfriends" of the club's male players. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 249.) The way media writes, or does not write, about women's football can even be seen as an obstacle for the development of the sport. The objectification of women is something that needs to change in sport journalism. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 265.)

In 1920s there was entertainment matches held in Sweden where women's teams played against men's teams. This led to women not being seen as worthy and respected players and simultaneously highlighted the masculinity of the sport. These were mostly held because of the money they brought to the organizers. This led to unflattering coverage on media for women in the sport also. (Andersson 2002, according to Väisänen 2019, 17.) Women in sport media face harassment both privately and publicly. Women's football has also been tied to homophobia besides sexism and misogyny. For example, since the 1980s until the early 00s, women players in Mexico and Brazil recall they



were periodically told that women's football is a "breeding ground for lesbianism" and they were also being called insulting nicknames. In this conversation it is good to notice that misogyny and homophobia are also alive and well in men's football, where the image of a masculine man is something that is tried to be protected. (Else & Nade 2019, 248.) Historically, it has been seen that taking part into male-dominated contact sport can provoke visions of masculinity, and as a continuation to this, even homosexuality (UCFB 2020).

Hosting the FIFA women's World Cup or other international tournaments can be a beneficial way for the hosting country and its economy to gain profits if effort is put into the arrangements. FIFA has criteria that guides the bidding process that defines who right to organize the tournament in question is given to. According to a study by Beissel et al. (2023) the bidding process for the 2023 FIFA women's World Cup however did not live up to the criteria set by FIFA. According to the study, even though criteria was defined before the bidding process, they were modified during the process towards results that pleased FIFA. It is proposed that the process is designed to favour western countries and economies. (Beissel et al. 2023, 19-21.)

One topic that seems to be relevant currently is the prize money and bonuses for international games and international tournaments. These are rewarded by either the countries' football associations or umbrella organizations such as FIFA or UEFA. There is a lot of debate whether women should be paid the same bonuses and if not, what should the amounts be. These can also vary a lot depending on the countries' organizations and how they want to divide the money. According to the chairman of Finnish Football Association Ari Lahti in the last women's European Championship, advancing to the group stage secured prize money of 100 000 € per team. The winner of the whole tournament got 660 000 €. In comparison, for the men's tournament these amounts were 9,25 million euros and 10 million euros. (Murtomäki, 2023.) For instance, the winning team of women's 2015 World Cup, the United States, took home a prize money of 2 million US dollars, while the 16 men's teams eliminated in the group stage of the 2014 World Cup were awarded 8 million US dollars each (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 27).

Some barriers women's football face might be systemic and industrial, which makes them even harder to break (Tulshyan 2019). The institutional delay in recognizing

women's football and organizing it in a more professional way, lack of consideration for girls and women by the national federations, issues with payments of transportation and accommodation costs or simply not paying those or bonuses promised for instance, problems with accessing football fields or scheduling are all factors that illustrate the male domination of the sport. (Hidri Neys & Juskowiak, 2024, 9.) The first women's Ballon d'Or, a reward given to the world's best footballer of the year, was rewarded to Norwegian Ada Hegerberg in 2018 and there were still some countries resisting this, including Iran and Sudan. As a comparison, the first one for men was already distributed in 1956. (Hidri Neys & Juskowiak, 2024, 1.) Also, the top scorer at FIFA World Cups for men and women combined, Marta Vieira da Silva, a Brazilian player (Hidri Neys & Juskowiak, 2024, 1) usually tends to go unnoticed in the media. For example, if you google "world cup top scorer", high in the result comes an article by FIFA, in the official FIFA website. In this article, there are no women (or Marta) mentioned at all, or even the fact that the list solely consists of male players. The article is even stating "Miroslav Klose tops the overall World Cup scoring chart" which does not even use the official men's tournament's name. (FIFA 2023b.)

