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Football, Empowerment and Gender Equality: An Exploration of Elite-Level Women's Football in South Africa

Mari Haugaa Engh

Seeking to empower females through sport is somewhat paradoxical given that the world of sport can be a bastion for male privilege and power (Saavedra 2009:124)

Introduction

Women's role in sport, and the role of sport in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, has increasingly become a key concern within the development 'industry' since the mid-1990s. Starting with the emergence of the Women in Sport movement in the 1990s (Saavedra 2005) and the Brighton Conference of 1994, women and girls have increasingly entered the policy frameworks of international sport and development. The Brighton declaration succinctly points out that 'while women and girls account for more than half of the world's population and although the percentage of their participation in sport varies between countries, in every case it is less than that of men and boys' (International Working Group on Women and Sport 1994:1). Apart from the potential of sport to foster gender equality and women's empowerment, it is also seen as 'an extremely powerful means of promoting physical and mental health' (Sport for Development and Peace, International Working Group 2008:8). The International Working Group for Sport for Development and Peace, for example, notes that 'sport participation leads to increased self-esteem, self-confidence, and enhanced sense of control over one's body' (Sport for Development and Peace, International Working Group 2008:10).

Drawing on the claims made by literature supporting sport-in-development discourse and thinking, this chapter provides a critical examination of the role of women's football in bringing about women's empowerment and gender equality, and raises some key questions concerning women's participation in elite-level sport. Constructions of heteronormative femininity impact on women's sporting potentials, and continue to shape the female body as distinctly different from the male, athletic body, thus upholding inequitable beliefs about sportswomen, female bodies and sexuality. In this sense, the physical body of sporting women, despite the recent acceptance of female athleticism and muscularity, continues to be 'a work in progress'; a body that must be shaped, regulated and controlled in order to be acceptable and 'readable'.

This chapter is based on the findings of my Masters thesis, and presents material gathered in my interviews with women in elite-level women football in South Africa. The discussion is based on qualitative, informal interviews with 18 elite-level women footballers in South Africa, 12 of whom are currently members of the senior women's national football team, Banyana Banyana. The remaining 6 participants are members of one of Cape Town's oldest and most successful women's football teams. The interviews took place at a national team camp in Pretoria in October 2008, and in Cape Town between August and November 2008. The material presented in this chapter is informed by feminist post-modern theories and perspectives, and aims to challenge the gendered bias inherent in most African sports sociology through taking women's experiences seriously.

My positioning as a white, Norwegian woman has undoubtedly shaped the material presented in this chapter. As a football player, however, I have often had my sexual orientation, 'female-ness' and skill as a player questioned, and I am well acquainted with what it means to be 'a woman who plays football'. Moreover, I have lived, worked, studied and researched in South Africa over the past six years. Thus, I have been able to situate my analysis within the context of the observations I have made and the intimate conversations, discussions and formal interviews I have had with South African women footballers. Nonetheless, I remain firm that knowledge is essentially partial and situated, and this chapter is grounded as much in a hope to understand and make sense of what I have experienced in my time on the football field, as it is in a hope to contribute to continental knowledge production within this under-researched field.

Sport, Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

Sport and physical activity has come to be seen as 'an extremely powerful means of promoting physical and mental health' (Sport for Development and Peace, International Working Group 2008:8). The Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (SDP-IWG), for example, has suggested that 'Sport participation leads to increased self-esteem, self-confidence, and enhanced sense

of control over one's body' (Sport for Development and Peace, International Working Group 2008:10). Moreover, sport and physical activity has been argued to hold very specific advantages for girls and women, and the SDP-IWG argues that:

Sport programs can enhance the empowerment process by challenging gender norms, reducing restrictions and offering girls and women greater mobility, access to public spaces, and more opportunities for their physical, intellectual and social development (SDP-IWG 2008:131).

McDermott (2000) supports this argument and argues that one of the most striking ways in which physical activity can 'empower' women physically is through providing opportunities for women to experience their bodies physically, through physical work. Clearly, learning and developing new skills carries with it a sense of achievement and empowerment (Garrett 2004), but physical activity can also offer a space where experiences of the physical body 'at work' can liberate women from the feminine body aesthetics and discourses attached to hegemonic femininity (McDermott 2002). McDermott suggests that the 'potentially empowering consequence of physical activity 'is to broaden their [women's] understanding of the multiple ways, beyond appearance, in which they can physically experience themselves' (McDermott 2000:356).

