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## Breaking Barriers in Football: Tackling the Pay Gap and Under-Representation of Women

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### Abstract

This report explores the persistent gender inequalities in English football, focusing on the pay gap and the underrepresentation of women in coaching roles over the past eight years. Despite the rising popularity of women's football, systemic issues rooted in historical gender norms have led to significant disparities in earnings and opportunities. Statistical data, firsthand accounts, and academic research highlight that male players and managers earn substantially more than their female counterparts, with average salaries for Women's Super League players at approximately £47,000 compared to millions for male players. Moreover, female coaches face similar pay inequities, exacerbated by barriers to entry and a lack of representation in leadership roles. The report identifies two key factors contributing to these disparities: historical societal norms that have marginalized women in sports and ongoing underinvestment due to perceived profitability issues. Recommendations to address these inequalities include enhancing transparency in pay reporting, integrating football education into school curricula, and promoting inclusive hiring practices. By implementing these measures, the report argues that English football can foster greater gender equality, ensuring fairer pay and improved opportunities for women in the sport. This analysis underscores the need for systemic change, underpinned by equality law, to dismantle entrenched biases and promote inclusivity in football leadership.

### Introduction

Despite the growing popularity of women's football,<sup>1</sup> gender inequality remains a persistent issue, particularly regarding the pay gap<sup>2</sup> and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.<sup>3</sup> The pay gap reflects the earnings between male and female athletes, while underrepresentation highlights the insufficiency of women in coaching roles. This report examines these issues within high-level English football over the last eight years. These inequalities are largely attributed to the gender norms prevalent in the 20th century,

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Archer and Martine Prange, "Equal Play, Equal Pay": Moral Grounds for Equal Pay in Football' (2019) 46 *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 416-436, 416.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Tong, 'Navigating the Challenges: The Unfolding Story of Female Leadership in English Football', *I Trust Sport Blog* (12 March 2024). Available at: <https://itrustsport.com/blog/navigating-the-challenges-the-unfolding-story-of-female-leadership-in-english-football> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

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which excluded women from sports.<sup>4</sup> As a result, women's football has been systemically marginalised, leading to underfunding and restricted opportunities.<sup>5</sup> Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring fairness, equal prospects, and encouraging greater female involvement in football. The report draws on statistical data, firsthand accounts from professionals and victims, law, academic studies, and media reports to analyse the issues and propose practical recommendations. The report is structured into three main sections. The first examines the pay gap in football, exploring its causes and contributing factors. The second analyses the underrepresentation of women in coaching, identifying barriers that limit their access. Lastly, it proposes recommendations aimed at addressing both these issues to improve fairness and inclusion within English football.

## **Section 1 - Pay Disparity**

### ***Pay Disparity for Players***

A prominent issue in football is the significant pay gap between male and female players. According to Salary Sport, the earnings of male footballers are expected to remain high in 2025.<sup>6</sup> For example, Arsenal's player Bukayo Saka was estimated to earn £13 million annually,<sup>7</sup> while Manchester United's player Marcus Rashford was reported to earn £15 million.<sup>8</sup> Although these figures are not definite due to contractual privacy, it still offers a reliable indication of the substantial pay men receive based on financial disclosures and press releases.

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<sup>4</sup> George Yiapanas, 'Addressing Gender Inequalities in European Football: Key Dimensions and Strategies' (2025) 7 *Insight - Sports Science* 711-737, 715.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Salary Sport, 'Bukayo Saka - Salary, Contract & Net Worth', *Salarysport.com*. Available at <https://salarysport.com/football/player/bukayo-saka/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Salary Sport, 'Marcus Rashford - Salary, Contract & Net Worth', *Salarysport.com*. Available at <https://salarysport.com/football/player/marcus-rashford/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

