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Integration between women's and men's football clubs: a comparison between Brazil, China and Italy

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ABSTRACT

Despite an increasing interest from media and fans, one of the challenges women's football currently faces is the lack of resources to sustain its growth at both grassroots and elite levels. To cope with this issue, National Associations (NAs) of various countries have recently formulated a policy demanding men's football clubs to integrate a women's team within their structure. Using the Multiple Streams Framework, this article examines the context, timing and conditions leading to the implementation of the policy of integration in three different countries: Brazil, China and Italy. The authors collected and analysed policy documents and media reports to identify factors influencing the policy formulation. Results indicate declining performances of senior women's national team, low participation rates, external pressures from supranational football institutions and increased societal need to reduce gender disparities contribute to influence NAs' engagement with policies for the development of women's football. While potentially helping women's football enhance its visibility and commercialisation, the policy of integration risks the women's game continuing to be seen as subaltern to its men's counterpart. Implications of the policy of integration for the long-term development of women's football and its possible future scenarios are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Historically, women have been discouraged from involvement in sectors of society, including participating and competing in sport (European Commission 2014, United Nations 2019). This has especially been the case for traditionally male-dominated sports such as football (Caudwell 2011). Football represents a typical example of strong gender bias, with women accounting for less than 10% of total registered players, 28% of the total administrative workforce, 25% of the total management staff and 7% of the total coaches (FIFA 2019a). Giulianotti (1999) and Williams (2007) indicate that football institutions have been historical active opponents of the women's game. However, it can be argued that governing bodies have shifted towards becoming supportive of women's football development more recently (Gammelsæter and Senaux 2011).

In 2018, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) launched the first-ever global strategy for women's football, in which it stated its goal for all its 211 National Associations (NAs) to have dedicated women's football development programmes by 2022 (FIFA 2018). Actions of meso-level institutions, such as NAs or public authorities responsible for sport policy making, are decisive

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for the advancement of the sport. According to Soss and Schram (2007), policies can play a key role in altering conceptions and influencing public attitudes and perceptions. This is of particular importance to women's football, due to it being positioned within a complex and gendered environment (Pfister 2010, Allison 2016, 2017). Nonetheless, literature to date has dedicated limited attention to analyse NAs' engagement with policies aimed at furthering the growth of women's football (Bell 2012, Kjær and Agergaard 2013, Woodhouse *et al*. 2019, Añorve 2020).

To contribute to filling this gap, this study focuses on a recent policy NAs of Brazil, China and Italy have implemented demanding men's football clubs to integrate a women's team within their structure. Integration between men's and women's clubs is considered as one of the instruments to facilitate the professionalisation, visibility and commercialisation of the women's game (Aoki *et al*. 2010, European Clubs Association 2014, Valenti 2019, Valenti *et al*. 2020). However, a long-lasting debate exists around the issue of male and female integration in sport (e.g. Hargreaves 1990) and on whether the development of women's football should be tied to the men's game (Welford 2018, Woodhouse *et al*. 2019). Conducting an analysis on this policy initiative is therefore in line with the ultimate objectives of international football governing bodies to commercialise the women's game, and offers the opportunity to expand the debate on its development.

Specifically, this study examines the context and the timing under which NAs formulated the policy of integration, with the objective to answer the following question: What has influenced NAs of Brazil, China and Italy to implement the policy of integration? Drawing on a cross-continental comparison, the aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the dynamics and challenges NAs face when promoting initiatives intended to influence the development of women's football. In addition, this article discusses the possible future scenarios for women's football, which is of interest to the main stakeholders of the game.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review: the multiple streams framework