In the introduction the difference between amounts of registered women players in Sweden and Finland was discussed. Women's football, organized like we know today, began in Finland in the 1970's, and in Sweden around the same time (Vehviläinen & Itkonen, according to Väisänen 2019, 1). Both women's and men's football were unprofessional and unprofessionally organized in Finland in 1970s. The shift towards more professional football happened in 1980s, when the operations also became more organized and hiring more staff made the division of labour became more efficient. (Väisänen 2019, 9.) Because of the close history, Sweden is an often-used control country for Finland when trying to find reasoning for not being within the top-countries in Europe. Finland and Sweden can also be seen as good examples of early gender equality in many things outside of the football field also, for example the vote to right was given to women early in both countries. They both also started organizing football for women fairly early after the ban was lifted in Europe, so these factors do not explain why football in Finland has been lagging behind so much for so many years. (Väisänen 2019, 4.) Reasoning can for example tried to be found in how in 1910s the Finnish Football Association was in a money shortage all the time and it was said to be because football was not an interesting enough sport in Finland (Väisänen 2019, 10). In Finland

playing on sand has been very common though out the history of football, mostly because of the costs of upkeeping grass fields and climate. The first football field where the base was grass was constructed in 1909 in Helsinki (Väisänen 2019, 14). In Sweden, the resources for exercising and sport used to be the best in all the Nordics in 2004, while in Finland they were the worst. Also, the sponsorship market was already a lot bigger in Sweden than in Finland back then. (Lämsä 2004, 1.)

Some national football associations only put the minimum amount of money into women's football, and this amount comes earmarked from FIFA. The federations usually have the option to fund women's football more, but they choose not to. The smaller amounts in funding have a direct impact on the conditions and other factors related to how well women are able to perform in the sport. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 249.) Another factor that has had influence on women's football is how in some countries, historically girls' physical education has been neglected compared to men. As an example, in Argentina and Chile the physical education was not funded a lot besides other issues, and today these two countries have the greatest disparity between men's and women's national football teams in the world. In December 2016, Argentinean men's football team ranked the 1<sup>st</sup> in the world while Chile the 4<sup>th</sup>. The women's teams of these countries did not even have rankings at the time, because they were considered inactive. Over 18 months since the last competitive game had passed for both teams. And Chile and Argentina were not even the only inactive national women's football teams in South America at the time. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 246.) At a federal level, the directors of the associations are mostly men, in some associations almost fully men. For example, in CONMEBOL (The South American Football Confederation) only 2 % of personnel in executive committees were women. If this is the case, there is a higher risk that women's football gets ignored even at the federal level. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 264.) These issues are also relevant for example in the Middle East. In Saudi Arabia women's opportunities to participate in organized sport have been very limited. Some schools have historically had no physical education for girls at all. (Lysa 2018, 844.)

## **4.2 Risks and challenges of commercialization of women's football**

When it comes to challenges of sport commercialization, it always includes risks. Risks tied especially to sponsorships are for example related to the fact that you cannot be sure about how well the team or athlete is going to perform during the upcoming

season(s) or how well the deal will be perceived by the potential customers. (Hakala 2010, 19.) The performance of the team or club in upcoming games can have a significant impact on how well the sponsorship marketing works, good result implementing more positive outcomes. However, potential negative results are more insignificant in case the team and brand are already well-known and recognised. (Yuan & Gao 2022, 780.) Especially those consumers with less capability to identify teams are less likely to contribute to sales from weakly performing teams (Ngan et al. 2011, 563). From the viewpoint of the sponsoring party, not achieving the desired increase in sales is an unwanted result from the sponsorship relationship (Smith & Stewart 2015, 200). A risk from the viewpoint of the sponsored party is also getting dependent on the sponsor income, which might grow to be a significant issue in case the cooperation someday ends (Hoye et al. 2018, 222).

Risks tied especially to women's football come from many different viewpoints. Inequality creates problems for both the athletes themselves, but also the potential business partners. If women's football is not seen as valuable as men's, it might be a sign for a potential sponsor that it might not be the best investment. A factor that can be associated to this is the accessibility of the games: women's games are more often broadcasted through webpages than television channels. (Hakala 2020, 62.) This can also be seen as a problem since in today's sport world, (television) broadcasting rights can be a crucial way of funding for sports clubs or teams (Hoye et al. 2018, 69). When it comes to any kind of sport sponsorship it is important to take into account potential cultural differences that might affect the way the sponsorship or marketing done during the cooperation made. For example, in the US women's football is more popular than men's, whereas in some countries women's participation in the game is still restricted. (Hakala 2020, 64.)