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In contrast, according to a 2023 BBC news article, Leah Williamson, one of Arsenal's top female players, earns about £200,000 annually.<sup>9</sup> However, due to limited media coverage of women's football, it is difficult to obtain comprehensive salary data for female players.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while this figure may not fully reflect the scope of women's earnings, it highlights the significant disparity in pay when compared to male player salaries like Saka's and Rashfords. Supporting this evidence, BBC Sport in 2023 reported that the average salary for a Women's Super League player in England was approximately £47,000 per year.<sup>11</sup> While this average may obscure the true extent of the pay gap since it is not reflective of individual pay, it still provides insight into general pay structures, implying that many female players are likely to have earned much less. This reinforces the pay gap issue between male and female players which extends to managers who face similar inequalities.<sup>12</sup>

### **Pay Disparity for Managers**

Female football managers earn significantly less than their male counterparts.<sup>13</sup> Chelsea's women's team manager, Emma Hayes, addressed this problem in an interview with talkSPORT stating, "I don't get paid what Jurgen Klopp gets paid for me to take a sabbatical year."<sup>14</sup> This reveals the significant salary gap even for successful female coaches, indicating a systemic undervaluation of women's football. Hayes' position within the sport adds credibility to the issue since she is directly impacted by the pay gap. Further evidence of this disparity can be found in a 2022 report by *The Independent* which noted that Sarina Wiegman, head coach of England's women's team, earned an estimated £400,000 in 2022, despite leading the squad to success in the UEFA Euros.<sup>15</sup> In contrast Gareth Southgate,

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<sup>9</sup> Ben King, 'Arsenal Women's Pay Rises 30% but Still behind Men', *BBC News* (23 February 2023). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-64735639> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Yiapanas, above n4, 721.

<sup>11</sup> BBC Sport, 'Women's Super League: Jonas Eidevall says players who "struggle" with pay is "big problem"', *BBC Sport* (17 November 2023). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/67438556> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>12</sup> talkSPORT, 'Emma Hayes REVEALS Why She Won't Coach a Men's Team & URGES Owners to be CHALLENGED on the Topic', *YouTube* (6 September 2024). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5QX-xciVbw> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Furvah Shah, 'Sarina Wiegman Salary: Lionesses Manager Paid Only a Fraction of Men's Boss Gareth Southgate's Wage', *The Independent* (1 August 2022). Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news/lionesses-sarina-wiegman-gareth-southgate-salary-b2135740.html> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

England's men's coach, earned approximately £5 million with additional bonuses.<sup>16</sup> This discrepancy in earnings questions the assertion that pay gaps solely reflect the higher revenue generated by men's football.<sup>17</sup> If revenue were truly the determining factor, Weigman's salary would likely have increased following her team's success, reflecting the growing interest and investment in women's football. Thus, the lack of such an increase suggests systemic inequalities exist that have devalued women's football.

### ***The Revenue Myth***

A common justification for the pay gap is the argument that men's football generates more revenue, which is therefore reflected in the higher pay that male players and managers receive.<sup>18</sup>

This assertion suggests that men's football, with its higher viewership and fan engagement, attracts more substantial investments from sponsors and media companies, ultimately resulting in higher salaries.<sup>19</sup> Whilst this may be true to an extent, this view is limited as it overlooks the growing popularity of women's football.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the 2023 Women's World Cup on BBC iPlayer attracted 25.7million viewers, representing a 75% increase in streams from 2019.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a 2022 YouGov survey highlighted by the BBC found that women's football saw a significant growth in fans, with 8.7 million more than 2021.<sup>22</sup> These statistics illustrate the rising popularity of and engagement with women's football. Despite this, the pay for female players and managers remains significantly lower than for male players and managers.<sup>23</sup> This persistent disparity suggests that entrenched inequalities exist

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Yiapanas, above n4, 720.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Women's Sport Trust, 'Latest Research from Women's Sport Trust Delves into Visibility and Fandom of Women's Sport in 2023', *Women's Sport Trust Website* (6 February 2024). Available at: <https://www.womenssporttrust.com/latest-research-from-womens-sport-trust-delves-into-visibility-and-fandom-of-womens-sport-in-2023/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> BBC Sport, 'Women's Sport Fandom Is Growing in the UK', *BBC Sport* (8 November 2022). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/63457021> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>23</sup> Archer and Prange, above n1, 416.

