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Women's football in Türkiye from the perspectives of female footballers on the field

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ABSTRACT

Women's football in Türkiye, like in other parts of the world, is a relatively new sport branch. Women began playing football later than men, and the fact that it is a branch in which men are more interested and visible, has caused certain issues in women's enthusiasm in this sport. The phenomenology approach was utilized to investigate the challenges faced by Turkish female football players in this study. Data was gathered using a semi-structured interview form and face-to-face interviews in this research. When the research findings were assessed, female footballers who took part in the study indicated that they had problems with 'gender discrimination', and they stated that the most significant problem faced by female footballers in Türkiye was 'not being valued'. According to the conclusions of this study, it has been concluded that certain female footballers in Türkiye face gender discrimination, are undervalued, lack material and moral assistance, lack media support, and are unprofessional.

Introduction

This research aims to examine the state of women's football in Türkiye, the challenges faced by female football players, and their expectations, based on the perspectives and insights of women footballers. The fact that women's football is a relatively new and developing sport in Türkiye, coupled with the scarcity of academic studies on this topic, underscores the significance of this research. In this context, the views of female footballers playing in the leagues were gathered to shed light on the current situation and challenges of women's football.

Football is a dominant sport in Türkiye. However, women's football lags significantly behind men's football in terms of development, resources, and visibility.

The historical development of Women's football

During human history, in many parts of the world women remained in the background in almost all areas and they were exposed to many discriminations and gender inequalities. When we examine the history of football, we can see that, like many other sports, it has a history of male supremacy. Although women have been seen to participate in football on occasion in some locations during this period, their actual involvement in this field does not trace back to ancient times. Although women have actively participated in this game and made significant progress in various periods, particularly

after the transition to modern football, it can be said that the effects of gender-based relations and male dominance on the field are an impediment to the development of the women's football field.

While there is a large corpus of scientific study on men's football, the number of studies on women's football is rather low. Furthermore, while the issue of sports first appeared in the sociology literature with diverse studies in the 1920s and gained traction in the 1950s, sociological research on women's football experiences is just 15 years old.¹ The first forms of football were played five thousand years ago, and football's modern history dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when it became a very deep-rooted and widespread game-sport played by elite soldiers, lower-class people, bourgeois children, and professionals. Despite the fact that football has a long history and has been accepted by various elements of society, women did not begin to participate in football as players until the latter quarter of the nineteenth century.²

Women began playing football in Türkiye in 1954, according to the data. On 24 May 1954, 6 women football players competed in a mixed competition in Izmir. On 4 July 1954, a football match featuring exclusively women was held during a sports festival in Izmir. The Turkish Football Federation launched the first women's football league in 1993–1994, naming the organization 'Women's League'. Since 2000, numerous violent incidents on football fields, match-fixing debates, and the negativity felt because of some clubs being unable to compete for a variety of reasons have given birth to the women's league. This problem places the individual in a tough predicament. Furthermore, with the addition of administrative, social, and financial issues to these negatives, many teams were forced to halt their operations, and women's football leagues began to fall significantly.³ Following all of these incidents, women's football leagues were banned, national team operations were also halted, and women's football entered a three-year period of acute stagnation.⁴ During the time when the women's football league was halted, U17 and U18 young girls' football organizations began to form, and new women's football clubs were formed. After a three-year hiatus, the women's football league was revived in the 2006–2007 season.⁵

Though football is a sport that both men and women can participate in, as in many other industries, women have historically been undervalued and have been pushed to the sidelines. Not only men, but mainly their own gender, are against women participating in football, and women who desire to engage in face discrimination. This condition emerges as the most significant reason why women's football is still underdeveloped today.⁶

Kerr Ladies Football Club was founded during the First World War for recreational activities and aid, and its popularity grew day by day. Men's football organizations, concerned about the growing popularity of women's football, took efforts to 'defend the game of football' during this time period. The men's football team barred women from participating in federation competitions, saying that they collected the earnings of women's football competitions for charity but did not distribute them to charities.⁷ Another reason for these prohibitions on women's football is a declaration issued by the Football Association on 5 December 1921: 'The game of football is not suitable for women at all and its playing should not be encouraged'. As a result of these events, although men continued to advance in the field of football on a regular basis, women's development was halted for half a century.⁸ Women's football bans lasted around 50 years, and they were gradually lifted between 1969 and 1972. Women's football teams were re-established after the 1970s, and women's football became active in many nations, particularly in Europe.⁹