A potential risk seen when sponsoring women's football is the lower exposure of the game. For example, in England, the WSL (women's top league) attracted only about 5 percent of the spectators that men's Premier league did in mid 2010s. (Hellier et al. 2019.) Simultaneously, these sponsorship deals are usually cheaper to the sponsoring party (Hakala 2020, 55). It might be a hard job for a women's team, especially with no hired marketing personnel, to find suitable potential sponsors. Women's football teams usually find it easier to approach local companies when searching for financial support in comparison to big, even multinational, companies. In the case of multinational

companies, the sponsorship deals can potentially even be behind of long-lasting international negotiations. (Hakala 2020, 61.) Although in women's football from the perspective of the sponsored party there might not be as many companies offering or interested in having a sponsorship relationship as in men's football, they should still consider whether the sponsorship would actually benefit them also (Hakala 2020, 60). One viewpoint that was continually brought up in a case study by Hakala (2020, 72) was the "potential" that women's football holds, which unfortunately still does not bring money to the women's football clubs alone.

A common challenge seen among potential sponsors about women's football both in Finland and globally is issues related to the perceived quality of the game. By some, the quality of the game is seen to be worse than men's football. Some indicators about this could be having less intensity in the game or less passes throughout the match. The number of passes through the game is for example a common way to try to define the quality of the game. (Hakala 2020, 65.) A problem for sponsorship marketing that is rather essential for all sport in the viewpoint of Finland, men's and women's, is that the Finnish economy is small compared to many other ones, which also affects the size of fan groups. (Hakala 2020, 72.) In fact, the Finnish sport market is the smallest one in all Nordics when calculated by revenue. In these numbers however different sports are not individualised, but the result is calculated for sport in general. (Lämsä 2004, 63.)

There are many football clubs that have both men's and women's teams playing at a high level and a huge amount of revenue overall, but today the revenue is usually still distributed very unevenly between men's and women's teams. For instance, in the season 2021/2022 the highest women's revenue in the world was acquired by FC Barcelona, with a revenue of 7,7 million euros for the women's team, which was still only a fraction of the club's overall revenue of 1,02 billion euros. (Chandler-Wilde & Hellier 2023.)

For women's football in Finland, one issue with the commercialization is that the national team might not be able to qualify for the most important international tournaments, such as the Olympics or the FIFA women's World Cup, where even for participation you can get high reward money and a lot of visibility for the sport. The women's national team of Finland has never made it to the Olympics or to the FIFA women's World Cup, even though they have been in the FIFA women's European

Championship four times. The corresponding number the Finnish men's national team has participated in the European Championship is just one. For the participation in men's European Championship 2021, the Finnish men's national team was rewarded a total of 9,25 million euros. 30 percent of the sum, 2 775 000 euros, was distributed evenly among the players. For the latest women's European Championship these amounts were 600 000 euros and 180 000 euros. You can also get even more and bigger bonuses if qualifying from the group stage. (Koskinen, 2022.) Even though the amounts are smaller in the women's tournament than men's, it still holds significant value. With this being said, being able to qualify for more or more significant tournaments, both men's and women's national teams would factually be able to gain at least more economic capital.

## 5 Solutions for commercialization of women's football

### 5.1 Enhancing traits of women's football

The development manager of Finnish Football Association Heidi Pihlaja notes that since there are not many more open days left in the annual international competition calendar in men's football, investing in women's football next could be a natural continuation of developing the commercial aspects of the sport (Murtomäki, 2023).

One thing where women's football could differentiate from men's is the diversity of the crowds. Historically, women have typically attracted different crowds than men. For example, in Mexico during the women's football boom, there was more children spectators than in the men's matches. And if not children themselves, many attended the games while holding children. (Elsley & Nade 2019, 209-210.) However today, not only the players and attendees in female football games and other events is not the only indicator about women being interested in football, but also social media trends indicate the same (Hakala 2020, 44).

The fans are crucial for a sports club to be able to commercialize, since they are another stakeholder bringing money into the clubs in the form of paying for the product. In some studies, female fans have been associated with the importance of identity and forming networks, whereas male fans might even be associated with masculine hegemony, deviant behaviours, alcohol or violence. Other insights gained from research on fan engagement is that fan loyalty is seen as more symbolic within men watches, and female watchers are more interested in the feeling of community, entertainment and the social atmosphere. (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna 2022, 316.) In a case study by Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna (2022, 321) the aspect of social engagement is noted as an important factor especially within women fans.