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within the structure of football, which continues to limit investment in women's games, hindering its growth which is discriminatory.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Causes of the Pay Gap***

The gender pay gap in football can be attributed to two interconnected factors: the historical exclusion of women due to societal gender norms<sup>25</sup> and the ongoing lack of investment from corporate sponsors and broadcasters.<sup>26</sup>

Historically, patriarchal norms confined women to domestic roles, reinforcing the perception that football was an exclusively male activity.<sup>27</sup> This was institutionalised by the Football Association's (FA) ban on women's football in 1921, which lasted 50 years. This ban delayed the development of women's football, leaving it decades behind men's in terms of visibility and funding.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the media and sponsors continue to prioritise investment in men's football due to established popularity and commercial appeal, which has reinforced the pay gap.<sup>29</sup>

A prevalent reason for the limited investment in women's football by media outlets and sponsors is the belief that it is less profitable than men's football, due to lower viewership and fan engagement.<sup>30</sup> However, this belief is contradictory as the lack of investment from media companies and sponsors has hindered the growth of women's football.<sup>31</sup> An analysis of the media coverage given to women's football found that their games are often only covered during major tournaments, while men's football enjoys year-round media attention.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the limited presence of journalists at elite women's matches has

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<sup>24</sup> Yiapanas, above n 4, 715.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Above, 9

<sup>30</sup> Yiapanas, above n 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Stacey Pope, Rachel Allison and Kate Petty, 'Gender Equality in the "Next Stage" of the "New Age?" Content and Fan Perceptions of English Media Coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup' (2023) 41 *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27-38.

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meant social media platforms such as twitter are the primary sources for updates.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, this restricted media exposure reduces fan engagement and sponsorship opportunities for women's football, making them a riskier commercial investment for corporations.<sup>34</sup> As a result, sponsors are more inclined to invest more into men's football which benefits from greater attention, leading to unequal sponsorship deals.<sup>35</sup> While deals such as Barclay's £45 million partnership with the English women's team in 2024 show progress, they remain far below the sponsorship deals that men's teams secure.<sup>36</sup> For instance, Manchester's City partnership with Etihad was renewed in 2022 for £400 million over 10 years.<sup>37</sup> This stark contrast in sponsorship deals highlights the systemic undervaluation of women's football which contributes to the lower revenue female clubs receive, impacting female players and managers.<sup>38</sup>

Such practices may constitute indirect discrimination under section 19 of the Equality Act 2010 since unequal investments continue to disadvantage women's football. Without intervention to break this cycle of underinvestment, the pay gap will persist, which is unfair and needs to be addressed to ensure equality in sport.

## **Section 2 - Lack of Representation of Women in Leadership Roles**

### ***The Underrepresentation of Women in Coaching***

Women remain significantly underrepresented in coaching roles within English football.<sup>39</sup> Research conducted by YouGov found that the percentage of female coaches dropped from

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Yiapanas, above n 4, 720.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Emma Sanders, 'WSL Agrees New £45m Sponsorship Deal with Barclays', *BBC Sport* (23 September 2024). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/articles/c79n83l0wd8o> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>37</sup> Dana Leigh, 'A Guide to Football Sponsorship in the Premier League: TechRound Sponsors TAFFA FC', *TechRound Website News* (30 October 2024). Available at: <https://techround.co.uk/news/football-sponsorship-premier-league-techround-sponsors-taffa-fc/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>38</sup> Yiapanas, above n4, 720

<sup>39</sup> Tong, above n3.

44% in 2022 to 38% in 2024.<sup>40</sup> This highlights the ongoing barriers to achieving gender balance in these positions. A 2023 survey by Women in Football, revealed that 67% of women felt football was an environment where they couldn't excel, with nearly half reporting being overlooked for career progression due to their gender.<sup>41</sup> While the survey only includes female perspectives, narrowing its scope, it still provides valuable insight into firsthand experiences of prejudice within the sport. These experiences can be interpreted as direct discrimination under section 13 of the Equality Act 2010, since gender is being used as a barrier to career progression.

