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The Corporatization of Women's Football in South Africa: A Case Study of the Sasol Sponsorship and its Transformative Potential

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One of the things that I strongly feel should be looked at is the reason why there is not so much sponsorship going into women's football and sport. And one of the areas that I would like explored is to look at the relationship between non-sponsorship of women's sport and African culture being male dominated and male solidarity... There might be a relation[ship] between male dominance and the lack of sponsorship. And if you start looking at it from that perspective, to look at a women's sports sponsorship... as far as I can remember, and I know most of the people in this industry, there are hardly any women that are sponsorship managers or marketing, or group corporate affairs managers, because that's where the decisions come from, so because of that, it might have an impact on when a decision is being made on sponsorship, who is making that decision (SASOL Sponsorship Specialist, August 2009).

This chapter suggests the possibility of creating both a market niche for women's sport and gender equality through corporate and media involvement in women's sport. Corporate and media institutions have the potential to create a profitable market and fan-base by publicizing female teams and athletes, thereby encouraging wider female participation and spectatorship. Using Sasol's sponsorship of women's football in South Africa, I argue that women's sport has the potential to benefit greatly from the sport-business-media model. This model encompasses the integration of sports with global market forces such as corporate businesses and the media, an arrangement which is now intrinsic to the successes found in men's sport. With genuine corporate and media buy in, these institutions have the capacity to generate a niche market and popularity for women's football within the global economy. Oil company Sasol's sponsorship of South African women's football provides a unique example on the continent, as it indicates genuine

corporate buy-in that has been guided by what is needed to boost the sport, as specified by key stakeholders within women's football in South Africa. Increasing the visibility of female footballers has the potential to change perceptions, strengthen existing women's football, and encourage more girls to participate in sport and become part of an expanding fan base. A process of 'normalizing' women playing male sport would greatly contribute to neutralizing gender inequalities and lend to women realizing their full potential.

This chapter draws on my observations and experiences over the past two years as a football player and administrator for the University of Cape Town (UCT) women's team participating in three leagues: a local football association (LFA), a South African Football Association (SAFA) regional league, and the University Sport South Africa (USSA) league, both regionally and nationally. As well as playing, I am an avid spectator of women's football, following local league games, the SASOL National Championships and international women's football. My arguments and suggestions also derive from extensive research I have undertaken on football, development and gender issues in South Africa over the past year. My Masters research for the Development Studies programme within the Sociology Department of UCT focused on the impact of the World Cup and legacy initiatives on football development at grassroots level. Furthermore, two colleagues and I combined our areas of expertise to form a Research Collective, specialising in gender, sport and development. Our most recent research explored the daily challenges and barriers that female administrators, referees and coaches in Cape Town face while participating in and promoting football.

Women's Football in South Africa

The impacts of the apartheid legacy on the dynamics of sport are well documented. The absence of sports facilities in African schools, combined with poverty, transportation problems and patriarchal controls meant that girls and women were not significantly involved in sport during apartheid (Hargreaves 2000). Moreover the ending of apartheid saw an increase in the 'feminization of poverty' (Hargreaves 2000:26). Certainly 'gender inequalities and sexism have produced an overriding structure of control throughout South African society, which is exaggerated in sport' (Hargreaves 2000:28). Gender inequalities can be located in the way that sponsorship is heavily weighted in favour of men's sports, which in turn perpetuates discrimination (Hargreaves 2000). Research findings from a study conducted in Cape Town show that the main barriers to women participating in sport today are lack of finances to pay for transport, equipment and fields; lack of support from male-dominated institutions such as the South African Football Association (SAFA); and a widespread negative stereotype that females who play football are 'masculine' (Clark et al, n.d).

Despite the legacies of oppression, women's football in South Africa is undoubtedly gaining visibility. That growing numbers of women are now entering the historically male domain of football is increasingly being recognized as a challenge to historical colonial, apartheid and patriarchal relations (Pelak 2009). Women and girls in football can be considered agents of change and democratization in the way that they are 'escaping the trappings of daily domestic labour and dominant gender ideology and showing up at the soccer fields' (Pelak 2009: 116). In this light then, although there is a long way to go, women's football in South Africa has progressed enormously in the 16 years since political democracy and is contributing to a more gender equitable society.

