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The Factors Promoting the Sports Experiences of Women Football Players and Examining the Problems Faced with Gender Approach

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the factors encouraging women's participation in football and the problems they are faced with by using the social gender approach. The sampling of this qualitative case study was 13 female footballers playing for Eskişehir Çamlıca Football Club, which is one of the teams competing in the 3rd interregional league in Turkey. Focus group interview technique was used to collect data, and the data obtained were analyzed through content analysis method. The analysis of the data revealed four different themes. According to the results, it was found that the problems they encountered and the motivating factors in their sports life had common grounds. In addition, they believed that the sports branch they consciously chose contributed to their self-development and social development. Accordingly, we can state that the negative experiences of female footballers are basically due to social gender inequalities and the resulting patriarchal sports policies. Finally, we can conclude that an increase in the number of female footballers, who are still a minority, might lead to a significant decrease in the social gender pressure on them as well as the discrimination they are exposed to.

Keywords: Women, Football, Social Gender

1. Introduction

The dictionary meaning of "gender" is somewhat different from its practical meaning. Today, it is often defined in sociological terms or as a conceptual category. This new definition involves the definition of man and woman in sociological terms, how society differentiates between man and woman and the social roles assigned to them (Bhasin, 2003).

Social gender is about organizing social relationships between men and women, and it rejects biology-based definitions in terms of sexist concepts such as fertility of women and physically superior power of men. In contrast, "social gender" is a way to refer to "cultural constructs" which claim that the appropriate roles for men and women are completely produced by the society (Scott, 2007).

It is suggested that social gender, as a historical and cultural concept, should be integrated into the social analyses of sports. Sport, as a cultural practice, should be examined in order to understand prevailing power

relationships in the field of sports. Especially, competition-based sports provide strong implications for being a man or woman. Such sports are considered a "man's activity" which traditionally requires male gender roles, and high performance is associated with manhood (Koca ve Bulgu, 2005). Such a mentality implies that women are likely to face problems in many issues such as involvement in sports, sexual abuse and harassment, sportswear, gender tests, and gender-based payment inequality.

Although "social gender relationships" is a topic of sports sciences which has been frequently studied since the 1980s, Turkish researchers have focused on this topic only since the last decade (Koca, 2006). Feminism in sports emerged following the attempts to produce scientific knowledge and to lead a transformation in the field of sports as a strategy to strengthen the position of women as well as their presence in the field of sports (Öztürk, 2016). This type of feminism is about the struggle against discrimination resulting in the exclusion of women from sports (Hargeaves, 2004). In parallel with the paradigmatic transformation of social gender studies in sports, the studies in Turkey also tend to adopt a critical paradigm (Öztürk, 2016).

Whether a particular sport is suitable for a certain gender or not is often confined to the traditional categories of manhood and womanhood. Women today are expected to take up aesthetical and elegant sports branches due to the traditional social roles of women and the characteristics associated with their bodies (Kavasoğlu and Yaşar, 2016). Accordingly, women are associated with the branches such as gymnastics, swimming, ice-skating and tennis while the branches such as football, boxing, wrestling, and weightlifting are considered more suitable for men (Koca and Demirhan, 2005). Thus, such discrimination in the field of sports may result in certain difficulties for those who take up sports that are not considered suitable for them (Kavasoğlu and Yaşar, 2016).

Just like in the world, football is considered a male sport in Turkey. Unfortunately, the interest in women's football has not reached a sufficient level yet, so the investments in this branch are quite inadequate when compared to those in men's football. It is true that a lack of sufficient interest in women's football has always been prevalent throughout the history of football, and it is projected to continue to exist in the future as well. Today, women footballers encounter many problems resulting from sex discrimination in the field of sports, which has inspired many studies focusing on this issue. This study focuses on the experiences of female footballers playing in women's football league in terms of social gender. In other words, it aims to examine the factors encouraging women's participation in sports and the problems they are faced with by using the social gender approach.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This study is a qualitative case study. A case study is a research method that explores a program, phenomenon or problem by confining it to one or more sample cases (Creswell, 2014). According to another definition, case study analyzes a case or phenomenon through a set of detailed and in-depth data obtained from various sources such as observations, interviews, documents, reports, audio-visual materials. Since a great amount of data is collected, analyses might be a bit difficult, so researchers report themes determined with the help of descriptions (Merriam, 2013). In this respect, the aim of this study is to examine the factors encouraging women's involvement in sports and the problems they are faced with by using the social gender approach.

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study are 13 female footballers of Eskişehir Çamlıcaspor Football Club, which is one of the teams playing in the Turkish 3rd interregional league.

