

**DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN AZERBAIJAN:
PROBLEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS****M.E. Ahmadli***Azerbaijan Sports Academy*mustafa.ahmadli2022@sport.edu.az, orcid.org/0009-0000-0243-4046**Nəşr tarixi**

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Annotation. This study explores the challenges faced by women's football in Azerbaijan, including societal attitudes, limited resources, and infrastructure. It offers strategic recommendations to promote the sport, such as increased funding, improved training facilities, and awareness campaigns to shift cultural perceptions and encourage greater participation among women and girls.

Keywords: *women's football, Azerbaijan, development, challenges, recommendations.*

1. Introduction. The activity of women, who have an important place in social life, in the field of sports is a reflection of their general status in the society in which they live. Considering the position of women and the roles attributed to them throughout the world, it can be said that women in the field of sports are evaluated based on their gender before their athlete characteristics. As is generally the case in every subject, there are gender superiorities in the field of sports. When considering sports branches, a dominant gender superiority in impressions of performance levels and differences in perspective on the subject can be seen when societies with different development levels are observed. While the rate of women's participation in sports is high in developed countries, we see that the rate is low in developing countries. Because, considering the role of women in developing societies, it is thought that they will exist with their fertility, the smell of perfume instead of sweat, and a quiet family life instead of an active life. If

he/she is going to engage in any sports branch, it is recommended that he/she choose swimming, tennis, skating and similar aesthetic branches. Gender roles have been an important factor in shaping the position of women in society. As individuals, we are shaped in the society we exist in, according to the gender roles perceived within that society. Gender has been considered an important factor in shaping women's social status throughout history. Over time, people create their own sexual identity according to the gender perception of the society they live in. In this process, male and female roles shaped through gender fields have different meanings. Although today gender roles seem like a complete system that surrounds and directs human relations, the truth is that our society is divided into different categories. People see themselves differently from everyone else in terms of what they have and what they do not have, and they classify them according to these perceptions. These categorical differences in social structure can be based on religion, race, profession, biological characteristics, etc. It may also change accordingly. In addition to these categorical formations, men and women form the basis of individual and social life.

The field of sports has not been able to escape being among the areas where gender inequality has been maintained from past to present. Although women's orientation and participation in sports is high in developed countries, this rate is very low in developing countries. This is because it is believed that women should exist only for fertility, preferring a passive life over an active one. Considering women's participation in sports, it is recommended to choose aesthetic and artistic sports such as skating, swimming and tennis. It is thought that women's sports achievements

make them more masculine. It can be said that scientific research on women has increased recently both at national and international levels. As in all other fields, women's quantitative and qualitative performance is becoming increasingly important in sports, which has universal values and tries to spread these values to the development of society.

Today, football has taken its place in many areas such as social life, media, politics and economy. Football has become an important part of daily life with its increasing economic volume, its place in the media and even in the political arena. Football is a fast version of football played indoors and emerged in South America in the early 20th century. Women's football leagues are becoming increasingly popular around the world. FIFA, UEFA and other organizations organize various programs and events to support female football players. However, the male dominance of football, in which many people participate globally, is undeniable. In modern football, as it is played today, dating back to the 20th century, women have been excluded for a very long time, even as spectators. Although social changes have occurred with the success of women athletes and various feminist movements, differences between men and women are still noticeable in some sports branches. Families at a certain socioeconomic and cultural level in society encourage their girls to be interested in sports. However, despite these incentives, the duration of girls' participation in sports is lower than boys, depending on the social structure. Football, which has existed thousands of years ago with its primitive playing styles throughout history, has continued its continuous development and has become an arena for spectacle on a global scale.

2. The place of women's football in the world. The roots of the tension between football and gender, which I will try to explain in the history of women's football, are closely linked to the history of sports. Philosophy of Olympism In the laws of Elis: "On the way to Olympia... there is a steep mountain rising with majestic stones, its name is Typaeum, any woman who is found to have participated in

the Olympics will be thrown down from here". There is a meaning here that embodies the exclusion of women from sports since ancient times. Throughout the history of sports, men have played a role in the birth and continuation of many sports branches. Throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, men denied women access to sports facilities and programs, disparaged women's initiatives, and threatened women with a body health dilemma. Women were perceived as the weaker sex; They encountered a gender system that was closed not only to sports but also to all areas of social life and political rights. The situation that prevents women from participating in sports activities is based on women's lack of physical skills and the fact that women's primary social roles do not allow for such activities. When we look at athletic performance, high performance means having good physical characteristics, ability, ambition, etc. Defining it with criteria enabled men to be at the center in this field and to be numerically superior. Sport is thus established as a microcosm of hegemonic masculinity. In this process, sports that are considered male-dominated (boxing, rugby, football) not only normalize male dominance both within themselves and in their relations with women, but also ensure that female athletes are not accepted in these fields.