With passing of Title IV in the United States, the emergence of an international Women in Sports (WIS) movement and increased feminist sport scholarship, the past decades has seen an increased focus on gender 'work' particularly within sport-in-development organizations, institutions, donor agencies and national governments (Saavedra 2005). This has enabled better attention to be paid to the ways in which sports are gendered and lend support to unequal gendered power relations in wider society. These discourses argue for the use of 'sport for gender equity' (Meier 2005) and suggest that sport, as a social institution, can effectively empower women and contribute to gender equality in wider society.

The Context: Women's Football in South Africa

Organized sports in South Africa are deeply classed, raced and gendered. Legacies of colonialism and apartheid continue to shape access to participation, sporting facilities and resources at all levels of organized sports. Although South Africans are generally sports enthusiasts, mass participation is limited and highly contested (Pelak 2009) while sports leadership, administration and participation, are still dominated by men (Burnett 2002). According to Cora Burnett (2002) only 21 per cent (2.5 million) of South African women participate in sports, as a multitude of difficulties such as domestic and reproductive responsibilities cause sports participation to receive low priority, and also lead to high dropout rates (Roberts 1992; Pelak 2009). One of the major constraints on women's (and men's) effective participation is caused by the vast racial and geographical inequalities con-

cerning access to facilities and resources; most quality sporting facilities are located in white, urban areas, making transport a major problem for many South Africans (Pelak 2009).

While the situation has improved somewhat for the national team and some of the elite-level teams, the fact is that much of women's football remains underfunded and under-resourced. Most teams still struggle to find resources to cover costs in relation to league affiliation, transportation and equipment; and players, coaches and administrators in women's clubs still do not get paid for their hard work (Clark, Mills and Haugaa 2009). Research from Cape Town suggests that many women's football teams cannot afford to register their teams with their Local Football Association (LFA), nor do they have money to cover transport costs (Clark, Mills and Haugaa 2009). As a result many township teams, despite having enough women and girls that are willing and wanting to play football, do not get opportunities to compete in formal leagues and competitions, and are left to organize matches against other club- and school teams on an ad-hoc basis (Clark, Mills and Haugaa 2009). In addition, many teams struggle to find adequate facilities for training and matches and many players cannot afford to buy football boots and shin-guards for themselves. As a result, many teams are effectively run on contributions made by the coaches themselves, many of which are under- or unemployed (Clark, Mills and Haugaa 2009).

Material constraints are undoubtedly tied to class and race positions and do not have the same impact on all sporting women in South Africa, and Pelak (2005) has argued that in the Western Cape, white and coloured women enjoy better access to sporting facilities and resources than black women. Keim and Qhuma (1996) support this claim and outline how sporting facilities was a major problem in the establishment of the 'Winnie's Ladies Soccer team', a black team based in the township of Gugulethu in Cape Town. They explain that the 'Winnies' struggled to access training grounds on which to hold practice sessions and games, because men's clubs prevented the team from using the few football fields and facilities available in Gugulethu (Keim and Qhuma 1996). Black sporting women also experience ideological constraints differently from their white counterparts, and while many black women participate in football, the fact remains that there is an immense lack of female black sporting role models in South Africa; South African sports stars are mainly white (for example Penny Heyns, Elana Meyer, Amanda Coetzer and Zola Budd) (Burnett 2002). Although footballers like Desiree Ellis, Portia Modise and most recently Noko Alice Matlou, have received a fair amount of publicity and recognition, it is doubtful that these women can be considered mainstream (malestream) sports stars.

In addition to the material constraints, there are also important ideological impediments to the development of women's football in South Africa. Pelak argues that 'the strict boundaries between so-called 'male sports' and 'female

sports' in South Africa are classic examples of how dominant groups constructs social, physical and cultural boundaries to build collective identities and *naturalize* their privilege' (Pelak 2005:58). Women football players are faced with being marked as outsiders, and their game and their skills are devalued to constitute simply a less valuable alternative to male football (Pelak 2005). Whereas men are playing football, women are seen to only be 'kicking' the ball around, and are thus not taken seriously as football players (Pelak 2005). However, what it means to be a woman footballer in South Africa is also undoubtedly tied to racial and class positions. Drawing on research performed in Cape Town, Pelak (2010) suggests that because football is predominantly seen as a black sport in South Africa, black women are seen to possess 'natural' football abilities that coloured and white women do not. Through valuing black women as 'natural' footballers and situating coloured women as playing 'with heart', women footballers themselves are reiterating essentialist notions of race that maintain football as a black sport (Pelak 2010:69).

