Women's football: Equal pay for equal play?

The recent Women's World Cup hosted by Australia and New Zealand was the most successful edition yet. The audience for the ninth incarnation of the tournament totalled approximately 2 billion, with stadium crowds reaching 1.9 million fans – both are new records.

According to the BBC, England's final with Spain, was viewed by a peak audience of 12 million (a figure higher than the Men's Wimbledon final) – impressive considering the time zone difference meant that kick off was at 11am BST.

Ahead of the tournament, FIFA announced that it was tripling the total prize money to $150 million. While clearly a significant increase, this is still just 34% of prize money for the Men's World Cup in Qatar in 2022.

Further, while Argentina's winning men's team won a total of $44 million, Spain was awarded only 10% of that at a total of $4.2 million although, for the first time, FIFA made payments directly to players with sums dependent on how far their team progressed in the tournament.

Questions are being asked as to how this can be the case, particularly as football is supposed to be going through a diversity drive.

Equal pay for equal work

In the UK and European Union at least, men and women are entitled to equal pay for equal work. However, differences in pay may be justified if an employer can show that they are due to a material factor which is neither directly nor indirectly sex discriminatory. These principles are relevant to the way the issue of prize money in the women's and the men's game is being analysed.

Can this disparity be justified?

FIFA has traditionally awarded prize money to the National Federations; it was then up to them how to allocate this money. It is the National Federations who choose how much to give to the players and how much to invest in other areas of the game, although this seems to be changing at least in part.

On the face of it, they choose to give more money to male players than they do to female players. However, in the football world, it is regularly argued that this seemingly unfair and discriminatory apportionment of money is connected to the difference in revenue generated by the men's game when compared to the women's game ($7.5 billion was generated by the Men's 2022 World Cup compared to $570 million generated by the Women's 2023 World Cup). The argument is that when the women's game generates the same as the men's game, the money they receive will reflect this.

But this argument, so long relied on, ignores an obvious logical flaw: had women's football received the same level of investment as men's football over the past few decades, it too

would be generating much higher revenue. Even Infantino acknowledges that *"we have to invest in the women's game."* If we were talking about equal pay in a workplace, this material factor would be one which is either directly or indirectly linked to sex: the longstanding lack of opportunities for women to train as professional sportspeople, alongside and linked to the failure to invest in, support, advertise, promote and encourage women's sports.

In reality, how far are we from equal pay for women footballers?

It is likely that the National Federations who allocate the money will – whether through choice or coercion – invest more in women's football either by increasing pay or increasing promotion through greater investment.

We continue to see current pay deals being challenged and an increasing number of high-profile disputes between players and their federations, including England. As Lucy Bronze, England defender, proclaimed prior to the World Cup:

"We are the European Champions. We have changed the game massively in England, so we want everything to fall in line. If we are going to do well on the pitch, then you would expect things to follow."

In the domestic scene, players' union FUTPRO has announced that, after failing to reach an agreement with the league over minimum salary and working conditions, players in Spain's top-flight women's league will go on strike for the opening two rounds of the new season.

Demands from the wider public are also increasing, and National Federations are being called out when this is not being addressed.

There is room to challenge the status quo and scope for National Federations to institute equality. The USA Federation, after a long battle with the US National Women's Team, in 2022 agreed to pay the Men's and Women's teams equally and also agreed to make a back payment of $24 million and Scotland women's team have very recently reached a settlement with the Scottish Football Association.

The Future

While the pay gap is closing, there is still a long way to go. As women's football receives further investment and continues to grow, there will be increasing pressure to decrease the inequality. Greater exposure and investment are key and waiting on revenues to generate in isolation will take much longer than I suspect women footballers, and the general public, are willing to wait. If the women's game is to continue to flourish, the sportswomen are likely to be seeking equal pay for equal play.

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