Women's football in contemporary türkiye

In contemporary Türkiye, women's football, as a developing sport, has seen the establishment of both amateur and professional leagues, with competitions regularly held in these leagues. Participation in these matches, both as spectators and television viewers, is steadily increasing. Various sports clubs offer football training to girls of different age groups, and the number of female athletes continuing this training grows daily. In this context, it can be observed that the attitudes of parents towards women's football have become increasingly positive. When examining the

trajectory of women's football in Türkiye since its inception, it is evident that significant positive developments have occurred. However, it remains undeniable that, despite these advancements, certain deficiencies persist. Furthermore, the media support, political connections, economic scale, popularity, and public interest in men's football in Türkiye is seen to be in a level that can't be compared to the women's football.

Therefore, this study sought to elucidate the state of women's football in Türkiye by gathering the perspectives of elite female football players and analysing their experiences and opinions. Through this approach, significant findings were obtained by evaluating Turkish women's football from the viewpoint of the players on the field.

Method

This study followed phenomenology design, which is one of the qualitative research approaches. The phenomenology design is concerned with objects and events about which we are aware but lack precise and in-depth knowledge.¹⁰

Participants

The research's subjects were 20 female footballers with an average age of 24, who played for various clubs in the Turkish Women's Football Super League. When determining the research group, the criterion sampling method was utilized.¹¹ The criterion sampling method seeks to investigate all scenarios that satisfy a set of preset criteria.¹² Participants in the study had to be at least 18 years old and have been actively playing football in the women's football super league for at least three years.

Data collection tools

The data for the investigation was gathered using a semi-structured interview form.¹³ Experts reviewed and modified the questions in the researchers' semi-structured interview form to ensure they were clear and understandable. The interview form included demographic inquiries as well as three open-ended questions. These are the questions:

- (1) Have you encountered any difficulties as a woman in your football career? What are these issues, if you've had them?
- (2) In your opinion what is the most serious challenge confronting female footballers in Türkiye?
- (3) Do you think there is a difference between women's football in Türkiye and women's football in other countries? What, if there are any, are these distinctions?

Data collection process

The research data was gathered through face-to-face and online interviews, as well as audio recordings. The data was gathered by transferring the audio-recorded interviews into written format with no alterations. Between June 2023 and September 2023, 20 women footballers from the Turkish Women's Football Super League were interviewed.

Data analysis

This research's data was analysed utilizing the content analysis method. First and foremost, the interviews' transcripts were transcribed verbatim and converted to written form.¹⁴ Themes and categories were then determined using data content analysis.¹⁵ Findings were achieved by combining direct quotations with the identified themes. Only a few of the exact or highly similar

expressions from the direct quotations are provided in the findings. Participant coding; As ‘WF’ stands for woman footballer, it was coded as WF-1, WF-2, WF-3... and expressed in the tables and results in this manner. The findings are presented in a descriptive narrative, with direct quotations used frequently.¹⁶

Tables were created by determining meaningful themes in the findings of the qualitative data obtained in this research, and the approach of supporting them with verbatim quotes was adopted within the tables created to ensure quality and credibility, which are two important concepts in qualitative studies.¹⁷ When reporting the statistics, care was taken to incorporate all of the specifics. To generate the themes, two researchers working in the field of educational sciences and experts in their field provided assistance during the data analysis process.¹⁸ Both researchers’ concepts were analysed, and adjustments and rearranging were made until consensus was obtained.¹⁹ The reliability of the research was calculated using the reliability formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).²⁰ As a result of the calculation, the research’s reliability was determined to be 88.6%.

Findings

The following findings were gathered in accordance with the answers given by the participants to the questions in the interview form.