This study employs the Multiple Streams Framework (Kingdon 1984) because it offers a powerful tool to examine the timing and conditions under which ideas are pushed onto policy agenda. The Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) is derived from the 'garbage can' model[1] and serves as an exploratory device for understanding public policy agenda setting (Kingdon 1984, Zahariadis 2007). The analytical power of the MSF is characterised by its heuristic consideration of three (quasi-) independent streams (problem, policy and political) that interact within the policy system to produce 'windows of opportunity' for agenda setting. The *problem stream* refers to the perceptions of problems that are seen as 'public' in the sense that actions from public agencies and the government are expected to resolve those (Zahariadis 2007). Policy makers usually become aware of the problems because of triggering crises or through feedback from existing policies and programmes that attract public attention (Kingdon 1984). The *policy stream* consists of the list of possible actions that are available to policy makers as potential solutions to resolve a given problem. The decision to adopt the identified solutions is normally based on two criteria: technical feasibility and value acceptability (Kingdon 1984). However, in many cases, adoption of policy initiatives is not static. Instead, the development of policies can be gradual and incremental (Travis and Zahariadis 2002). The *political stream* represents the large-scale political environment and trends in which the policy process occurs. This stream considers three factors influencing the body politic: the national mood, interest group advocacy campaigns, and the executive or legislative turnover.

The three streams flow independently from each other until, at a specific point in time, a *policy window* opens (Kingdon 1984). This represents the juncture whereby the problem, policy, and political streams cross. Exworthy and Powell (2004) suggest that policy windows can be of two types: 'big windows' at the national level and 'little windows' at the local level. In the context of the current analysis, 'big windows' refer to events beyond the sport *per se* occurring in the selected countries (e.g. political and economic changes), while 'little windows' are more specific to (women's) football. Furthermore, Kingdon (1984) indicates that window openings usually are triggered by

apparently unrelated external focusing events (e.g. crises and accidents), and/or policy entrepreneurs who act both within and outside institutions. The role of policy entrepreneurs is to couple policy problems and policy solutions with political opportunities, thus working at the intersections of the three streams and contributing to their flow.

A major strength of this framework and the streams metaphor resides in their power to illustrate policy dynamics and envision the convergence of multiple societal phenomena to precipitate an 'idea whose time has come' (Kingdon 1984, p. 1). The MSF has proved valuable across a wide range of policy areas and been applied to various geographical contexts and cultures. Relevant to the current study, the MSF was utilised to examine policy issues in China (e.g. Zhou and Feng 2014), Europe (e.g., Richardson 2001) and South America (e.g. Brasil and Capella 2017). More specifically to the area of sport, the MSF has been utilised to explore sport policy processes at the level of local authorities (King 2009) and in the physical activity promotion domain (Piggin and Hart 2017). The theory has also been deployed to investigate national walking policy (Milton and Grix 2015) and found applications in the sport policy development in New Zealand (Chalip 1996), Norway (Bergsgard 2000) and Australia (Sotiriadou and Brouwers 2012). The Chinese sport context has been investigated via the MSF lens. For example, Zheng (2017) considered the MSF to analyse elite swimming development in China, while Peng *et al*. (2019) studied the football reform implemented in China in 2015. In Brazil, Camargo *et al*. (2020) applied the MSF to the field of elite sport policies, while Machado and colleagues (2017) investigated the formulation and organisation of the policy for educational sport through the framework.

When Kingdon first published *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* in 1984, he recognised the need for future research to focus on comparative analysis and urged for more cross-national comparisons. As discussed by Béland (2016, p. 237), since the early-to mid-1990s, 'a growing number of scholars have explored the politics of ideas from international and comparative perspectives'. For instance, the concept of multiple streams has been applied to explain the evolution of privatisation ideas in Great Britain and Germany (Zahariadis and Allen 1995). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, the MSF has not been employed with the objective to compare the development of sport policies across nations. In view of this, adopting the MSF with a comparative purpose is deemed relevant to respond to the current research question and, at the same time, further advance the literature in the specific area of sport policy.

3. Method

3.1 Research paradigm

This research followed a critical realist paradigm (Bhaskar 1989). This posits that any sought knowledge exists but is 'imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms and the fundamentally intractable nature of phenomena' (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p. 110). An interpretivist approach was employed, as it helps examine power dynamics in socially constructed reality (Morgan 2007). This is particularly relevant when it comes to gain an understanding of the conditions influencing implementation of a policy initiative. Along these lines, a qualitative research setting was embraced, with secondary data representing the source of information for meaning making (Krauss 2005).