One viewpoint that differentiates women's football from men's is also the queer representation of the sport. Women's football can be tied with mental images of openness, inclusivity and acceptance towards different minorities, such as LGBT+ people. The percentage of queer female footballers might even be over-represented in comparison to reality. Having a lot of queer representation can be drawn to simple reasons such as spending a lot of time together in single-sex groups. (UCFB 2020.) In the sport market, different minorities such as LGBT+ people are still not as recognized

as other potential fans for instance. There is also a lack of resource about how these kinds of economically significant minorities could be utilized better in commercialization of sport. This conversation is not solely about how to enhance the commercialization, but the openness towards the topic might help the athletes themselves feel more welcome and accepted with their identities. Overall, in sport marketing research there is very limited amount of research on diversity and inclusivity done. (Williams et al. 2023.) However, equity and inclusivity can be recognised as values that companies today appreciate and might be willing to invest in (Jensen & Kushner Smith 2024, 17).

A phenomenon that could be recognized in a case study within fans of women's football was the almost feeling of responsibility of supporting the sport and the women playing. Some fans even described that as women, they felt they were obligated to show up to the matches, whether it was a local club or an international match. (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna 2022, 319.)

A potential strength for women's football is the fact that even though the growth has been huge, the ticket prices are still at a very low level compared to men's teams. For instance, a season ticket to Anfield to see Liverpool's men was at least 685 pounds a couple years back. For the women's team the season ticket was only 60 pounds, which also calls for a very different financial contribution from the consumer. (Chandler-Wilde & Hellier 2023.)

Nielsen Sport, a global leader in analytics within the sport industry conducted research on sponsorship in women's sport in 2018. The study revealed that in women's sport, the biggest potential fan base is in football with a fanbase of 105 million people with the markets surveyed. These eight markets were the US., the U.K., France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia and New Zealand. In the same study it was discovered that women's football is more often associated with being more inspirational, less money-driven and more family-orientated than men's sport, with an overall positive image. (Hakala 2020, 28.)

In football nowadays it is not uncommon for fans to support a distant team or support a nonlocal team, historically the geographical location has had more impact on this. This helps to make the teams have a greater chance of appealing to a larger population, possibly even in another country. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 81). The importance of personal



branding in sports is consistently growing (Hoye et al. 2018, 71). Both the potentially sponsoring companies and the athletes themselves benefit from strengthening of personal athletic brands (Coleman et al. 2001, 197). One factor in practice tied to this phenomenon is the fact that the jersey number the player uses can be an important factor in the personal branding, but sometimes players might face regulations that make it more difficult or impossible to use this tool as a way to help the fans identify them. For example, in the Olympic football tournament, for both men and women, the players must wear numbers 1 to 18, which might exclude some numbers a player would normally play international matches with (FIFA 2023a, 43).

Sponsorship can be an opportunity for a company to influence its public image. However, the sincerity of the sponsor, subjectively observed by the consumer, might have an effect on the end result. Those who are perceived as sincere when sponsoring might obtain better results with the marketing than those who might be seen to be just looking for financial gain. (Smith & Stewart 2015, 222). They can for example position themselves as an advocate for gender equality, which can be tied to women's football (Hakala 2020, 46). In a case study conducted by Hakala (2020, 48) it was stated by multiple sponsorship partners of women's football or football in general that sustainability and equality are values often linked to images about women's football. Another type of motive for sponsoring that could be utilized in women's football that might not be such a huge phenomenon in men's football anymore these days, because of the worldwide nature of the men's sport, could be the willingness to make women's football more popular and more visible. This can be recognised even within big enterprises such as Visa. (Hakala 2020, 45.) "Creating meaningful change in the sport industry" can be recognised as a motive amongst variable brands (Jensen & Kushner Smith 2024, 17).