Football and Femininity

Sport and physical activity function as a masculinity training-ground (Griffin 1998), they uphold an arena where boys learn to be men, and where men 'can continue to have ideological dominance and power' (Sisjord 1997:433). Because men tend to outperform women in competitions involving tests of strength and endurance 'men can maintain the illusion of athletic superiority by naming these attributes as bona fide requirements of the ideal athlete' (Lenskyj 1990:237). Associating physical strength, aggression, activity and muscularity with hegemonic masculinity creates a situation where men come to be seen as 'natural' athletes, whereas notions of hegemonic femininity associate women with 'passivity, relative weakness, gentleness and grace' (Theberge 1987:388). According to Kolnes (1995:64), 'to be a woman and to do hard physical training is often perceived to be a contradiction in terms'.

For women footballers, there is a clear sense of having to prove legitimacy as women, because playing football is seen as a signal of non-compliance with the heterosexual paradigm. South African women footballers are constantly faced with challenges to their capability, skill, appearance and sexuality; and negative stereotypes of women footballers as 'butch lesbians' are widespread. Even national-level administrators in South Africa have criticized women footballers for not being feminine enough, and demanded that the Banyana Banyana players attend etiquette classes, wear tighter-fitting shirts while playing and start wearing skirts rather than trousers when travelling to and from camp and matches (Saavedra 2005). Moreover, in 2005 Ria Ledwaba, the then Chairperson of the Women's Committee of SAFA was quoted as saying:

We don't want our girls to look, act and dress like men just because they play soccer... They need to learn how to be ladies... At the moment you sometimes can't tell if they're men or women... (City Press, 12/03/2005).

These outbursts from top-level administrators clearly show the extent to which women footballers' femininities are being controlled and disciplined to fall in line with heteronormative discourses of femininity.

Like in other parts of the world, women footballers in South Africa draw on the notion of tomboyism to explain their interest and love for football, and they represent themselves as being different and less 'girly' than other girls while growing up (Haugaa 2007). Upon reaching puberty however, some experience pressures to take up a more feminine-appropriate sport, like netball or hockey, to signal that they have grown out of the 'tomboy phase' (Haugaa 2007). A refusal to 'grow out of' tomboyism through taking on more feminine appropriate activities is considered a signal of transgressing heterosexual norms, and is thought to be an indication of homosexuality (Haugaa 2007). This leads to many feeling the need to mark their bodies as feminine, through the use of clothing, make-up and accessories. However, because the 'butch, lesbian' stereotype is so present in South African women's football, some players also feel that by appearing too feminine they are devalued as footballers (Haugaa Engh 2007). Women who play football are expected to 'play like men' but 'look like women' when entering this male domain, creating a system in which football remains understood in masculine terms, even when women are playing the game.

In the last decade, however, there has been an increasing acceptance of women and sport. Emerging images of athletic femininity have affirmed and given legitimacy to sporting women and athletic femininities, and as such, provided opportunities for young women to construct athletic and physically active subjectivities without running the risk of being labeled as 'pseudo-men' (Heywood and Dworkin 2003). While western beauty-ideals previously demanded a woman's body to be slender, thin and passive; we are currently facing a situation where discourses of femininity expect women to present bodies that are not only slender, sexy and feminine, but also toned and fit (George 2005).

However, there is a fine line between being fit, beautiful and feminine and being too big and muscular. Several of the women I interviewed claimed that football and training de-feminizes their body, and that due to a strict training regiment, their thighs become so muscular that it is no longer possible for them to 'walk like women' or wear stilettos. Karabo, for example, said that:

Even if I wear stilettos now, you will see that I struggle.

Weight-lifting, in particular, can pose a real problem to maintaining a feminine physique. Winnie argued that although her club team coach provides her with a weight-lifting programme, she avoids doing certain kinds of exercises and is

careful with how much weight she lifts in order to avoid building too much muscle. She said that many of her team-mates do this because:

We actually try to make sure you know that we maintain our normal muscles, we don't want to like...become big just like boys you know, too much muscle.