The process of meaning making presents unique challenges as it serves to build an explanation in order to resolve a gap or inconsistency in knowledge (Weick, 1995). This is especially challenging in cross-cultural research, where the 'insider/outsider' status of the researcher represents one of the critical characterisations influencing the positionality of a study (Merriam *et al*. 2001). Authors of the current research are from the selected countries and have extensive familiarity with the dynamics and politics of football within their respective nations and internationally. As such, in line with Banks (1998, p. 7), authors can be considered as *indigenous-insiders*. Notably, as indicated by Merriam *et al*. (2001), one of the insider's strengths relies on their ability to project a more authentic understanding of the culture under study.

3.2 Cases selection and the comparative approach

Yin (2018) and Patton (2002) indicate that greatest understanding of a phenomenon can be gained through the selection of representative cases. Following this indication, the attention was drawn on Brazil, China and Italy cases for three main reasons. First, all three countries have formulated the policy initiative relating to integration of women's and men's clubs at similar times and adopted a similar top-down implementation approach. Second, the three countries display similar levels of gender disparities in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index report (World Economic Forum 2019). More specifically, out of the 153 countries analysed, Brazil ranks 92nd; China occupies the 106th position; and Italy is in 76th position. This indicates substantial gender gaps existing in the three countries. In responding to Denscombe's (2007) suggestion to choose cases based on their characteristics of similarity, the selected cases provide a suitable context for the research question to be answered. Third, the selected countries' geographical locations provide a unique setting to draw a cross-country and cross-continental comparative analysis. A critical advantage of this comparative case-study approach is that it has the potential to 'exemplify' (Bryman 2016) how women's football is developing across countries and cultures. However, it is important to note that this article does not pursue generalisability on the development of women's football and the initiatives to favour it.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Secondary data sources included in this research are official policy documents, media reports and past related literature. Attention was mainly devoted to policy statements and programmes concerning women's football development. Other documents consisted of annual reports, activity plans and online publications (e.g. articles from official NAs' websites). These were complemented by documents from FIFA and each NA's football confederation: the South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL) for Brazil, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) for China and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) for Italy. The collected data were subject to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This followed the principle of 'concept elaboration', where a researcher begins with a set of preconfigured conceptual ideas in mind and then interprets meaning from the emerging content of the collected data (Atkinson 2011). Starting from the tenets of the MSF and its streams logic, the analysis consisted of 'reading', sorting, and classifying the practices under investigation (Atkinson 2011). The content analysis was mainly premised on the elements of the research question. Also, following the streams logic of the MSF, the authors evaluated the three countries separately, and then reviewed and juxtaposed cases through 'within-case' and 'across-case' comparisons (Ayres *et al*. 2003)

4. Results and discussion

The cases illustrated in this section outline several issues relating to the past and current conditions of women's football. These offer an opportunity to reflect on the context and the timing under which NAs initiated the programme of integration. After presenting individual cases, authors juxtapose the three different countries, highlighting similarities and differences between Brazil, China and Italy. Through the MSF lenses, a discussion is presented on what have likely been the major forces influencing NAs to implement the policy initiative.

4.1 The case of Brazil

Football has contributed to define Brazil's national identity. Brazilians consider themselves the 'football nation'. However, large disparities between the men's and the women's games exist in the country. For example, in 2017, the number of professional contracts for female football players (3,263) represented only 4% of the number of contracts for male players (77,361) (CBF 2017). Also, football is the most played sport for leisure participants who are 15 years or older, but only 5.5% of

these are female (Agência Brasil 2017). Despite the strong tradition and large population, Brazil counts 15,000 female players in organised football, while the number of registered players totalled 3,449 women and girls in 2019 (FIFA 2019a). This figure places the 'football nation' behind other South American countries such as Venezuela and Argentina both in absolute and relative women's football participation rates (FIFA 2019a). In addition, only 1% of Brazilian licenced coaches are female, no representatives from women's football currently sit in the NA's executive committee and none of the nine committee members is female (FIFA 2019a).