2.3. Measure

The data of the study were collected through focus group interviews, which is an interview technique used in qualitative studies. The interviews were conducted by using a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers. The interviews started with general questions such as how they took up the sport, their achievements in football, the factors encouraging them to continue to play, the place and significance of football in their lives

and the problems they encounter. Later, the interview continued with some questions to obtain data about their experiences regarding social gender and the social perception of the issue.

2.4. Procedure

As for the data collection procedures, female footballers were interviewed, and the interviews were audio recorded by taking the participants' permissions. Focus group interviews were carried out in a room where the footballers could feel psychologically and physically comfortable. Other reasons to choose this room are silence, comfort, and easy access. Later, the room was designed in a way to facilitate interaction to carry out a more efficient interview.

2.5. Statistical Analysis

The study used a content analysis method, which is one of the qualitative data analysis methods, to obtain more in-depth data and explore the subjective experiences of the participants for the purposes of the study. The focus group interview carried out with 13 female footballers was transcribed, and the raw data were obtained. The real names of the participants were not used in the analyses, instead, the codes were used to represent them: G1, G2, G3. The statements of the participants were analyzed word by word. The codes obtained from these analyses were combined to form meaningful units. Later, these units were combined into more confined ones, and one general title was determined for each confined unit. The reliability coefficient of the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was calculated as % 91, which means a reliable study. The obtained codes were combined under certain themes, which formed a meaningful unity in terms of data.

3. Results

Data analysis revealed four different themes. The first one is about how the participants took up football, and the second one involves the significance of football for female footballers, how they perceive this sport and the meaning they assign to it. The third theme refers to the effect of family and coaches; and the fourth one is about the problems encountered in women's football, the motivating factors and their experiences with the social gender issue. Table 1 below presents the themes and frequency values obtained from the replies given to the question "What motivated you to take up sports?"

Table 1. The Results regarding the question "What motivated you to take up the sport?"

Theme	Code	F
The motivation to take up the sport	Physical Training and Sports Teacher	12
	Family	4
	Friends	7
	Total	23

Table 1 displays 3 codes: Physical Training and Education Teachers (f=12), Family (f=4) and Friends (f=7). Some of the statements regarding the question "What motivated you to take up sports?" by the participants for each code are as follows:

G1: I started to do sports with athletics when I was a third-year student in the primary school. My physical training teacher discovered my talent. I took part in athletics competitions until I was a 5th-year primary school student. When I was at 6th year, I was chosen for the school team."

G4: "My father wanted to have a boy as his first child. He satisfied this wish with me, and we used to play football together since I learned how to walk."

G3: "I joined to those who played on the streets. Later, when I continued to play, I took people's attention since I was the only girl playing football in the neighborhood."

Table 2: Results regarding the question: "What does football mean to you and why is it important for you?"

Theme	Code	F
The Importance and Meaning of Football	Talent	1
	Courage	1
	Affection	4
	The feeling of winning and losing	1
	Self-sacrifice	2
	Commitment	1
	Passion	1
	Its effect on self-development	8
	Teamwork / spirit	10
	Self-expression	2
	Total	31

Table 2, which displays theme and frequency values obtained from the answers provided for the question: "What does football mean to you and why is it important for you?", includes the following codes: Talent (f=1), Courage (f=1), Affection (f=4), Feeling of winning and losing (f=1), Self-sacrifice (f=2), Commitment (f=1), Passion (f=1), Its effect on self-development (f=8), Teamwork / spirit (f=10), Self-expression (f=2). The followings are the quotes from the participants regarding the codes obtained from the replies given for the question "What does football mean to you and why is it important for you?"

G5: *"I am well committed, I mean I want to continue this sport for a long time as long as I don't get injured. I do not want to give up, and I want to continue to be a part of a sport, as a coach maybe."*

G11: *Sometimes, one cannot know why he is doing something, it is like a passion for me.*

G6: *"You have to keep calm, you have acted impulsively. Fairplay approach is becoming more widespread. A sort of socialization, indeed, it is not an individual sport. In addition, it brings advantages, and I owe it a lot. For instance, I used to be a bad-tempered person. I used to be very angry when I was young. I have overcome it thanks to sports. It is about winning and losing, and you are learning to be patient, you are being mature."*

G13: *"You understand when you join a team; I mean, being like a family in a team. Team members' loving and respecting each other, it is such a nice feeling. Especially, when the coach is like a mother, father, elder sister, everything. Nothing compares to this feeling. Even if you are given 500 billion (TL), you cannot feel like that. I mean you cannot enjoy and feel such a pleasure. But if you have such an environment, you continue even if there is no support, financial support."*

G12: *"For instance, we express ourselves like that, by playing football. We discharge our minds while playing football."*

Table 3. What are the factors motivating you to take up football and continue?