Table 1 depicts female footballers’ statements about the issues they face on the field. Female footballers reported problems such as humiliation, gender discrimination, and family-environmental pressure. Concerning the challenges encountered by female footballers, six athletes reported humiliation, six athletes reported family and environmental pressure, and seventeen athletes reported gender discrimination. Gender discrimination was the most often mentioned concern among athletes’ problems. One of the athletes (WF-15) who underlined gender

Table 1. Problems experienced by female footballers.

Have you had any problems as a woman in your football life? What are these problems if you have experienced them?	
Theme	Expressed
Humiliation (WF-1, WF-2, WF-4, WF-8, WF-10, WF-13)	‘Many individuals in my neighborhood and family remarked things like “Tomboy” or “Do girls play ball?” This was also my father’s strategy. ‘There is a bias against female ballplayers’. (WF-1) ‘At first, they overlooked us as girls when we entered the neighborhood match. When the teams are equal, they tell you to go there as well, because you won’t be any use anyway. ‘They don’t believe we can make it’. (WF-8) ‘I was looked down on because of my gender and the profession I did’. (WF-10)
Gender Discrimination (WF-1, WF-3, WF-4, WF-5, WF-7, WF-8, WF-9, WF-10, WF-11, WF-12, WF-13, WF-14, WF-15, WF-16, WF-17, WF-18, WF-20)	‘They were mocking ladies because they didn’t play football’ (WF-4) ‘People insulted me as a child, even my relatives. My brother Ali outperformed me. I learned it on my own because they ostracized me; I never received any help from my family; I arrived here on my own’. (WF-9) Many people told me, “You can’t do it, you can’t do it”. It has been suggested that football is not for women; instead, they should play volleyball’. (WF-15) ‘Women’s football is a neglected branch. It wasn’t when I first started. In my opinion, these are the best times yet. Previously, reactions were more intense. ‘Wait, what football? Is there nothing else to do? Girls are unable to play football’. There were sentences like this, but I can now claim that those thoughts are slowly fading’. (WF-16)
Family- Environmental Pressure (WF-6, WF-7, WF-12, WF-14, WF-18, WF-19)	‘They can’t do it because there is a prejudice against women as women. Prejudice exists on the street and within the family’. (WF-7) ‘I went through a lot of hardships, both financially and spiritually. People in my family and relatives were first opposed, as were those who believed that women could not play football, but in the end, everyone thought the opposite. I worked so hard for this’. (WF-14) ‘I had some issues when I first started playing football because of family and environmental pressures. After a few years, my family and everyone around me began to support me, and they continue to do so.(WF-18)

discrimination mentioned that she was told as a woman that she should play volleyball rather than football. Another athlete mentioned that her family and surroundings ostracized her because she played football (WF-9). An athlete (WF-1) who was mocked and humiliated for playing football stressed the problem of humiliation by noting that there was a prejudice against woman football players. When asked about family and environmental pressures, an athlete (WF-14) indicated that he had faced numerous challenges and worked hard in this area. WF-14 and WF-18 reported that the challenges they faced with family and environmental pressure subsided after a period, and they began to get support.

Table 2 contains statements about the most significant issues confronting female footballers in Türkiye. 8 athletes highlighted gender discrimination, 12 athletes mentioned not being respected, 8 athletes mentioned a lack of financial assistance, and 2 athletes mentioned a lack of media support in response to this question. WF-6 participant reported that they were subjected to gender discriminating remarks such as ‘women can’t play football, but men can’. Similarly, WF-9 argued that individuals who said men could play football excluded and discriminated against women. The most often voiced concern about this table about the situation of women’s football in Türkiye was its undervaluation. 12 athletes submitted statements claiming that they saw no benefit. According to WF-12, women’s football does not receive adequate financial assistance, that they are regarded less than men in this regard, and that they have fewer financial chances than even the lower leagues of men’s football. Some competitors (WF-5 and WF-16) indicated that they had issues with the lack of women’s football advertising and sponsors due to a lack of media support.

Table 2. Women’s football in Türkiye.