It is fair to argue that football has contributed to the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity in the Brazilian sport scene (Knijnik 2015, Snyder 2018). The struggles of women as football players started in the 1930s, when the first women's tournaments were organised in São Paulo (Nadel 2014). As matches started to attract media and public interest, a reaction of repression was triggered because authorities were afraid that women's football could somehow disturb the 'natural order' in sport participation (Nadel 2014). The apex of the repression happened in the 1941, when the dictatorial regime of President Getulio Vargas promulgated the Decree Law 3199, banning women from participating in 'sports that are incompatible with the conditions of their nature' (article 54). The legislation certainly destroyed many women's sports associations, including football ones, that had started to flourish in Brazil before 1941 (Rigo *et al*. 2008). Women were prevented from playing football until 1979. Women's football in Brazil was formally accepted and acknowledged by the federal government only in 1983 (Wood 2018). That moment of fair liberalisation created an environment that fomented the growth of women's football during the 1980s and the 1990s, with football finally becoming a competitive and high-performance sport for Brazilian women and girls. Reports from this period show that participation of women in football grew exponentially (Goellner 2005, Wood 2018). Some authors indicated the level of participation in women's football was unique, reaching impressive numbers all around the country (Kittleson 2014).[2]

In 1991, Brazil was the only representative from South America in the first FIFA Women's World Cup. Although the women's *Seleção*[3] was eliminated in the group stage, the event sparked many positive reactions. Five years later, at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, the women's national team reached the fourth place. This marked the first turning point for the women's game in Brazil as the local media, for the first time, took women's football seriously (Wood 2018). Snyder (2018) asserts that the success of the women's national team at the Olympic Games awoke the country to the potential of women's football. The Brazilian team continued to be successful, winning silver medals in two Olympic Games (Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008) and achieving the second place at the 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup. This led Brazilian women's football to a second turning point as politicians, fans and domestic media started to consider female football players such as Cristiane, Formiga, Tamires and Marta, as national heroes. In particular, Marta Vieira da Silva, who was recognised as the greatest female player of all time,[4] unquestionably epitomised the football excellence displayed by the Brazilian women's national team during that period.

Nonetheless, the international achievements of the national team did not result in a more organised administration of women's football in the country. Following the defeat in the Final of the 2007 Women's World Cup against Germany, the then President of the Federative Republic of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, criticised the lack of support from sports entities for Brazilian women's football:

> I think that these girls are not as valued as they should be by the entities that take care of women's sports in Brazil. They really need to raise their heads, know that we are starting a very big process, they are valuable, they are the pride of Brazil (Agência Brasil 2007)

Despite the promises, since then, not much has changed. The reality of Brazilian women's clubs consists of amateurism and difficulties to sustain basic team expenses (Oliveira Souza and Mendes Capraro 2020). This situation results in precarious conditions for most players and their individual

development. When the Brazilian national team suffered an early defeat at the 2012 London Olympics, the press and the fans accused players of a 'lack of commitment'. However, in response to the heavy criticism, Keiton Lima – who had been the head coach for three and a half years before the 2012 Olympic Games in London – went public to defend the national team players and stated they could not be expected to produce better outcomes, given the insufficient resources available to develop women's football in the country (Veja 2012).

In 2014, representatives of the Brazilian Women's Football League delivered to the general secretary of the Secretariat of Policies for Women a request for the elaboration of a bill to deal with the professionalisation of women's football (Agência Brasil 2014). Within this context, a year later, a window of opportunity opened for women's football when men's football clubs were exposed to a large process of reform due to their heavy fiscal debts, constituted in part by taxes owing to the state (Marques 2015). To try to address this, President Dilma Rousseff enacted the *Brazilian Football Modernisation Programme* (PROFUT), through which men's clubs interested in refinancing their debts were required, among other new financial management standards, to maintain a permanent investment in women's football.[5]