Winnie's statement clearly indicates that although some muscle tone is acceptable for women, muscle bulk is fundamentally associated with masculinity, and that it is important for female athletes to present bodies that are distinctly different (and smaller) than male athletic bodies. Because conventional femininity only allows a certain degree of muscularity, many players stress the need for having a feminine 'shape'. While a six-pack¹ can be attractive, it is only so if it is coupled with noticeable breasts and round hips. These regimes lend support to the idea that feminine athleticism is acceptable only so long as women appear heterosexy; 'a seemingly contradictory 'identity that [is] simultaneously tough, fit, feminine and heterosexual' (Ezzel 2009:112). As such, South African women footballers are under pressure to train hard for their sport, but also to appear feminine and sexy on and off the field. In this, the empowering potential of physical exercise and training is negated through the policing of heteronormative femininity.

Football and Homophobia

Hetero-normativity functions as an organizing principle in sport, and homophobia is utilized to police the appearances and appropriateness of women's bodies (Kolnes 1995 and Griffin 1998). Because sports have been constructed as a masculinity training-ground, where boys learn to be men, women's presence in sport (and especially male dominated sports) threaten the seemingly 'natural' association of aggression, competitiveness and athleticism with men, and as a result, women athletes are stigmatized and labelled deviant so as not to threaten the 'natural' gender order (Griffin 1998). Most of the women footballers I have encountered during my research have experienced, on at least one occasion, being labelled as 'deviant', 'lesbian' or 'butch'. For some, this took the form of people referring to them as 'boytjie'² or trying to 'be like a man'. Most however, are so used to such utterances that they simply shrug them off, or refuse to take such comments seriously. As was the case with Pumla;

They are still saying that. That all the women that are playing soccer are lesbians. Me, it is like it gets in here [points to one ear] and out here [points to other ear]...I know myself I am a woman.

Although simply being a footballer is enough for accusations and suspicions of homosexuality to surface (often from people on the outside, both men and women), the labelling is also 'read' from a woman's style of dress, hairstyle and physical appearance. Because of this many of the players, when I asked them

how they respond to the popular stereotype that ‘football makes you lesbian’, quickly turned to commenting on the way in which some women footballers choose to dress. Desiree for example, argued that women who dress ‘like men’ are behaving disrespectfully:

Most of the girls actually dress up like men and they want to be seen like a man and hang the pants just like the men so that’s, I would say that’s no discipline.

This statement from Desiree is significant in several ways. Firstly, her reference to style of dress indicates that her ‘reading’ of homosexuality is based on a specific masculine performance; she does not interpret accusations of lesbianism as being directed at all women footballers, but a specific ‘other’ type of footballer – the short-haired butch lesbian. Secondly, Desiree’s statement shows clearly how heteronormative expectations of feminine performances are intimately tied to notions of respectability. If a woman fails to wear a tracksuit the way it is ‘supposed’ to be worn by a woman, for example by wearing a cap sideways or rolling up one of the pant legs, she is regarded as being disrespectful. The normalization of hegemonic, heterosexual femininity goes so far as to not only regulate what a sporting woman can wear, but also how she is to wear her clothes.

Homophobia not only serves to keep many women away from sport, it also puts women who are labelled as ‘deviant’ (read: not heterosexual) at risk of homophobic prejudice and violence. Women who do not adequately mark or construct their bodies as toned, fit and ‘heterosexy’, often face social consequences such as devaluation, stigmatization and sometimes also violence and harassment (George 2005). Although women footballers in general face homophobic attitudes and harassment, those players identified as homosexual are particularly at risk, and as a result, many lesbian women footballers will keep their sexuality secret and proceed to ‘pass’ as being heterosexual in order to avoid harassment (Cox and Thompson 2001; Griffin 1998). Due to this, homosexuality within sport remains an almost invisible issue, and very little research and writing has given this issue the attention it deserves. In South Africa, discourses about homosexuality as un-African are widespread and broadly supported, and gay and lesbian Africans are said to be ‘mimicking Western or white culture’ (Muholi 2004:117). Many openly homosexual South Africans become victims of hate crimes although the South African Constitution (1996) protects against any form of discrimination, and the Equality Act of 2000 specifically outlaws hate crimes (Martin, Kelly, Turquet and Ross 2009). Zanele Muholi argues that black lesbian women are at particular risk of hate crimes and corrective rape as they occupy identities at the intersection of racist and sexist discourses concerning Black women’s sexuali-

ties; 'the rape of black lesbians reconsolidates and reinforces African women's identity as heterosexuals, as mothers, and as women' (Muholi 2004:122).