Organized women's football in South Africa has existed over the past 40 years with white women comprising the majority of teams during the apartheid era. Since 1994, an unprecedented number of coloured and black women joined existing teams and by mid-1990s South African women's football had grown exponentially (Pelak 2006). Although there are no official statistics, Martha Saveedra estimates that there were around 50,000 female participants in 2003. Women's football first acquired sponsorship in 2001 when the South African banking and insurance company Sanlam partnered with the SAFA to fund the SAFA Sanlam National Women's League, comprising over 300 teams from all the SAFA regions at that time. Champions from each of the 9 provinces competed for the national title in the Sanlam Halala Cup tournament (Saavedra 2003). Sanlam's corporate investment of 15 million Rand over 3 years has paved the way for further corporate involvement in women's football as companies such as Vodacom, Nike and Cadbury began to sponsor various regional tournaments (Saavedra 2003). Nationally-based corporations also assisted with equipment and transportation costs and ABSA bank has invested in amateur women's football by funding leagues and apparel (Clark et al, n.d; Pelak 2006).

It has also been acknowledged that over the past decade, media involvement has played an important role – albeit negligible in comparison to men's football coverage – in engendering new football opportunities among South African women. For example, Ghana and Nigeria's performance at the women's World Cup events prompted black South African women to 'more easily dream about travelling and making money by playing the sport' (Pelak 2006). It is clear that global capital and the 'global-sport media nexus' have helped develop new opportunities and interests in women's football (Pelak 2006). Given the vast advancements in the post-apartheid era as a result of relatively small investments, if corporate and media institutions now commit seriously to women's football in South Africa, it could become one of the strongest sports on the continent. The following case study of the South African oil company Sasol's recent 4-year sponsorship deal, between 2009 and 2012, of the women's national team Banyana

Banyana and the national provincial premier league shows how this is the beginning of a genuine commitment to realizing this dream.

Corporate and Media Investment in Women's Football: Creating a Market Niche and Gender Equality

Male sport has significantly developed via its increasingly intrinsic relationship with corporate and media bodies, which has been conceptualized as the 'sport-media-business alliance' involving the 'tripartite model of sponsorship rights, exclusive broadcasting rights and merchandizing' (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006). Women's football has consistently struggled to gain as much attention, investment and exposure as the men's game, despite the increasing number of female players worldwide. To boost women's football, there have been efforts internationally to train up and build the capacity and skills of women in administrative, coaching and refereeing roles. The significance and the successes of this campaign are widely recognized. In 2007, there were 52 female International Referees in Africa as a result of FIFA's infrastructure and capacity building programmes (Saavedra 2007). One such referee is South African Deidre Mitchell who has refereed in various women's international competitions and is the first female to referee a South African men's premier league game (BBC 2007). According to South African national women's team manager, Fran Hilton-Smith, 'FIFA has a massive development project to develop women's football, especially coaches... there are about six of us who are FIFA instructors and... we go to countries that are not developed in women's football and coach coaches to be instructors to coach other coaches' (Interview, August 2009). Although this recruitment process must continue if we are to have women managing and envisaging the future of the women's game, it is simply not enough to have these women within football working in isolation from wider processes. With increasing female participation levels within the sport, women's football is carving out an expanding future at amateur level. This however would remain 'unthreatening to football authorities' and would do little to 'alter the essentially amateur nature of the female game' (Williams 2003). For women's football to project itself to another level, integration with globalizing forces is essential. There are a number of women's sports which have benefited from being incorporated into processes of globalization, such as tennis, athletics and golf. Although the gains and exposure experienced by women in these sports are rarely equal to those experienced by men, the developments have been enormous. Fans of these women's sports have been given opportunities to follow their favourite female athlete, access constant updates on their sporting progress via various media channels, and be consumers of merchandise and sports events. Where corporations and sponsors have envisaged economic opportunities in the backing of these sports played by women, there has been a

dramatic shift in the awareness and perceptions in society of women as athletes, and has accelerated developments within the sport.

Corporate and media institutions in the sports industry have sophisticated ways of creating global icons and images in diverse local settings as they are 'adept at shaping and using glocal sport practices, symbols and celebrities as conduits for realizing their global ambitions; ensuring their corporate footprints transcend the boundaries of nation-states... and... that serving a profitable global presence necessitates operating in the languages of the local' (Andrews and Ritzer 2007:34). This indicates that global market forces have the potential to create a profitable market from women's football through the establishment of local iconic teams and players. As sponsors use the emotional impact of sport to build and connect with consumers, there is the opportunity for them to target sophisticated marketing of female sport to women and girls and indeed male followers of women's sport (Santomier 2008). With genuine corporate and media buy in, these institutions have the capacity to generate a niche market and popularity for women's football within the global economy. There are already an escalating number of female football participants across the globe which constitutes an untapped fan-base market. Global actors thus have the potential to transform the male-dominated activities of watching and buying into sport.