Theme	Code	F
The Effect of Family and Coach	Mother	7
	Elder brother	2
	Father	9
	Working with a female coach	7
	Working with a female and male coach together	6
	The effect of the coach	5
	Total	36

Table 3, which displays themes and frequencies drawn from the question “What are the factors motivating you to take up football and continue?”, consists of the following codes: Mother (f=4), Elder brother (F=2), Father (f=9), Working with female trainers (f=7), Working with a female and male coach together (f=6) and The effect of the coach (f=5). The followings are the quotes from the participants regarding the codes obtained from the replies given for the question “What are the factors motivating you to take up football and continue?”

G8: *“You should act like a boy, you should swear, you should shout loud on the street. No one will like you.*

G9: *Since she has an emotional point of view, the mother comes to watch you, when you get injured, she cries. She gets angry. So we fathers more. When you get injured, they say: “you will get well, that is a sport, normal.” Mothers say: “Don't play football, you give harm to yourself. You will have children in the future. What will you do then?” Since I am the oldest child, I feel the pressure of this concern more.”*

G7: *“When I was new to the team, I worked with a male coach. Although we shared our problems with him and he tried to understand us, he did not really understand us because she was not a woman. But Pınar cares about us as if she were out elder sister, and she is trying to find solutions to our problems.”*

G10: *“I do not want to be sexist. We can learn many things from both; man or woman”.*

G2: *I mean, if you have a target in football, male coaches are more experienced, they know more about football. Yes, female coaches also know about football, but they also graduate from the department of coach training, they understand women better yes. But when it comes to condition, the male coach is better. If you have a target, two coaches, one male and one female, is better.*

Table 4. The results regarding the question: “What are the problems you encounter as a female footballer?”

Theme	Code	F
The Problems Encountered in Football	Referees	10
	lack of financial and emotional support	11
	Sex Discrimination	22
	The negative reactions in case of failure	12
	The awards / congratulations in case of achievement	6
	Physical Appearance	5
	Insults	4
	The players of the opponent team	7
	Total	77

Table 4, which displays themes and frequencies drawn from the question “What are the problems you encounter when you play football?”, consists of the following codes: Referees (f=10), Lack of financial and emotional support (F=11), Sex discrimination (f=22), The negative reactions in case of failure (f=12), The awards / congratulations in case of achievement (f=6) and Physical Appearance (f=5), Insults (f=4), The players of the opponent team (f=7). The followings are the quotes from the participants regarding the codes obtained from the replies given for the question “What are the problems you encounter when you play football?”

G11: The referees are quite inexperienced. This really affects our football performance negatively. When our goals are cancelled because of the off-side decision, we lose the match. I think referees are the factors that decrease our motivation".

G3: "Those who are not schooled, get the certificate by just paying for it and are not from a sports background and see us as if we're robots. There are many of them in the sports sector.

G1: In the early years of my football career, I was invited to the national team. I was told “well done, İrem” by my friends, relatives and other people around me."

G7. I believe that the most important problem is the lack of financial and emotional support. I mean we have no support from people around us or authorities."

G10: "At first, there are a number of supporters. In fact, we have a limited number of supporters. When we lose two successive matches, the number decreases. No one thinks that we can get better in the following matches – But when a male team experiences the same, they continue to support."

G11: "...and when we go to play an away match- my hair is short, and I feel better like that- you are insulted, for instance, they say "you are in a wrong pitch, play with the boys in the next pitch."

G6: "There was a spectator in the stand who said, "Are you, boy or girl?". Also, they say: "you have cross legs and walk diagonally" I don't understand this. Also, they say "the ball hits you in the eye and your eye bursts open."

G5: “Men.. I mean, I met many men, they all say "girls cannot be footballers."

G1: "Also, there are people who don't know about women's football. For instance, recently I was chatting with my dentist, and we started to talk about sports, and he asked "Are you doing sports? What are you playing?". I said, "I play football." He said : “Really? I did not know that there was a women’s football league”.

G7: Swearing, spitting, hair pulling, tripping up and stepping on other's foot all occur during the matches. Although we try hard not to react back, we get angry in time and start to play rough, and the atmosphere gets tense, and it ends with a red card."