Fears of violent attacks and rape are thus a very real part of lesbian women's lives in South Africa, and women footballers are not exempt from this. On the 28th of April 2008, former Banyana Banyana player Eudy Simelane was found dead not far from her parents' house in Kwa Thema, a township outside Johannesburg. She had been raped and subsequently stabbed 25 times. Simelane was one of very few women who lived openly as a lesbian in Kwa Thema (Martin, Kelly, Turquet and Ross 2009:10). The rape and murder of Eudy was well-known among most of the women I interviewed, and several expressed fears that they too might become victims of violence if they fail to appear heterosexual 'enough'. As evidenced in this exchange between two national team players:

Mbali: They are killing...they are raping and then they kill...

Nandipha: It becomes scary

Mbali: Very scary. I mean that ja(yes) you think that you look feminine because,

well, you just got your hair done or something like that, but you don't.

What is most striking in the above quote is the acknowledgement that while players themselves may feel that they are presenting acceptable, feminine bodies; others may not. Due to the high levels of violence against women and hate crimes in South Africa, these concerns feature strongly in the narratives of women footballers.

Football, Discipline and Surveillance

While sport participation may allow women a sense of physical embodiment and power, an experience that has not previously been open to women, there are also growing concerns over the impact of elite/professional sport activity on physical embodiment. Johns and Johns (2000) claim that an 'ethic of excess exists in elite sport. These excesses may include compulsive, excessive weight training, the consumption of ergogenic aids and a high incidence of aberrant eating habits' (2000:222). Although women's football in South Africa has not yet reached the stage of being fully a professional sport (there is no national league, and women footballers still cannot make a living from their sport) players at the top level nonetheless experience intense pressures to train daily and watch their weight in order to achieve an acceptable athletic body. Many women players have indicated to me that their coaches and management keep a close watch on their weight, and that they are punished if they were seen to carry too much weight.

The following quote from Linda, a senior player with the national team, provides a useful insight into weight-related concerns:

Coach told me 'you are FAT!' and I was like 'hmm...maybe I am...' and then he just put me under pressure to lose it...you think 'cause you are training so much you can eat whatever you want, but it doesn't work that way...

Linda's statement above is illuminating for several reasons; it clearly shows the external regulation and control that footballers experience in relation to their weight. As professional athletes, elite-level women footballers are under close scrutiny when it comes to their weight and body shape, and the immense power a coach holds in determining what is appropriate renders individual experiences of, and control over, the body almost impossible. Linda's surprise at her coach calling her fat illuminates the disempowerment associated with external weight control.

Over-training and under-eating can easily overshadow the emancipatory and empowering potentials of sport participation for women. As a result of this, I would argue that elite-level participation does not necessarily afford women the opportunities for positive physical embodiment, but that it enforces a new level of bodily control, management and distress that is specific to professional sports. In this, training and sports participation forms part of a regulated regime, constructed through discourses of fitness, fatness and athleticism, and players are constantly putting themselves under pressure to live up to these standards and expectations.

For all professional footballers, injuries remain a core concern, and they add to the burden of policing weight in accordance with feminine and athletic ideals. Injuries can lead to weight issues and bad eating patterns especially for those who do not belong to resourceful structures and clubs. Janine, a former national team player, has had vast experience with injuries, and she presented a disturbingly long narrative; starting with a broken ankle at the age of 9 and culminating in a complicated knee injury that led to her retirement from international football at the age of 27. Thinking back on how her many injuries impacted on her psyche, she stated:

I had an operation and after that I had crutches and it took me over a year to get back again, and I picked up this weight and I struggled a lot, I didn't know what to do. Sometimes I don't even want to eat, I eat like fruits and nothing else, I drink coffee and I have my cigarettes'.

For Janine, an injury did not only mean that she lost her spot in the national team as well as her club team, she also had to fight long and hard to have her medical bills covered by the South African Football Association. Although she sustained her injuries while representing her country, she had to postpone the required surgery several times because she did not have funds available to cover the asso-

ciated costs. In addition, her injuries left her feeling depressed and caused her to gain a lot of weight due to not being able to train regularly anymore.

The fear of sustaining serious and debilitating injuries paradoxically leads many women footballers to ignore various aches and pains they may feel while playing. Nandipha, for example, confessed in our interview that she was ignoring an injury because she was afraid that paying attention to it would either end her career or leave her facing several months of recovery. She stated that:

I am running away from injuries...I don't want operation. My injuries are pushing me to do operations ...I can't not now...now it is quiet, but it will come one day.

Although she was aware that ignoring an injury might lead it to become worse, she insisted on playing, despite feeling pain and discomfort. Dealing with pain becomes an integral part of coping mechanisms when participating in elite-level football. Mbali stated clearly in our conversation that she is accustomed to dealing with pain:

'It is all in the mind...the power of the mind is very powerful'.