Changes outside Brazil may also signal forces to explain the decision of the NA (*Confederação Brasileira de Futebol* – CBF) to launch initiatives in favour of women's football. For instance, since 2009, the CONMEBOL had organised a female version of *Copa Libertadores de America*.[6] In 2016, the CONMEBOL approved criteria making compulsory the creation of women's teams for men's clubs participating in the *Copa Libertadores de America*. The by-law enforced men's clubs to have connections with at least a senior and a junior female team (CONMEBOL 2018). Following this, in 2019, the Brazilian NA established the same rule for participants in *Campeonato Brasileiro Série A* – the top national men's football league. As a result, top Brazilian clubs now have women's teams playing with the same name and the same colours of the men's teams. However, this has not yet represented the full professionalisation of women's football in Brazil. According to recent data, only 4 out of 20 teams in the top Brazilian tier, *Série A*, pay their female football players, with most salaries varying between US$400 and US$1000 (Alves 2019). Two teams use the association with other clubs to pay the players, while all others have amateur players in their rosters receiving, in the best-case scenarios, subsistence allowances (Alves 2019). In terms of the national teams, the CBF has given some steps to promote equality between male and female players who represent the country in international competitions. Since 2020, men and women receive the same daily pro rata and the same prizes, when playing for the national team (CBF 2020).

4.2 The case of China

China has been actively involved in the evolution of women's football for many decades, having hosted the first and fifth editions of the FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991 and 2007. Also, China has occupied a leading position in Asian women's football and achieved major continental success since 1986.[7] Yet, in terms of grassroots participation, China – the country with the largest population in the world – lags behind other AFC nations with much smaller populations such as Japan and Australia (FIFA 2019a). According to the latest FIFA's survey, the total registered female players in China were 20,359, while the number of females playing organised football reached 100,000 (FIFA 2019a). The Chinese Football Association (CFA) has a dedicated women's football committee and a designed women's football strategy (FIFA 2019a). Nevertheless, the NA's executive committee only includes one female member (out of 22) and currently has no official representatives from the women's sector (FIFA 2019a). The sporting achievements of the Chinese women's national team have historically outweighed those of their men's counterpart. For this reason, the *Kengqiang Meigui*[8] was once described as a beam of sunshine into the gloominess of Chinese football (Zhao *et al*. 2012). However, glorious moments only constitute a small part of the overall turbulent process of development for women's football in China.

The first appearance of women's football in China was recorded at the Liangjiang Women's Physical Education Institute in Shanghai in 1924. Since then, women's football has been gradually introduced nationwide, but it was during the early 1980s that women's football experienced its real upsurge (Liu and Liu 2009). After the first female professional football team was established in Shanxi in 1979, other provinces started to form professional teams, with local sports commissions mostly sponsoring them.[9] In 1981, the first national women's football league was organised with around ten teams. The number increased up to 27 in the following season (Fan and Mangan 2004). In 1983, the Chinese women's national team was set up, marking the first turning point for Chinese women's football as the country entered the international football community (People Daily 2003).

Despite the increasing number of female players and clubs, and the attainments of the national team, women's football was never taken seriously. In September 1987, in Guangzhou, during the Sixth National Games, at a strategic planning meeting with the Sports Ministry and all the Heads of provincial sports commissions, it was decided that women's football would not be an official event at the Seventh National Games in 1991 (Fan and Mangan 2004). This was mainly due to women's football not being an Olympic sport and therefore not fitting into China's Olympic Strategy. Without the possibility of obtaining prestige, government budget or political credit[10] through women's football in the Games, most provinces dismissed their women's football teams. Consequently, in 1987, the number of women's teams went from thirty to only five within two months (Fan and Mangan 2004).

At the beginning of 1990s, women's football regained interest and attention from the central government, due to the outstanding performances of the national team at international competitions (e.g. 1990 Beijing Asian Games and the 1991 AFC Women's Asian Cup). This represented a second turning point for Chinese women's football as the CFA explicitly recognised in the *Ten-year Plan for Chinese Football Development (1993–2002)* that the women's national team was one of the strongest in the world (Chinese Football Association 1993). Also, the inclusion of women's football in the 1996 Olympics entitled the women's national team to the same treatment as the men's. This included finance, training and administrative provision. In particular, managers were appointed specifically for the women's national team, which could train up to ten hours a day and six days a week (Fan and Mangan 2004). The support from the government was effective in preparing the women's team for the 1996 Olympics and the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup, during which China reached two second places. The positive results reinforced Chinese politicians' perception that women's football was a strong contributor to national pride. However, the sporting successes also impeded the government from seeing the problems emerging in Chinese women's football as it moved into the 2000s (Dong and Mangan 2002).