Donna De Verona, Chairman of the 1999 USA Women's World Cup Local Organising Committee argues that 'it can never again be doubted that women soccer players can attract interest, fill stadiums or earn high television ratings' (De Verona 2003). One of the main reasons for the unprecedented success of the 1999 Women's World Cup, whereby 650,000 tickets in total were sold, was the marketing strategy employed. Verona recalls that the Organising Committee 'appreciated early that our core fan base was different from that of the men's World Cup and from professional soccer', hence, they marketed women's football to a mostly new audience (De Verona 2003). Another reason for its success globally was the commitment by ABC television network and Cable partners ESPN 1 and 2 to broadcast all 32 matches in over 70 countries, prompting further sponsorship by corporate investors such as *Sports Illustrated* magazine which helped generate even more interest in the tournament (De Verona 2003). Here is an evidence of the kind of untapped market out there that has the potential to be appealing to corporate and media investors. It also proves that the mainstream sports crowd do not only have to be the audience being targeted.

Sponsorship of women's football may indeed have to start as a corporate social responsibility component rather than a commercial investment, but as the Sasol sponsorship of women's football in South Africa will show, investment returns are anticipated as improvements, successes and exposure of the game materialize. Businesses can therefore contribute to normalizing women's involve-

ment in football in society which in turn is likely to encourage wider female involvement. Women's football may provide an indication of the ability of women to realize their potential (Hoffmann et al 2006).

Sasol's Corporate Social Responsibility

Sports sponsorship has become pivotal within the global marketing campaigns of many brands and is considered to be as important as traditional marketing strategies as it creates and develops brand equity (Santomier 2008). That Sasol is committed long-term to women's empowerment is likely to influence the perceptions of Sasol's brand and company image positively. Sasol acknowledges that their sponsorship of women's football in South Africa is different as it is a corporate social responsibility investment, therefore 'you have to create your own value out of the sponsorship... if we have an event... and we market it well, we are able to get media to cover it and we are able to get awareness from the people of our sponsorship and also our association with sponsorship awareness' (Sasol Sponsorship Specialist, Interview, August 2009). Sasol views the sponsorship as buying into development and as a contribution to nation-building, rather than as a straightforward commercial investment. However, returns are predicted in the long-term as indicated by the Sasol Sponsorship Specialist: 'let's give the team what they need, let's give them equipment and in due course we will start deriving the benefits when everyone can be aware of the team, when they start winning. Because everyone follows a winner'.

Similarly, corporate and media institutions have the capacity to create personalities in sport and 'once you've created personalities in the sport, then the sport quickly catches on... once you've got personalities, people want to follow, people worship, people idolize; also with women's football, Marta and those girls from the US, they now play at an international level, everybody knows them' (Sasol Sponsorship Specialist, Interview, August 2009). It is clear then that Sasol's aims are to establish Banyana Banyana as one of the world's best and well-known teams. Achieving this would activate heightened involvement of the media and widespread support.

Sasol sponsors both the national women's team and a provincial premier league comprising 144 teams in the 9 provinces. All teams in the Sasol League receive a comprehensive 'starter pack' at the beginning of the season filled with training equipment such as water bottles, cooler box, first aid kit, bibs, cones, full match kit and so on. Additionally, Sasol provides travel grants and provincial club coaches have attended coaching workshops (SuperSport 2009). In February this year, Sasol toured the 9 provinces to host 'Road Shows' with objectives to raise awareness of women's football and to enable provincial team players to try out for the national team in front of Coach Augustine Makalalane. Quoting

Makalalane, 'the Sasol League Road Shows have given me more choice and a bigger pool of players to select from for the national team [...] talent we have discovered this year alone' (Gsport 2009). Winners from each of the Sasol Provincial premier leagues compete in the week-long Sasol National Championship.