Many branches, except synchronized swimming, pioneered by Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman at the beginning of the 20th century, were first created, established and built by men, and then women were included. For example, the invention of team sports such as volleyball and basketball took place in the training schools of the Christian Young Men's Association in the second half of the 1890s. Doing sports has not been easy for women. Because the sports that women will do are examined whether there is physical contact or whether their class characteristics are appropriate. At the first modern Olympic Games in 1900, women could compete in tennis and golf, sports open only to upper-class women. Archery was added to these in 1904. Volleyball was added in 1964, basketball and hand-

ball in 1976, shooting and cycling in 1984, and football in 1996. Additionally, wrestling in 2004 and boxing in 2012 became sports in which women could compete in the Olympics. For nearly two-thirds of the 20th century, women were banned from playing football by administrators. The use of football fields was restricted and girls were not allowed to play football with boys. The history of women's participation in football includes a history of discrimination and hostility towards women in almost all geographical regions, including England, the cradle of modern football. Football quickly spread to European countries through British men, but women's participation in the game was not that fast both in England and other countries [2].

Despite various objections and bans, women who entered the field through the cracks of football in the late 19th and early 20th centuries began to take part as football players. It is accepted that the first women's football team in England was "British Ladies", which was established in 1895 and the matches were played with thousands of participants. The number of fans has increased with other teams established since 1895. Football became a popular sport among women at that time, especially working-class women who participated in sports activities that saved the long working hours of women working in munitions factories during the war. In 1921, the number of women's football teams in England was close to 150. Teams formed by factory women workers (e.g. Dick, Kerr Ladies FC) also organized international competitions. For example, 12 thousand people gathered at the Pershing Stadium in Paris to watch the match between France and England in 1920. Women's teams and leagues were established in various countries during the First World War. When women established their own football leagues in France in 1902; Women's Football has been played in Sweden since 1918 and in Austria since 1923. Women faced many obstacles in women's football, which is not in a constantly developing direction, as well as in other sports branches. The most concrete example of this was the decision

of the English Football Association to ban women's football with the decision that "the game of football is not suitable for women", after the women's football match played at Everton Goodsin Park on December 5, 1921, with the participation of 53 thousand spectators.

This attitude, seen after the 1940s, became evident in almost every country in Europe and South America, including Brazil. For example, in 1933, a women's football federation was established in France, which did not survive until the 1940s. News about women's football gradually disappears from the newspapers, and comments are written criticizing the young women "looking like street children". Women's football, played recreationally between 1920-69, was not taken seriously and was treated as an exhibition match. The German Football Association banned women's football in 1955 because it "damaged the physical structure of women". Women playing football in Germany were not able to play football in an organized manner until the 1970s due to this ban. For the same reasons, between 1941 and 1979, the Brazilian National Sports Council banned women from participating in sports such as football, boxing and decathlon, considering that football was against the nature of women. After years of ban, the women's game began to re-emerge from the 1970s. With the social developments in the mid-1960s (such as the 1968 freedom movement, women's rights movement, workers' protests), new advances were made in sports, and with the emergence of the idea of healthy life (fitness movement), women began to take a more prominent place in the field of sports. In addition, women have participated more in sports with the influence of innovations in education and professional fields. In this developing period, it has become easier to access information and education, and female athletes and coaches have begun to take part in different sports branches. Women who escaped the bans found a place for themselves in the 1970s. Despite these developments, there were times in the 1970-80s when the effects of the bans continued and women had difficulty in entering the football field. Dunning states that Ted Croker (Secretary of the English Football

Association in 1988) reflected this approach: “Football is a game of competition that requires challenging physical contact. For this reason, it should remain a men's game. Women must support men in this game. Women's jobs include taking care of children, doing laundry, ironing, and preparing and serving meals. “They have no place in this game,” he commented [1].