### ***Dismissing the Lack of Interest Myth***

A common argument for the underrepresentation of women in coaching positions is the view that females are simply uninterested in such roles.<sup>42</sup> This argument suggests that gender discrimination is not a factor, reducing the issue to personal choice. However, this view is limited as it overlooks the influence of ingrained stereotypes that discourage women from pursuing coaching careers. Bryan et al.'s study highlights how coaching positions at Queens Park Rangers are largely male-dominated and considered the "normal tendency".<sup>43</sup> This suggests that embedded social norms create barriers, undermining women's confidence in entering coaching roles. This aligns with the second wave of feminism which critiques how gender norms create invisible obstacles that restrict women's opportunities, reinforcing the cycle of underrepresentation.<sup>44</sup>

### ***The Causes of Underrepresentation of Women***

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<sup>40</sup> UK Coaching, 'UK Coaching Research Reveals Decline in Female Coaches', *UK Coaching Website News* (7 January 2025). Available at: <https://www.ukcoaching.org/news/uk-coaching-research-reveals-decline-in-female-coaches/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>41</sup> Women in Football, 'Women in Football – Women Thriving in Football Despite Rise in Sexism, Survey Reveals', *Women in Football Website News* (27 July 2023). Available at: <https://www.womeninfootball.co.uk/news/2023/07/27/women-thriving-in-football-despite-rise-in-sexism-survey-reveals/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>42</sup> Sophia Jowett, Katelynn Slade, Jyoti Gosai and Louise Davis, 'Women Coaches Leadership Development Programme: An Evaluation Study of Programme Effectiveness' (2024) 6 *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* 1433787, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Amée Bryan, Stacey Pope and Alexandra J Rankin-Wright, 'On the Periphery: Examining Women's Exclusion from Core Leadership Roles in the "Extremely Gendered" Organization of Men's Club Football in England' (2021) 35 *Gender & Society* 940-970, 956.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Davies, 'Unity and Diversity in Feminist Legal Theory' (2007) 2 *Philosophy Compass* 650-664, 653.

The underrepresentation of women coaches within English football can be attributed to two interconnected factors: the historical perception of leadership as a male domain<sup>45</sup> and systemic hiring biases that disadvantage female candidates.<sup>46</sup>

Football leadership has traditionally been associated with masculinity, reinforcing stereotypes that position men as natural leaders while relegating women to supportive roles.<sup>47</sup> This perception has shaped football culture where coaching roles were historically reserved for men.<sup>48</sup> Although formal restrictions have been lifted, these attitudes persist today, discouraging women from pursuing coaching careers. For instance, English manager Gemma Grainger noted in 2023 that entrenched stereotypes often position men as the default leaders in football.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that these historical biases still exist and contribute to why many women are put off from becoming coaches.

Hiring practices further reinforce this historical belief, restricting women's access to key networking spaces where recruitment decisions are often made. A recent article emphasised how hiring and promotion choices frequently take place in exclusive, male-dominated networking environments such as informal hubs and hotel bars.<sup>50</sup> Without access to these spaces women struggle to build the professional connections that could advance their careers. Additionally, women often face heightened scrutiny during recruitment, with additional layers of approval required due to assumptions about family responsibilities.<sup>51</sup> For example Beth Clarkson reported the experience of "Sarah", a qualified coach who was explicitly told that women could not apply for a position because the club "preferred to hire men for elite talent development".<sup>52</sup> She also underwent additional

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<sup>45</sup> Yiapanas, above n4, 722.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 723.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 722.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Vicki Hodges, 'Why There Is a Lack of Female Coaches in Football - and the Steps Being Taken to Change Landscape', *Sky Sports News* (24 March 2023). Available at: <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/12830328/why-there-is-a-lack-of-female-coaches-in-football-and-the-steps-being-taken-to-change-landscape> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>50</sup> Tong, above n3.

<sup>51</sup> Yiapanas, above n4, 732.

<sup>52</sup> Beth G Clarkson, Elwyn Cox and Richard C Thelwell, 'Negotiating Gender in the English Football Workplace: Composite Vignettes of Women Head Coaches' Experiences' (2019) 27 *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 73-84, 78.

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vetting procedures based on the assumption that her responsibilities as a mother would make her unsuitable for the role.<sup>53</sup> This reflects societal biases that unfairly challenge women's ability to balance work and home life and illustrates the obstacles they face in becoming coaches, contributing to their underrepresentation.