The Sasol sponsorship of Banyana Banyana provides the team and players with all the resources and infrastructure to compete internationally, such as training equipment, domestic and overseas travel, accommodation and food expenditures and female-fitted apparel as well as formal and casual suits to enhance the professional image and morale of the players. In a recent interview, Banyana Banyana Manager, Fran Hilton-Smith, exclaimed that the Sasol sponsorship is 'the best thing that ever happened to women's football' (Interview, August 2009). With Sasol sponsoring both the national team and the provincial SAFA leagues it means that 'the national team have a pool of players who are active throughout almost the entire year, so when they are called up for national team duty they are fit and they are ready to play' (Sasol Sponsorship Specialist, Interview, August 2009). Indicative of the success of the Sasol sponsorship is the frequency with which Banyana Banyana is now able to play international games overseas. Saavedra (2003) cites the cost of airfares and lack of support from domestic football federations as hindrances to teams playing internationally or within Africa. Without frequent scheduling of inter-African matches and competitions, the level of play and visibility of women's football will not easily progress (Saavedra 2003). This is all set to change for South African women footballers. In the build-up to the African Women Championships taking place in October 2010, Banyana Banyana was invited to compete in the Cyprus Cup in February 2010. The team gave outstanding performances, narrowly losing to England's women 1-0, a substantial improvement from the previous year's 5-1 defeat. The team took part in this competition in 2009 and were invited back 'because the players are playing so well' (Hilton-Smith, Interview, August 2009). Banyana Banyana is also planning fixtures against Switzerland, New Zealand and Australia as well as a possible tournament in Chile. The team has also confirmed a 3-week pre-camp in Germany prior to the African Women Championships where they will play against Holland and Germany. Such preparations and travel were not possible prior to the Sasol sponsorship.

South Africa is hosting the African Women's Championships in Gauteng in October 2010 and the top two teams will qualify for the World Cup 2011 in Germany. There is widespread belief that Banyana Banyana has never been in a better position to qualify than now. Sasol are doing all they can to ensure Banyana Banyana win the African Women Championships: 'I sincerely believe in our team, that if the team can really start doing well, I mean if next year they can win the African Cup of Nations, that, on it's own, can get this team to be recognized

once and for all' (Sasol Sponsorship Specialist, Interview, August 2009). The reciprocal returns on Sasol's investments if Banyana Banyana qualify for the World Cup are voiced by the team manager: 'that is going to be massive publicity for SASOL [...] we have a huge crowd support for Banyana and especially at a tournament of that magnitude' (Hilton-Smith, Interview, August 2009).

There is a strong possibility therefore that Banyana Banyana will generate popularity by winning international sporting events. The sport-business-media concept is likely to be developed through the commodification of team support, such as team merchandise and ticket sales, as well as the marketing of female football icons. Targeting new audiences is a viable option which inherently comes with the appeal of constituting a new market niche. Today's advanced technology and communication channels also provide the means for South African women's football to be transmitted worldwide, and therefore, achieve connectivity via interactions with global market forces.

Concluding Remarks

In South Africa, Sasol is providing a platform to make the aspirations of female footballers a reality. Corporate and media involvement in women's football can develop a fan base once the exposure of talent occurs, the potential for a market is created. Female footballers could serve as much needed icons and role models in society. Every day images change perceptions and could strengthen existing women's football and encourage more girls to participate in sport and become part of an expanding fan base. There could be enormous positive impacts on inclusive participation of girls in physical activity due to increased visibility of female sporting role models, and as a result of the process of 'normalizing' women playing sport. This would greatly contribute to neutralising gender inequalities and lend to women realising their full potential.

Women have made vast strides in gaining representation on decision-making bodies and committees within sport. However the biggest challenge facing the corporatization of female sport is the lack of female representatives in corporate and media structures. Corporate and media institutions are key agents of change and the advancement of women's sport can be attributable to such. Presently, Gsport is the only reliable source that provides accurate and timely reports on women's sport and women in sport in South Africa (Gsport 2009). Fran Hilton-Smith recalls how journalists 'tell me it's very hard to get their editors to write on women's football because they're not interested'(Interview, August 2009). This is also applicable to women in the corporate world too, which is reiterated by the Sasol Sponsorship Specialist who recalls that, 'as far as I can remember, and I know most of the people in this industry, there are hardly any women that are sponsorship managers or marketing, or group corporate affairs managers, be-

cause that's where the decisions come from, so because of that, it might have an impact on when a decision is being made on sponsorship, who is making that decision' (Sasol Sponsorship Specialist, Interview, August 2009).

Corporate and media institutions have become inextricably linked to the promotion of sport within the context of globalization (Andrews and Ritzer, 2007; Giulianotti and Robertson 2007). It is important to note that there could be potential negative consequences for women's football as a result of adopting a capitalist model, which we have seen in men's football. Despite the unprecedented opportunities, wealth and popularity that globalization has enabled, it has also triggered inequalities and disparities, and men's football is now driven by capitalist multinational corporations with questionable practices (Darby 2000; Alegi 2007). Although the sport-business-media triad has boosted international football competitions, leagues and teams to exceptional levels, at the same time there are countries and populations that have been marginalized or exploited, typically at grass-roots level or across the third world (see Darby 2005; Alegi 2007). Sport, therefore, cannot be seen as separate from other commercial, transnational operations. Such issues must be interrogated further and understood within the framework of gender equality debates.

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