When women are interested in a sport that is quite diverse from the gender roles assigned to them, they suffer from sex discrimination. Among the problems they encounter are gender-based inequalities and patriarchal sports policies resulting from such inequalities. However, despite such society-based obstacles, the achievements of female football players serve as motivating factors for them.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study is to examine the factors that encourage women’s involvement in sports and the problems they encounter by using the social gender approach. The participants of the study were the female football players playing for a team in women’s football league in Eskişehir. According to the results, it was found that

the problems they encounter and the motivating factors in their sports life have common grounds. In addition, they believed that the sports branch they consciously chose contributed to their self-development and social development.

The focus group interviews conducted with female footballers revealed that families and family members are very important for them in terms of their socialization process and taking up football. The related studies also reveal that family is a social agent in socialization through sports. According to Kay (2000), the most important agents in socialization through sports are also families who play a guiding role in the process. The study also shows that their fathers and elder brothers are quite influential in young girls' taking up sports and improving their sports skills. Similarly, Stirling and Schulz (2011), in their studies on female footballers in England, suggest that family support is an important factor motivating young girls to take up football and continue to play. In addition, almost all the participants of the study reported that they became interested and involved in football because of their fathers' encouragement (cited by, Öztürk, 2017).

Female footballers often explain the importance and meaning of football for them by referring to emotion-based concepts such as love, affection, passion, etc. In other words, they emphasize the fun side of football (Cox and Thompson, 2000). Cox and Thompson (2000), in their study, defined female footballers as "multiple bodies." The recent studies also revealed that social gender performances of women are complex and volatile since it reflects different meanings in different phases of their journey from school teams to professional teams (cited by Öztürk, 2017). The interviews conducted in this study revealed that female footballers feel like a man in the pitch, but they display their feminine roles and characteristics in their daily lives. In other words, their football life does not undermine their social roles as a woman in daily life.

The current study showed that female footballers encounter many problems, and the most frequently stated obstacle is the lack of financial and emotional support for women's football, which hinders its development considerably. They also reported that they did not receive any financial support from their clubs. More importantly, when clubs are not supported financially, they are more likely to end their activities, and the number of women's sports clubs decreases to a great extent. The related studies also reported similar negative consequences such as shrinkage of the clubs due to financial problems, the shutdown of the clubs, withdrawing from the leagues or the shutdown of women's sports branches (Öztürk, 2017).

When we define sport as "physical power and stamina education," in fact, we reflect the differences between men and women; especially the superiority of one gender over the other in terms of physical strength (Sancar, 2011). This study is significant because it tries to integrate "body" into social gender patterns. Some recent studies also suggest that sport is still a social gender-based concept (cited by, Kavasoğlu and Yaşar, 2016). The sports that are considered suitable for women (figure skating, eurhythmics, etc) display aesthetical aspects of the female body. The emergence of muscular women in sports triggered the idea that they are likely to fail to fulfill their responsibilities in their private lives such as housework and childcare. Thus, such women bodies were labelled as "abnormal gender" by the patriarchal mentality (Topaloğlu, 2010).

According to the finding of this study, female footballer faces certain problems because football is perceived as a male sport – just like some other sports. The related studies in the literature conclude that women are faced with some obstacles and experience some conflicts when they are involved in competitive sports associated with males such as football, boxing and ice hockey (Cox and Thompson, 2001; Mennesson, 2000; Dicarlo, 2015). The female figures in the sports branches which require a sort of combat and struggle contradict with their social gender roles. Keeping the gracefulness of female body, their families and people in their immediate environment tend to believe that the women who play football will behave like a man, get rough and play it like a man because the perception of male body reflects patriarchal ideology, as suggested by the recent research (Kavasoğlu and Yaşar, 2016).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Adopting a social gender perspective, the study aims to examine the experiences of female footballers playing in Eskişehir Çamlıcaspor women's football team, a team playing at 3rd women's football league. To achieve this purpose, the obstacles they encountered and social gender inequalities were examined according to the feminist theories in sports.

When women are involved in sports which contradict with the social roles they are associated with, they are exposed to discrimination. It is believed that the negative experiences of female footballers are basically due to social gender inequalities and patriarchal sports policies. It might be stated that when the number of women in football increases and they are recognized more and more in sports, the social gender pressure on them and the discrimination they are exposed to will weaken considerably. Accordingly, it is thought that the continued struggle of women to be a part of this sport will lead to fewer practices of inequality, and women's football will be recognized more. At this point, the solutions to the problem of inequality by all the parties such as club administrators, physical training teachers, coaches, players, and referees will bring valuable contributions to the future of women's football and society. Finally, it is believed that the increase in the number of similar scientific studies will also increase the involvement of women in sports regardless of the branch and prevent the practices of gender inequality.

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