One way for government to finance sports is via direct or indirect government grants. Government grants are also known for their potential conditions for the funding. (Hoye et al. 2018, 223.) Gambling business is one example of how government has been utilized in the funding of sport in the Nordics. It is also a form of financing that creates value and is therefore related to the commercialization of the sport, and gambling is also traditionally very highly profitable form of value creation in sport in general. Worldwide, online gambling has been widely advertised throughout the years. (Horne et al. 2012, 188.) In all the Nordics one distribution channel for financing of sport are

national gambling companies. There are still differences between different gambling companies owned by governments in various countries and in the profit distribution. The biggest revenue out of national gambling companies in the Nordics in 2002 was in Sweden, where the profits almost hit 500 million euros with a revenue of 4090 million euros. The corresponding numbers in Finland that year were 750 million euros and 1811 million euros. (Lämsä 2004, 62-63.) In Finland the national gambling company Veikkaus has the monopoly to offer any kind of gambling. Veikkaus also must donate all of their profit to benefit the Finnish society. There has been changes in the distribution of the profits, and in the year 2022 the profits of Veikkaus benefitted over 4000 people or legal entities. In 2022 679,9 million euros was accounted to different Finnish ministries, which was less than in 2002 and it also undercut the amount that was predicted in the annual state budget. (Veikkaus 2022a, 42.) In 2024, Veikkaus is still one of the main partners of the Finnish Football Association, among other operators such as Elisa, K-Group and LähiTapiola. Veikkaus supports especially national competitive football and development of club football in Finland, besides the different national teams. (Finnish Football Association, 2024.)

Especially for small and medium-sized sport enterprises, the importance of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial thinking can be a key factor helping to keep up with the high competition in the sports market (Dodds et al. 2017, 375). In this case, entrepreneurship can be defined as “an activity that involves the discovery, evaluation and exploitation of opportunities to introduce new goods and services, ways of organizing, markets, processes and raw materials through organizing efforts that previously had not existed (Shane 2003, according to Dodds et al. 2017, 375).

## **5.2 Solutions and suggestions**

What has been popular in women’s football in recent years is building the fan culture, since it has been almost non-existent compared to men’s football. One popular way of increasing the fan base is hosting fan festivals for young players, which also more often tend to be girls, where the fans can interact with the players before or after the games. This is however a fairly targeted method, that might not work so well on a larger scale. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 28.)

Fan clubs are one way to increase fan engagement, which is a growing phenomenon for women’s football clubs and by being able to boost fan engagement, it will likely help

the club also economically (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna 2022, 321). Successful utilization of social media has also been recognised to grow the fan base of a club. Also being able market the right crowds, such as women, could increase the amount of fan culture around the club or team (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna 2022, 319). Positive traits associated with women's football, such as family friendliness, should be highlighted clearer in communication (Hakala 2020, 28). Social media can be seen to recruit new members to fan clubs, as a way to boost ticket sales or to introduce the players to the watchers as individuals. Social media can be a cheap way to give up-to-date communications. (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna 2022, 322.)

Fans are often keen to watch so called star players play. In the best-case scenario, an individual player can be very likely to draw more viewers to the game. Because of this, also personal brand of the players can increase the number of watchers and therefore improve the economic state of the club. Some fans might not even be really club-orientated or identify as a fan of a specific club, but watch matches online or live based on individual players who they see as very high-quality players. (Leslie-Walker & Mulvenna 2022, 318.) In a case study conducted by Hakala (2020, 51-52) the importance of player brands was also brought up by the sponsors of women's football or football in general interviewed for the research.

Women's football both in Finland and globally could benefit from systematically growing personal brands. This can be reached by the effort of both the Finnish Football Association (or other football associations), the clubs or by the players themselves, for instance. Sports involve a lot of strong emotions and developing personal brands can help make fans create more meaningful emotional connection both to the players and the game itself. Personal branding is something that especially in women's football in Finland still has not been utilized well. (Hakala 2020, 75-76.) It is good to notice that also personal marketing can have downsides in the eyes of the company or other sponsor, and therefore require, for instance, good public image and discipline from the athlete (Coleman et al. 2001, 209). It should also be highlighted how sponsorship deals exist beyond just deals with clubs or teams, but also between companies and individual athletes, which could offer them an opportunity to better income. Today the commonness and importance of personal sponsorship has increased in a way that you do not need to be an internationally known athlete to be able to gain a sponsorship deal. (Hoye et al. 2018, 71.)