The situation of Chinese women's football took a rapid downturn when the national team failed to qualify for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney and then lost its dominance in Asia to North Korea between 2001 and 2003. The biggest shock occurred at the 2004 Olympics in Athens when Germany appallingly defeated China 8–0. Examining the reasons behind such recession, the government quickly realised that there was a severe shortage of players at both grassroots and elite levels (Liu and Liu 2009). Furthermore, as China started to take a dive in its performance, its neighbouring and football rival countries, Japan and North Korea, begun to recover the lost ground (AFC 2020).

After seven consecutive editions of the AFC Women's Asian Cup, China was not able to climb back to the top. In response to the concerning situation, the CFA formulated the first policy specifically targeting women's football, the *China Women's Football Development Plan (2005–2012)* (Sina Sports 2005). From the document, it was clear that the Chinese government realised the urgency and necessity to catch up with other countries. This policy also marked the start of commercialisation for Chinese women's football, which arguably followed the same path men's football had undertaken in 1993 (Fan and Lu 2013). In addition, the policy plan aimed to establish commercial women's leagues with a promotion-relegation system. However, the top-down approach exposed its problems during the implementation stage, as a lack of consideration for the reality was revealed: the number of women's teams was still insufficient. This eventually contributed to the abandonment of the open league system.

In 2015, the central government issued the *Overall Plan for Chinese Football Reform and Development (Reform Plan)* and launched a profound national reorganisation of Chinese football at all levels (Chinese State Council 2015). This reform led to a series of policy and organisational changes within the Chinese football system in its entirety (Peng *et al*. 2019). One of the prominent initiatives was to grow grassroots participation through the school system:

> All primary and secondary schools should integrate football as part of the physical education curriculum . . . we particularly support schools with a good football tradition to continue this speciality. There are about 5,000 special football schools in our country and we aim to increase the number to 20,000 in 2020, and 50,000 in 2025, with some of these schools focusing on women's football development (Chinese State Council 2015, Point 5: 20).

In 2019, the CFA released another policy specific to women's football, which demanded all men's clubs from the Chinese Super League to establish a women's team to be eligible to participate in the men's league competitions from 2020 (Chinese Football Association 2019). Also, the former CFA President Du Zhaocai commented on the new policy:

> We have noticed that quite a few of the world's most successful clubs have women's teams as well and boosted by successes of the men's teams, their women's teams have developed fast and achieved tremendous successes too. This is a pattern on which we can model our women's game. So, we have decided that each men's Chinese Super League side should have a women's team by 2020 so the men's game will lend their strengths to the women's game (FIFA 2019b).

Du pointed out that the rationale of launching the integration policy for Chinese men and women's football was in fact inspired by other countries, where women's football was relatively more successful than China. The timing of the policy was also crucial as the CFA President continued to comment:

> In 2019, all eyes will be on the FIFA Women's World Cup in France and we are hoping to capitalise on the competition to attract more attention and promote our game (FIFA 2019b).

Overall, this policy is expected to stimulate the professionalisation and commercialisation of women's football through the collaboration with men's football clubs. A principle that was shared by the AFC, which has recently encouraged all Asian men's professional clubs to use their resources for the establishment of a women's team (AFC 2019).

4.3 The case of Italy

Italy is one of the powerhouses of world football. Over half of the population has a favourite team, twenty five million Italians watch football through media channels and over nine million supporters regularly attend matches live (FIGC 2019a). However, the popularity of the game is mainly due to men's clubs and the men's national team. In 2019, the *Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio* (FIGC – Italian Football Association) reported just over 25,000 registered women's football players, which represents less than 3% of total football participants nationwide. This figure places Italy behind other European nations with much smaller populations such as Sweden and the Netherlands (FIFA 2019a, FIGC 2019a). Also, data shows that 1% of Italian licenced coaches are females. The NA has a strategy for the development of women's football and set up both a dedicated committee and a women's football department (FIFA 2019a). However, currently there are no representatives from the women's football sector sitting in the NA's executive committee, of which 21 members only one is female (FIFA 2019a).