In your opinion, what is the biggest problem faced by female footballers in Türkiye?	
Theme	Expressed
Gender Discrimination (WF-1, WF-6, WF-9, WF-13, WF-15, WF-16, WF-17, WF-20).	‘Men have a lot of prejudices against women. I see a lot of comments on social media telling you not to play, and so on. Such remarks sap women’s motivation. I used to have low morale, but owing to my teachers here, I was able to recover’. (WF-1) ‘There is an environmental issue with women’s football. Men can do it, so women can’t’. (WF-6) ‘Men’s exclusion. Being mocked for being less flamboyant, being mocked because it’s a man’s game or whatever’. (WF-9) ‘I am undervalued and disregarded. They believe that as women, we are incapable of playing a tough game. Positive discrimination exists’. (WF-15)
Not being valued (WF-2, WF-3, WF-5, WF-7, WF-8, WF-10, WF-11, WF-13, WF-14, WF-15, WF-17, WF-18).	‘I believe the biggest issues confronting women’s football players in our country are a lack of worth or bullying’. (WF-2) ‘There is anti-women’s football bias on the streets and in families. Women’s football, in my opinion, cannot flourish because of a lack of state backing as a result of this discrimination. (WF-7) ‘Our main issue is that they do not believe in us and do not prepare the path for us. There is a lack of familial support’. (WF-8) ‘They regard women playing football as weird’. (WF-10) ‘The main issue we have in our society is that they are not appreciated as highly as men and that football is regarded to be a discipline dedicated for men. I am confident that if we obtain more backing, we will progress and lead our country to greater heights’. (WF-14)
Lack of financial support (WF-4, WF-7, WF-11, WF-12, WF-16, WF-18, WF-19, WF-20).	‘The incomes of men who play in leagues far lower than ours are several times more than ours. I believe we expended more effort. Because football alone is insufficient for us. We have to study and work at the same time.’When we should be concentrating on football’. (WF-12) ‘The most serious issue is a shortage of funds’. Clubs have a hard time finding sponsors’. (WF-19)
No media support (WF-5, WF-16).	‘The main issue with women’s football in our nation is that it is not as visible as men’s football, and it is not advertised’. (WF-5) We face discrimination in this field, as in any other. We face discrimination in areas such as facility use, financial gain, social media, advertising, and our inability to acquire sponsors. (WF-16).

Table 3. Women's football in Türkiye and other countries.

In your opinion, is there any difference between women's football in Türkiye and women's football in other countries? If so, what are they?	
Theme	Expressed
Not having financial support (WF-6, WF-12, WF-16, WF-17, WF-18, WF-19, WF-20)	'First and foremost, the number of licensed female football players is very low, and they are not trained; as I previously stated, this is due to discrimination; in Europe, they start from childhood and are trained; aside from that, they have a lot of possibilities, support, and they are successful. Female coaches are few in our nation, football is rarely taught in schools, and the Türkiye Football Federation places little emphasis on it, so we remain in the shadows'. (WF-16) 'They are ahead of us because women's football was adopted and sponsored in Europe before it was in Türkiye. I believe they have gotten both money and moral assistance. Türkiye is on the rise in this direction, I wish the gap between us will close in a short time'. (WF-17) 'Infrastructure issues exist. Most Turkish teams lack infrastructure and are unable to train female football players. In Europe, each team has its own infrastructure, and there are teams for every age group. Second, because all women's leagues in Türkiye are amateur, there is a significant financial concern. But it's not like that in Europe, where everyone is a professional and can earn millions of dollars'. (WF-18)
Insignificance (WF-3, WF-4, WF-5, WF-7, WF-8, WF-12, WF-16, WF-19, WF-20)	'I believe the fans are the most noticeable difference. Even my closest friends, who know I've been playing for years, ask me what kind of team they are. "It is valued in other countries, but this value does not exist in our country". (WF-7) 'Value exists for people in other countries. I do not believe that men and women are treated equally in our country. There are greater opportunities for women'. (WF-8). 'Of course, the main difference between us is the economics. In Europe, the value assigned to men's teams is the same as that assigned to women's teams. In Europe, for example, it is mandatory for amateur men's teams to open women's teams as well. Despite the fact that it has been deemed mandatory for Super League teams in our country, the teams still do not open it'. (WF-19) 'Women's football is valued in Europe; its financial resources are far higher than ours; and, most significantly, it has healthcare professionals, physiotherapists, and everything else that a professional club should have'. (WF-20)
Professionalism (WF-2, WF-9, WF-11, WF-12, WF-13, WF-14, WF-15, WF-16, WF-18, WF-20)	'In Europe, women's football is professional; in Türkiye, it is amateur. 'I believe the value assigned is medium'. (WF-11) 'I believe they outperform us in every way: infrastructure, professionalism, perspective, value, and support for sports and players'. (WF-12) 'In Europe, infrastructures are given more significance in women's football. Women's football has grown to a high level. Coach structures, club ideas, and professional growth are all accelerated as a result'. (WF-14) 'There is a significant difference. For starters, their sports age is young, and their infrastructure is well-developed. Few clubs in our country create infrastructure. Furthermore, there are significant disparities in nutrition and training plans. They are very excellent at sleeping. In Europe, women's football is already a well developed and valued sport'. (WF-15)