The highest league for women's football in Finland, Subway Kansallinen Liiga, has named three core values for the league: equality, success and courage. These are some traits that women's football often gets associated with, which might make the league seem more interesting for potential sponsors. This also helps the clubs of the league to aim their search of sponsors towards potential sponsors with similar values. When approaching potential sponsors, it might be beneficial for the team or the club to highlight the similar values and the pros partnering up with them could potentially offer. Promoting equality and sustainability are also highly ranked values for many companies, which could benefit women's football teams or clubs in potential sponsor search. (Hakala 2020, 73.)

Women's football might be a solution that offers women-oriented companies opportunities to reach their target audiences more effectively than when investing in sponsoring men's football. The first female-focused brand that sponsored a professional women's football club was Avon partnering with Liverpool's women's football team in 2017. In this collaboration, the Liverpool's women's team also got their own separate shirt deal apart from the men's team for the first time. Also, a campaign called "I Can Be" was launched with a mission to inspire girls and women to challenge gender stereotypes and aim for their personal goals. This success story was later recognised with the "Partnership of the Year" award at the annual international Football Business Awards. (Hakala 2020, 28-29.) For example, for Finnish local companies, partnering up with a local football team or a local club could give the aspired marketing coverage at a fair price, whereas big international companies could be rather interested in sponsoring the whole league or federation. Women's football is often associated as entertainment for the whole family, which leads to the possibility of targeting marketing for families also besides just "traditional" women's products such as cosmetics. (Hakala 2020, 73-74.)

Also selling physical advertising space is something more women's football teams could benefit from. For example, stadium or a simple field wall could be covered with commercial signs, in exchange for money. (Coleman et al. 2001, 204.) Partnerships can even go as far as naming a field or a stadium after the sponsor. While women's sports are growing more popular, the prices are still moderate compared to men's. (Coleman et al. 2001, 205, 207.)

One positive side effect sponsoring with goodwill as a motive has been that it is potentially sending the existing or potential customers a message that the company is an active member in society and is willing to give back to the community (Hakala 2020, 43; Coleman et al. 2001, 197). Consumers overall are more likely to think that sponsorship has benefits beyond just the sponsor, which might affect the buying decision positively and consumers might feel less defensive about reacting to marketing when done by sponsorships (Smith & Stewart 2015, 202). As an example in the case study conducted by Hakala (2020, 43), Finnish insurance company LocalTapiola hopes to achieve new customers by sponsoring youth teams. In this case, as a result from the sponsorship relationship where the sport insurances of the youth athletes are paid for by the company, the parents of the sponsored junior athletes hopefully have a positive attitude towards the company. This potentially leads to them buying also other insurances, such as home insurance, from the company since it can be more convenient and cost-effective to do so. This also fits with the mission and vision of the company, since it wants to position itself as a lifelong companion for their customers. (Hakala 2020, 43.)

The rise of social media has made it easier for women in sports and football to get more media coverage. Different social platforms such as Youtube and Twitter have made it easier to follow female athletes online. (Elsy & Nade 2019, 246.) Female footballers have also started to gain millions of followers on social media platforms, such as Instagram, which tells that women players' personal brands are also interesting in the eyes of the public. In the case study by Hakala (2020, 51-52), a sponsor thanked cooperation with women's football for its easiness and the less of complexity. They highlighted how in women's football there is not as many player agents or companies behind the players that must approve of the deal beforehand. (Hakala 2020, 51-52.) Attributes that make a football player attractive to sponsors are an interesting brand persona, wide demographic appeal and ability to influence fans (Pegoraro & Jinnah 2012, according to Hakala 2020, 51).

Gambling can also be a way to fund sports, as stated in the previous subsection. In 2022 the partnership of Veikkaus and the Finnish Football Association was continued with perennial contracts as well as expanded. The new length of the contract was 3 years with a clause. In this partnership contract the focus is on the national leagues of adults, both men and women and both in football and futsal as well as the Finnish Cup for both

sexes. This deal enables higher contractual compensations to clubs. Especially the cooperation with men's and women's leagues increases significantly. (Veikkaus 2022b.)

Concrete financial measures might also be achieved through the activity of the football players themselves, without necessarily having help from their organization or other stakeholders. In the case of US. women's national team suing their umbrella organization (The US. football federation) in 2019, having all 28 teammates aligned helped them succeed. A lawsuit was already filed back in 2016 by 5 members of the team, but then it did not yet obtain the wanted consequences. In 2019, the actions of the players led to concrete positive changes in their economic state. (Tulshyan 2019.)