Since the early 1970s, several divisions and mergers have occurred in relation to the administration of women's football in Italy. Nevertheless, Italy has constantly advocated for women's football to grow internationally. The first non-official Women's European Championship in 1969 and the first non-official Women's World Cup in 1970 were organised in Italy.[11] In 1981, the Italian women's national team won the first edition of the *Mundialito*,[12] and eventually hosted the following four

editions of the tournament between 1984 and 1988. Furthermore, Italy was selected to stage the fifth edition of the UEFA Women's European Championship in 1993, and it was among the UEFA members to sustain the creation of the UEFA Women's Champions League[13] in the early 2000s.

Early traces of women's football date back to 1930 in Milan (Giani 2017). However, there is consensus on identifying 1968 as the starting point for Italian women's football. This is when the women's national team played its first official match, the first independent governing body exclusively dedicated to women's football was established, and the first women's national league was incepted (Matteucci 2012, FIGC 2019b). Yet, when describing the situation of Italian women's football, it is important to contextualise this within the complex European scenario. It was only during the 1971 Extraordinary Congress of UEFA that most European NAs agreed to lift a ban that had prevented women from accessing all member club grounds since the 1920s. Therefore, while women continued to play and compete during the twentieth century, the organisation of women's football in many European countries, including Italy, had remained in an 'underground fashion' for five decades (Williams and Woodhouse 1999).

In 1972, two bodies existed to oversee women's football in Italy. These merged and were eventually renamed as *Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio Femminile* (FIGCF – Italian Football Association Women) in 1975, eliciting the acronym of the long-established FIGC, although not yet being officially part of the Italian NA. In 1983, the National Olympic Committee recognised FIGCF, and three years later the Italian NA finally absorbed women's football into its structure. This represented the first turning point for Italian women's football as it started to receive financial support for promotional activities (Matteucci 2012). In 1986, the Italian NA created an *ad hoc* Women's Football Committee including all stakeholders in a common umbrella group. However, in administrative terms, FIGC placed the Committee under the authority of the *Lega Nazionale Dilettanti* (LND – National Amateur League). Therefore, in line with the principles that regulate the status of athletes in Italy (Law 91/1981), women's football players are considered amateur, cannot sign full-time employment contracts, and are only entitled to reimbursements for training up to an overall gross sum of €30,658 per year.[14]

The sporting results of the women's national team maintained relatively high standards in the years following. Italy reached the third place at the 1987 European Championship and then achieved the second place in the same competition in 1993. Two years later the team failed to qualify to the European Championship and missed the opportunity to play in the 1995 Women's World Cup. In 1997, the team attained the second place at the European Championship and then participated in the final stages of the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup. Nevertheless, despite some positive results, women's football remained unsuccessful in its attempts to gain considerable attention from Italian football fans and media.

In the first decade of 2000s, the performances of the national team quickly declined as it failed to qualify for the subsequent three editions of the FIFA Women's World Cup and never reached the final stages of the Olympic Games. FIGC started to recognise that women's football lacked visibility and that the scarce results of the national team were partly due the limited number of players in the country. After a disappointing decade, women's football undertook another phase of institutional transformation, which marked the second turning point for Italian women's football with the Women's Football Division being put under special administration in 2011. In 2013, FIGC established the *Commission for the Promotion and Development of Women's Football*. In the meantime, Italy failed to qualify to the FIFA Women's World Cup for the fourth consecutive time whilst a new President of the Italian NA had been elected a few months earlier. Women's football leveraged on this executive turnover to push for a third process of change, with the newly appointed FIGC Chief Executive Officer, Michele Uva, promoting the creation of the *Executive Committee for Women's Football* in 2015. In the same year, FIGC took direct control of the women's football sector back from the LND, becoming responsible for the organisation of the national women's leagues, and launched a dedicated Women's Football Development Programme. The objective of the programme was to

revitalise various aspects the game, including its governance, the club licencing system, the management of the national teams, and the marketing and communication activities (FIGC 2019c).