Compounding this issue is the lack of female representation in sports governance which reinforces male dominance in coaching.<sup>54</sup> According to *The Guardian*, women account for only 7.6% of chief executive positions and 10% of board members within English football.<sup>55</sup> This suggests that gender bias is likely to remain unchallenged in recruitment since those able to make a change are predominantly men, sustaining a cycle that limits opportunities for women.<sup>56</sup> Addressing these challenges requires focused policy interventions to dismantle the structural barriers women face in football leadership. The following sections will outline key recommendation aimed at addressing the inequalities women face overall.

### **Section 3 - Recommendations**

#### ***Addressing Pay Disparity***

##### *Enhancing transparency in pay reporting*

The government should broaden gender pay reporting requirements in the Equality Act 2010 to include specific data for both players and managers. The existing section 78 of the Equality Act 2010 is ineffective as it does not require smaller clubs to publish their data, and the information required is limited to mean and median pay gaps. Expanding this framework would enhance accountability and enable more effective tracking progress for individual pay. Concerns about potential privacy violations can be addressed by anonymising the data whilst maintaining transparency.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Jason Stockwood, 'Increasing Diversity among Leaders in Football Is More than a Moral Priority', *The Guardian* (5 August 2024). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/article/2024/aug/05/sport-increasing-diversity-leaders> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Yiapanas, above n4, 723.

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*Football education in schools*

The government should integrate football education into the national school curriculum, to encourage female participation from an early age. Normalising female participation in football and would challenge the traditional gender norms. To minimise curriculum overload, football education could be combined into existing PE subjects. Over time this initiative would shift gender biased perceptions, ultimately making football a more inclusive sport.

*Incentives for media companies*

The government could offer financial incentives such as tax cuts for media companies that consistently broadcast women's games. This would help women's football build a stronger fan engagement, resulting in bigger sponsorship deals. Providing financial incentives would mitigate the perceived financial risks broadcasters have, motivating them and ensuring long-term growth for women's football.

***Addressing the Underrepresentation of Women Coaches****Promoting inclusivity through campaigns*

The FA could launch widespread educational campaigns emphasising that leadership and coaching roles in football are not gender specific, targeting schools and educational institutions. This initiative could gradually shift the public perceptions among young people, potentially fostering a generation of women who aspire to be leaders.

*Implementation of transparent hiring practices*

The FA should consider diverse hiring panels that include women when selecting coaching candidates and could anonymise applications throughout the early stages of selection. This way the decision is guaranteed to be based strictly on qualification and prevents gender biased outcomes. Additionally, formalising decision-making processes will reduce the unintentional exclusion of women that occurs in informal settings.

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Furthermore, mandatory shortlisting could be introduced to include a minimum percentage of female candidates. To avoid tokenism this should be temporarily applied in cases of critically low representation of women, focusing on eligible candidates. This would ensure a more representative playing field.

#### *Develop flexible coaching pathways*

The FA could introduce family-friendly policies, such as childcare support and flexible work arrangements to make coaching positions more accessible to women. Flexible hours can prevent disruptions to team dynamics while ensuring family obligations do not hinder career progression for women. This will ensure equal opportunities leading to a diverse leadership talent.

#### **Conclusion**

In summary, this report has examined gender inequality in English football, focusing on pay disparities and underrepresentation in coaching positions. It demonstrated how historical biases have marginalised women's football, creating a cycle of underfunding and limited opportunities. The report also includes common justifications for these inequalities such as the claim that men's football generates higher revenue and that women are less interested in coaching roles, refuting them as excuses for the persistent inequalities. Overall, the analysis illustrates that deeply entrenched inequality is prevalent in English football which is discriminatory. To reduce the pay gap this report suggests boosting transparency through expanded gender pay reporting, challenging stereotypes through educational initiatives and investing in women's football by incentivising media companies. To improve representation, it recommends educational campaigns on leadership, introducing transparent hiring processes such as anonymous applications and creating flexible coaching pathways to better accommodate women. By applying these measures, English football can have hope in progressing towards greater gender equality.