The independent European Football Confederation was founded in 1969 and Italy hosted the first official World Cup tournament in 1970. After the ban in Germany in 1955, women founded the Women's Football Federation to continue playing football and more than 150 unofficial international tournaments were organized. The encouragement of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and the struggle of women who wanted to play football were effective in lifting the ban in Germany in 1970. For the first time in the history of UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), a Women's Committee was established in 1980, and the chairman of the committee had a representative on the UEFA board of directors. Thus, federations affiliated with UEFA started to form women's committees. Approximately 14.1 million people watched the 2011 World Cup final between Germany and Japan. Football took its place as an Olympic sport at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics (men's football tournaments at the Olympics began in 1900). In the 2012 London Olympics, approximately 700 thousand spectators came to the stadiums to watch football matches.

It is known that today, 1.2 million football players and more than twenty thousand teams are registered in Europe. While women play in their own leagues in 49 countries, 50 countries conduct national team training. Watching women's football in the stands and on television is increasing. This increase was noticeable in the final match of the 2012 London Olympics. It was reported that 80 thousand people watched the match between the USA and Japan. 408 million people watched the 2011 Women's World Cup matches. Developments in the last twenty years have led to an increase in the number of projects, policies and practices aimed at increasing girls' participa-

tion in football, especially through FIFA and UEFA and women's sports federations. One of the most recent examples is the campaign launched by the English Football Association in June 2015 for school girls to play football with the slogan “We Can Play”. Kelly Simmons, President of the Women's Football Association, stated that they are in a society where football is still not a girls' sport and that they need to raise awareness, especially among parents. He said that they aim to introduce 100 thousand girls into football. Apart from England, many political campaigns have been carried out in different geographical regions of the world, such as “Girls and Football SA”⁴ in South Africa, to encourage girls to participate in football, to empower girls through football and to train coaches. Despite progress, there is still a huge gap in the popularity, prevalence and quality of men's and women's football. This is due to women constantly fighting to be a part of football against sexism, misogyny, bans and gender stereotypes, and men's football has turned into an industry. If we see football as a reflection of society, we have the chance to look at the presence of women in football at a macro level. Women's secondary position within the social structure and the application of some patriarchal regulations to their daily lives also determine the limits of their participation and participation in football. For example, FIFA General Secretary Joseph Blatter mentioned in 1995 that female football players participate in football “with their own characteristic style of play and games characterized by a stronger reproduction (imitation) of the men's game with real elegance” [2].

3. The place of women's football in azerbaijan. The history of women's football in Azerbaijan can be traced back to the early 20th century when the country was part of the Russian Empire. During this period, football was primarily seen as a male-dominated sport, with limited opportunities for women to participate. However, as Azerbaijan gained independence in 1918 and later became part of the Soviet Union, social changes began to pave the way for the inclusion of women in sports, including football. In the Soviet era, women's football started to gain recognition as part of

the broader push for gender equality in sports. The establishment of women's football clubs and teams in Azerbaijan during this time provided women with opportunities to engage in the sport and showcase their talent on the field. Despite the prevailing gender norms and societal expectations, female footballers in Azerbaijan began to make strides in the sport, laying the foundation for its future development.

The journey of women's football in Azerbaijan has not been without its challenges. Like many other countries, Azerbaijan faced barriers such as societal stereotypes, lack of resources, and limited infrastructure for women's football. Additionally, the political and economic transitions that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 posed further obstacles to the development of the sport. However, despite these challenges, women's football in Azerbaijan continued to grow, thanks to the dedication and determination of players, coaches, and administrators. The establishment of the Azerbaijan Women's Football Championship in the early 1990s provided a platform for female footballers to compete at the national level, fostering talent development and promoting the sport among women and girls across the country. Furthermore, international recognition and participation played a crucial role in advancing women's football in Azerbaijan. The inclusion of the Azerbaijani women's national team in regional and international competitions, such as the UEFA Women's Euro qualifiers and FIFA Women's World Cup qualifiers, not only raised the profile of the sport but also inspired a new generation of female footballers in the country.

In recent years, women's football in Azerbaijan has seen significant growth and investment. The establishment of youth development programs, grassroots initiatives, and women's football academies has helped to nurture talent at a young age and provide aspiring female footballers with the necessary training and support to excel in the sport. Moreover, increased collaboration with international football organizations and participation in tournaments and events have further propelled the development of women's football in Azerbaijan. The hosting of international matches and

competitions, such as the UEFA Women's Euro and FIFA Women's World Cup qualifiers, has not only showcased Azerbaijan's capabilities as a host nation but also promoted the sport at the grassroots level. Looking ahead, the future of women's football in Azerbaijan appears promising. With continued investment, support, and advocacy, the sport is poised to reach new heights and achieve greater gender equality in sports. By addressing challenges such as gender stereotypes, lack of resources, and infrastructure constraints, Azerbaijan can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for female footballers to thrive and succeed on the global stage.