## 6 Conclusion

Women's football still faces many challenges related to for example gender inequality, quality of the game and facilities and small spectator numbers. For instance, the average of spectators in women's Super League (English top level for women) was 1010 spectators per game in 2019, whereas for men the number was 38168. (Hakala 2020, 79.) All the knowledge on the background and history of the sport makes it more understandable why women's football faces the issues it faces today. This thesis has discussed different challenges women's football faces and some explanations for this by taking insights on the history and development of the sport. Also, solutions on how to enhance the economic status of women's football are debated in order to offer concrete measures in order to win these difficulties.

Yet, as the commercialization of football evolves, stakeholders must navigate a delicate balance between financial gain and the preservation of sporting integrity and their image, where women's football could be a tool to gain, for instance, positive publicity from. The dynamics of women's football offer unique opportunities for growth, particularly in fan engagement and sponsorship. Women's football attracts diverse crowds, including families and children, presenting a different atmosphere than men's matches and also different opportunities for commercialization outside the field. Research suggests that female fans are more interested in community, entertainment, and social engagement, which can be leveraged to enhance fan loyalty and increase commercial opportunities. Despite the risks associated with sponsorship and other forms of cooperation between football clubs or teams and businesses, investing in women's football presents an opportunity for companies to tap into a growing fan base and align with values that resonate with consumers. Moreover, the ease of collaboration and lower complexity in women's football sponsorship can streamline the process for sponsors, making it an attractive investment opportunity. In a case study done by Hakala (2020, 69) it was noticed that especially in the case of Finnish sponsors, women's football as a sponsorship target didn't bring any major advantages compared to when sponsoring men's football or other sports. On the other hand, in the same case study, it was found that the potential sponsors couldn't find any other major downsides to sponsoring women's football in Finland, except for the lower spectator numbers. When considered throughout, a very fulfilling cooperation could be established in these conditions.

Like stated before, since men's international competition calendar is almost full and humans are not machines that can increase the amounts of trainings and games endlessly, women's football might be the answer on how to be able to increase the economic value of football in the future if there are not completely new and innovative ways to continue the development of men's football's commercialization. It is undeniable that sport market is relevant both economically and socially, and it will probably not lose its status in near future. However, the development of women's football faces in the outlook of inequality also covers issues in sport literature: research is mostly done for men's sport and men's football. When it comes to research on events, is most often done on so-called mega events, which are more common in men's football. There is also a lack of research on women's large-scale sporting events. (Pitts & Zhang 2018, 237.) This literature gap makes it harder to study how sport commercialization works in practice in women's football and how it could be bettered utilizing fact-based and scientific methods.

The literature gap between men's and women's sport became really evident for the researcher throughout the process. When going to more detailed topics, such as sponsorship marketing, the literature revolving around the issue is majorly focusing on male athletes or men's sport in general (Jensen & Kushner Smith 2024, 19). Especially in Finnish context there was almost no scientific literature on women's football's commercialization to be found. A conclusion can be drawn from this that especially in Finland, further research proposals could be suggested to cover almost anything related to the topic. For example, the lack of literature in Finland makes it harder to understand how consumer, especially in football or women's football market, comports oneself in the market. Also in a global context, the viewpoint of especially women in football seemed to be rather underrepresented. There could be literature found on general sport or men's football with some lowercases on women's sport, but rarely research focused entirely on women. Producing more reliable and high-quality research could also boost the development of the sport in both athletic and commercial way. Also focusing the whole research on the perspective of women gives opportunities to make new discoveries that are not captivated with the findings on men's side.



For some, pointing out factors such as untruly calling Miroslav Klose “all time world cup top scorer” might seem irrelevant, but the researcher’s reality as growing up as a girl and woman who plays football has been full of belittling and underestimating without any relevant reason. There are undeniable physical differences in women’s and men’s football, but that does not reset the fact that women’s football also has athletic and economic potential and its own, growing fanbase. As a researcher I hope I have fulfilled my personal goals on motives to enhance the positioning of women’s football in the sports market by conducting at least a minor positive difference. In conclusion, the vast sums of money circulating within the football industry worldwide has not yet found its way to women’s football, but they hopefully will in the future, sooner or later.



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