According to Table 3, which compares women's football in Türkiye to women's football in other countries, it is clear that the female footballers who took part in the study discussed financial opportunities, worthlessness, and being professional. There were 7 athletes who said the difference between Türkiye and other nations was financial opportunity, 9 athletes who said it was worthlessness, and 10 athletes who said it was professionalism. Female footballers in Europe have very good financial chances, according to the remarks of the athletes classified WF-16 and WF-17, however the essential attention is not made to this issue in Türkiye. According to WF-18, there is an infrastructure problem in Türkiye, as well as significant funding difficulties in women's sports. Concerning the topic of worthlessness, participants claimed that female footballers in Türkiye do not receive the appropriate value, whereas female football players abroad are valued materially and

morally (WF-7, WF-8, WF-19, WF-20). The topic of professionalism is one of the most commonly noted differences between women's football in Türkiye and women's football in other nations. Women's football is professional in Europe and amateur in Türkiye, according to WF-11. Other athletes who spoke about it claimed to have professional approaches to women's football abroad.

Discussion

This study was aimed to examine the problems experienced by female football players in Türkiye. According to the findings, female footballers were questioned, 'Have you had any problems as a woman in your football life?' 17 of the 17 athletes that took part in the study reported experiencing gender discrimination (Table 1). Similar to our study Elmas and Asci (2022) investigated the experiences of 8 female footballers in Istanbul, Türkiye. According to the findings, they said that the social, cultural, and institutional environment of the female players creates many problems, difficulties, and deprivations in their participation, which make it difficult for their expectancy for success, task values, and future plans in their sports.²¹

Romney and Johnson (2020) investigated 1587 Instagram photographs in a recent social media study that validates this finding of our research.²² According to the findings of the survey, women are less represented in the media than males, and women lag far behind men in sports. According to reports, women are more likely to be portrayed in culturally 'appropriate' sports and non-athletic roles. The most significant finding in this study is the general paucity of female athletes and women-specific sports news, particularly on Instagram accounts with a large number of followers.

Women athletes receive less media coverage than men athletes.²³ In comparison to other men's sports, women's outstanding successes and supremacy in football receive little media attention and coverage.²⁴ In 2014, Sports Centre, the most popular daily show on ESPN, a British television station focused on professional sports in Canada and the United States, only allotted 2% of its broadcast time to women's sports.²⁵ It is common to come across news in the media that expresses the disadvantages of women in football, as opposed to men's football in Türkiye. For example, news such as; 'Women football players who broke the perception that girls play football',²⁶ 'Women's football does not receive enough attention',²⁷ 'Vangücü, which is made up of women whose families had to be convinced to let their daughters play football, asked for support for success'²⁸ have been seen.

The largest problem that female footballers face in Türkiye, according to 12 athletes who joined in this study, is that they are undervalued (Table 2). 'Is there a distinction between women's football in Türkiye and that of other countries?' In response to the question, 10 athletes stated that women's football was more professional in other countries and that it was not professional in Türkiye.