In recent years, the Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan (AFFA) has taken significant steps to bolster the development of women's football in the country by establishing various youth leagues catered specifically to girls. These leagues not only serve as platforms for young female players to hone their skills and compete at a competitive level but also contribute to the broader goal of promoting gender equality in sports. Among the notable youth leagues organized by AFFA are the AFFA High Girls League, AFFA U-17 Girls League, and AFFA U-14 Girls League [4].

AFFA High Girls League - The AFFA High Girls League is one of the premier youth football leagues in Azerbaijan designed for female players in the high school age range. This league provides a structured and competitive platform for talented young players to showcase their abilities and compete against peers from across the country. By participating in the AFFA High Girls League, players have the opportunity to develop their skills, gain valuable experience, and potentially catch the attention of scouts and talent identification programs. The AFFA High Girls League operates under the auspices of AFFA and adheres to the federation's guidelines and regulations for youth football. Matches are typically held on weekends or designated match days, allowing players to balance their academic commitments with their passion for football. The league follows a format similar to senior-level competitions, with teams competing in a series

of matches over the course of a season, culminating in playoffs and a championship title (<https://www.affa.az>).

AFFA U-17 Girls League - The AFFA U-17 Girls League caters to female footballers in the under-17 age category and serves as a crucial developmental pathway for young players aspiring to pursue a career in football. This league provides a stepping stone for players transitioning from grassroots and youth football to more competitive levels of the game. By competing in the AFFA U-17 Girls League, players have the opportunity to test themselves against top talent in their age group, further develop their skills, and gain exposure to the rigors of competitive football. Similar to the AFFA High Girls League, the AFFA U-17 Girls League follows a structured format with regular-season matches, playoffs, and a championship final. The league emphasizes player development, fair play, and sportsmanship, instilling important values that extend beyond the football pitch. Additionally, participation in the AFFA U-17 Girls League may open doors for players to represent Azerbaijan at the national level and compete in international youth tournaments [4].

AFFA U-14 Girls League - The AFFA U-14 Girls League is geared towards female footballers in the under-14 age group and serves as an introductory platform for young players to experience organized football competition. This league focuses on providing a fun and inclusive environment where players can learn the fundamentals of the game, develop their skills, and build camaraderie with teammates. The AFFA U-14 Girls League follows a development-oriented approach, prioritizing player participation, enjoyment, and learning over winning at all costs. Coaches and officials encourage positive reinforcement, constructive feedback, and equal opportunities for all players to contribute and grow. By fostering a love for the game at a young age, the AFFA U-14 Girls League lays the groundwork for continued participation in football and helps cultivate the next generation of female footballers in Azerbaijan [4].

The AFFA High Girls League, AFFA U-17 Girls League, and AFFA U-14 Girls League represent important initiatives aimed at promoting the development of women's football in Azerbaijan. By providing structured youth leagues tailored to different age groups, AFFA offers young female players opportunities to participate in organized competition, develop their skills, and pursue their passion for football. These leagues not only contribute to the growth of women's football in the country but also empower girls to overcome barriers and fulfill their potential both on and off the field.

4. Reasons for lack of development in women's football and suggestions. Women's football is a sport that has gained popularity around the world in recent years. However, the development of women's football still faces many challenges. Especially in the last 10 years, women's football has shown significant development in Azerbaijan. Our women's national team performed successfully in the European Championship and rose in the world rankings [1]. Additionally, the Azerbaijan Women's Football League has grown and become more competitive with more teams and players [3].

➤ **Reason 1: Uncertainty**

Recommendation: Football is a sport that is overshadowed by football and therefore women's football is not well known. To increase participation in women's football, football can be promoted, especially among young girls. For this purpose, football tournaments can be organized and football camps can be opened in schools and youth clubs. Additionally, women may be offered more opportunities to participate in the training of football teams.

➤ **Reason 2: Lack of Financial Support**

Recommendation: Women's football receives less financial support than men's football. Therefore, more financial and sponsorship support can be given for the development of women's football and more resources can be provided through grant programs.