Mbali thus clearly suggests that it is possible to ignore an injury through refusing to acknowledge it. This represents a mechanical view of the physical body, a view that in no way enhances physical confidence or empowerment. Rather than listening to their bodies and reading the signs that they are sending, Mbali and Nandipha continue to push their bodies beyond the pain threshold in order to fulfill the short-term goal of playing another game for the national team. Thus, the pressures of elite and professional sports create a situation whereby 'coping' with pain and injury is an integral part of participation, as it is seen as inevitable to achieving success (Theberge 2008). Through disciplining the body in line with discourses of elite sport and athleticism, many athletes come to treat, and perhaps experience, their bodies as machines for success (Zakus 1995).

Conclusion

Women's football does hold some empowerment potentials for women. Through football women can come to know and experience their bodies as their own rather than simply experiencing their bodies as a vehicle for communicating sexual availability and attractiveness (Brace-Govan 2002). However, the expectations placed on sporting women to appear heterosexy, fit and toned complicates the experiences of ownership and bodily control, and seem to lead many women to experience their bodies in contradictory ways (George 2005; Cox and Thompson 2000; Cahn 1993; Griffin 1998; Lenskyj 1990). Although feminine athleticism has become an acceptable part of a new commoditized beauty ideal, women ath-

letes still feel as though they are failing to present bodies that are feminine enough – and many are still engaging in processes of ‘feminizing’ their bodies.

Hetero-normative ideologies are a key in regulating athletic femininities, and posit a situation where femininity is possible only if it is coupled with heterosexuality. As a result heterosexuality, in sport, becomes a code for femininity (Kolnes 1995). Women’s appearances are regulated in response to a male gaze, and the feminine athlete is acceptable so long as she is considered sexually attractive to men. This reinforces the objectification of women’s (sporting) bodies, and represents women’s achievements as secondary to their appearances, thus lending support to notions of male superiority. The insistence on marking the female athletic body as an ultimately feminine body, reinforces a patriarchal ideology of gendered bodies, through the continued maintenance of a feminine body-beautiful regime (Maguire and Mansfield 1998). It reinforces the tendency of valuing women for what they look like, rather than what they achieve, and, as Craig (2006:162) notes ‘the feelings of inadequacy produced by the presence of beauty standards in women’s lives are, arguably, among the most personal manifestations of gender inequality in our lives’.

Because of the visibility that comes with being a professional athlete, elite-level South African women footballers experience (feminine) surveillance more intimately than those who play football on a recreational basis. The national women’s football team members are faced with the responsibility of ‘disproving’ crude stereotypes, and are expected to appear as feminine role models and football representatives. Moreover, professional level coaches are afforded intimate control and decision-making power over their athletes, and have the opportunity to regulate not only dietary and training regiments, but also off-the-field appearances and behaviours. In a South African context, professional sports are viewed as an avenue for personal improvement and upward mobility, due to a lack of generalized educational and employment opportunities. Although women’s football in South Africa is not yet fully professional, this means that for many women, football is a door-opener that can facilitate improved living standards for an extended family. Vast pressure is placed on young women to be disciplined and dedicated, creating a situation where pain, injuries and abuse can become a natural part of their existence. In this context, surveillance is omnipresent, and empowerment is constructed in monetary terms.

Shari Dworkin (2001) suggests that ‘while certain women disproportionately benefit from being physically powerful and healthy, an individualized fit body politic may be criticized as being removed from collective forms of empowerment that can challenge oppressive institutions and practices’ (Dworkin 2001:334). Echoing this, this article has shown that although football does play an important part in individual women’s lives, through offering opportunities for socioeco-

conomic mobility and physical freedom of expression, this participation alone does very little to challenge hegemonic and patriarchal notions of feminine subordination and compulsory heterosexuality. Rather than challenging the underlying structures and beliefs that posit femininity as foreign to and incompatible with, professional athleticism, professional sports participation can further subjugate women through an intensification of feminine expectations. Women in male domains and occupations, such as football, are threatening the 'naturalness' of the current gender order, and as a result face heightened pressures to prove their womanhood and heterosexuality. In this way, the ideologies and discourses that limit women's access to sport remain unchanged.

Notes

1. 'Six pack' refers to well-developed and clearly noticeable abdominal muscles.
2. 'Boyťjie' is Afrikaans slang for boy-like.

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