Concerning gender prejudice, participant WF-6 claimed, 'women cannot do it, men can do it'. When the findings of Bozlu (2018)'s study on female footballers are compared to this outcome, the questions 'do women play football?' and 'what do you understand from football?' are raised. It has been reported that such reactions have been encountered.²⁹ According to Koçak and Taşdemir (2022), women's football in Türkiye lags considerably behind men's football in terms of social standing, viewing pleasure, material and spiritual values.³⁰ Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez (2021) were explored the role of football in the construction of a hegemonic form of masculinity in a school located in Portugal.³¹ In this research conducted on 5-year-old girls and boys, it was seen that girls were more distant from football and were not invited to play football by boys. These different findings, as shown in other investigations, support the conclusions of our study.

Despite the entry into force of Title IX in the world today, a lack of media coverage for women's sports, excessive sexism, and discrimination are viewed as disrespectful to female athletes, and complaints about this disparity continue to develop.³² According to Romney and Johnson's (2020) research, while women's participation in sports has increased, media coverage of female athletes remains stagnant.³³ Four major American sports networks offer Instagram content. There are 1587

Instagram accounts. The photograph has been scrutinized. According to the findings of the study, women's participation in Instagram sports news lags well behind that of men. The lack of visibility of female football participation in the media and society supports the notion that football is a male-dominated sport. The presence of strong women playing high level football will put into question the notion that women are not physically capable of playing football. Girls and women still have few opportunities to play football and other combat sports in today's sports structure. While women continue to encounter major challenges on the football field due to existing limits, women playing football today are overcoming these barriers and transforming what it means to be a female football player.³⁴

This study compares women's football in other nations to women's football in Türkiye; they stated that there were disparities in terms of financial resources, appreciation, equality, and professionalism, as well as significant problems. Some female footballers who took part in the study claimed that while female footballers in the European zone have extremely good financial opportunities, this is not the case in Türkiye (WF-16, WF-17). Supporting the statements of the female footballers who participated in our study about these differences abroad, Kavasoglu and Bozok (2022) stated that while there are agendas such as the FIFA 2019 Women's World Cup breaking the attendance record, increasing the budget, increasing the visibility of gay football players and demands for equal pay, women in Türkiye has stated that football was far behind these enhancements.³⁵

When we were analysed China, which has had great success in international sports contests, particularly in recent years, we recognize that, while women's sports are not as well-established as men's sports around the world, female athletes in China win more medals than male athletes.³⁶ Convinced of Chinese women's excellent athletic achievements, the Chinese state has traditionally favoured women's sports over men's sports.³⁷ Thus, Chinese female athletes gained a lot of attention and support from the Chinese sports media.³⁸ Despite this, the media in China concentrates almost solely on male football players, with very little coverage of women's football.³⁹ Living in a society dominated by men, Chinese people may have seen football as an overwhelmingly masculine sport.⁴⁰ Football is considered as a gender-neutral sport in the United States. Because nearly equal numbers of girls and boys participate in this activity, and the number of female football players in the United States has increased over the years.⁴¹ When we looked at the Germany women football, the increasing popularity of the German Women's National Team has translated into greater economic success for the best female players. However, the broad-based appeal of women's soccer is more or less limited to the national team. In Germany more people now pay attention to the women's game, and earnings for women in the sport have increased.⁴²

Many studies conducted similar to our study have emphasized that there are similar problems in women's football all around the world. However, it has been seen that in some countries the values given to women's football have increased and they have better conditions.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, which was conducted to examine the situation and problems faced by female footballers in Türkiye, female footballers in Türkiye faced problems such as humiliation, gender discrimination, family-peer pressure, not being valued, a lack of financial support, and a lack of media support. When they compared their condition overseas to that of their own nation, they reported discrepancies and weaknesses in terms of financial resources, worthlessness, and professionalism.

Ultimately, we can state that women's football, which is rapidly gaining significance and developing around the world, is still in its early stages in Türkiye. In this study, it was seen that female footballers faced significant difficulties such as humiliation, gender discrimination, family and environmental pressure, lack of respect, lack of financial support and lack of media support. Based on this, it has been shown that the most essential aspects that will contribute to the

development of women's football in Türkiye are working to eliminate environmental and financial difficulties and supporting women's football through the media.

Eliminating discrimination against women and gender inequality both in Türkiye and around the world is a very important issue. Necessary studies and practices should be carried out on this issue towards society's perception of gender inequality. Women's football can be used as an important tool for the sustainability of preventing gender inequality.

Notes

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