➤ **Reason 3: Media interest
Publishing rights**

Recommendation: Women's football should not receive as much media coverage as men's football and broadcast rights should not be demanded. In addition, broadcasting more matches of women's football teams on television and sharing them on social media may also increase their popularity.

➤ **Reason 4: Inadequate Promotion and
Marketing Deficiencies**

Recommendation: Women's football is a less well-known sport compared to men's football. More promotion and marketing is needed for the development of women's football. For this purpose, more advertisements can be made for women's football matches and tournaments and social media platforms can be actively used.

➤ **Reason 5: Low Participation**

Recommendation: To increase participation in women's football, football can be promoted, especially among young girls. For this purpose, football tournaments can be organized and football camps can be opened in schools and youth clubs. Additionally, women may be offered more opportunities to participate in the training of football teams.

➤ **Reason 6: Education and Training**

Recommendation: More training and training programs need to be organized for women football players. In this way, women will gain the necessary skills and fitness to play football. It is also important to improve the quality of these programs.

➤ **Reason 7: Infrastructure Problem**

Recommendation: There is not enough infrastructure and facilities for women's football. More infrastructure and facilities must be built.

➤ **Reason 8: Less coach and referee
support**

Recommendation: Not giving due importance to the training and education of coaches and referees reduces support. It is necessary to organize more trainings and educa-

tional programs such as guiding training, courses and seminars.

➤ **Reason 9: Lack of Demand**

Suggestion: Women's football needs to be more recognized and supported in Azerbaijan. This will help discover more players and develop their talents. Additionally, greater sponsorship and media attention will contribute to the growth and success of women's football.

➤ **Reason 10: Less Support**

Recommendation: More support needs to be provided for women's football. This support can be given both materially and morally. Clubs, sponsors and media need to pay more attention to women's football.

➤ **Reason 11: Fewer Tournaments and
Matches**

Recommendation: More tournaments and matches need to be organized for women's football. In this way, women will be encouraged to play football and gain more experience. In addition, these tournaments and matches should be followed and published by the media.

➤ **Reason 12: Unpopularity of Women's
Football**

Recommendation: More promotion of football in general can be done to increase the popularity of women's football. In addition, broadcasting more matches of women's football teams on television and sharing them on social media can also increase their popularity.

5. Conclusion. The development of women's football in Azerbaijan faces significant challenges, including societal biases, inadequate funding, and insufficient infrastructure. Addressing these issues is crucial for the sport's growth and the empowerment of female athletes. Strategic recommendations such as increasing financial investment, enhancing training facilities, and implementing awareness campaigns can foster a more supportive environment for women's football. By tackling these barriers, Azerbaijan can not only elevate the standard of women's football but also pro-

mote gender equality in sports. A concerted effort from government bodies, sports organizations, and the community is essential to achieve sustainable progress in this domain.

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AZƏRBAYCANDA QADIN FUTBOLUNUN İNKİŞAFI: PROBLEMLƏR VƏ TÖVSIYƏLƏR

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Annotasiya. Bu tədqiqat Azərbaycanda qadın futbolunun üzləşdiyi çətinlikləri, o cümlədən ictimai münasibətləri, məhdud resursları və infrastrukturunu araşdırır. O, mədəni qavrayışları dəyişdirmək və qadınlar və qızlar arasında daha çox iştiraka təşviq etmək üçün ar-

tan maliyyə, təkmilləşdirilmiş təlim imkanları və maarifləndirmə kampaniyaları kimi idmanın təşviqi üçün strateji tövsiyələr təklif edir.

Açar sözlər: *qadın futbolu, Azərbaycan, inkişaf, problemlər, tövsiyələr.*

РАЗВИТИЕ ЖЕНСКОГО ФУТБОЛА В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ: ПРОБЛЕМЫ И РЕКОМЕНДАЦИИ

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Аннотация. В этом исследовании изучаются проблемы, с которыми сталкивается женский футбол в Азербайджане, включая отношение общества, ограниченность ресурсов и инфраструктуры. Оно предлагает стратегические рекомендации по продвижению этого вида спорта, такие как увеличение финансирования, улучшение

тренировочных баз и информационные кампании, направленные на изменение культурных представлений и поощрение более широкого участия женщин и девочек.

Ключевые слова: *женский футбол, Азербайджан, развитие, вызовы, рекомендации.*