As part of the development programme, FIGC also introduced an obligation for men's clubs to establish a formal link with women's football as a prerequisite to play in men's national competitions. The policy demanded men's clubs to either start a women's football academy or collaborate with an already existing senior women's team. FIGC designed the policy with the intention to keep it for at least seven seasons and progressively extend the requirement to men's clubs playing at all levels of the football pyramid. This way FIGC had laid the foundations to facilitate the establishment of connections between men's and women's football already in 2015. Four years later UEFA included a similar principle in its first-ever women's football strategy in which it encouraged both professional and grassroots men's and boys' clubs embrace women's and girls' football (UEFA 2019).

Three seasons after implementation, 13 of the 24 clubs competing in the top two women's national leagues (Serie A and Serie B) had a connection with a men's professional club. This helped FIGC enhancing visibility of Italian women's football. For instance, in April 2019, the game between the women's sections of Juventus and Fiorentina attracted a national record crowd of 40,000 spectators. In addition, the progression made by Italian women's football became evident at international level as the national team took part in the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup after twenty years from its last appearance in the competition. Importantly, for the first time in history, the team reached the round of 16 of the competition and attracted substantial media attention and fan followings (FIGC 2019b, 2019d, 2019e).

4.4 Analysis of the integration policy through the multiple streams framework

4.4.1 Problem Stream. As presented in the findings, two main problems emerged in Brazilian, Chinese and Italian women's football. First, the declining performances of the women's national teams signalled that the conditions of the women's game in each of the selected countries were starting to become a concern (see Figure 1). In particular, the Brazilian and Chinese women's national teams suffered rapid downturns after a period of outstanding performances at international competitions. This awoke policy makers to realisation of the problem that their respective women's national teams were no longer competitive at the highest levels (i.e. triggering crisis). Also, in these two countries, women's football had entered the public discourse and attracted considerable public attention before the sporting results crisis. Therefore, as indicated in the MSF, public authorities (e.g. NAs) are expected to provide solutions to resolve situations when these become 'problematic' (Kingdon 1984). Italy presents a slightly different situation, given that the results of the national

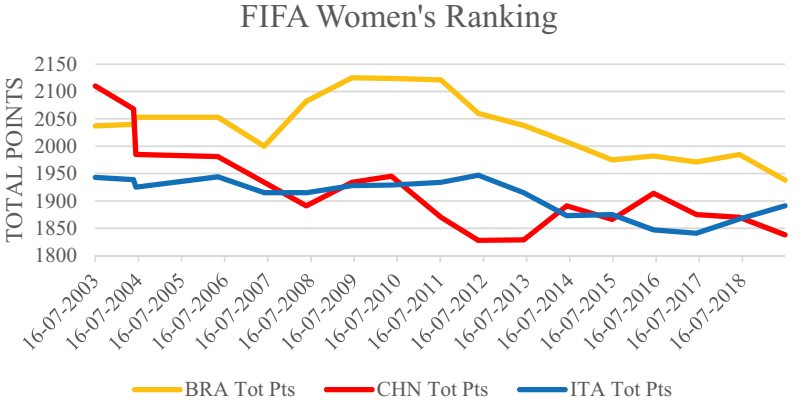

Figure 1. FIFA Women's Ranking: Brazil, China and Italy (2003–2018). Authors' own calculations. Data source: *FIFA.com*.

team had always maintained an average standard without ever exceling in the most prestigious competitions. However, it can be argued that missing the qualification to four consecutive editions of the FIFA Women's World Cup and never reaching the final stages of the Olympic Games triggered the attention of a traditionally successful association such as the Italian one about the state of women's football in the country.(Figure 1)

The second problem, low participation, owed to the long neglect of NAs towards women's football, particularly at the grassroots level. The number of registered female players in each country partly reflects the historical paucity of actions from football institutions. As such, the precarious conditions in which the women's game was left for many years resulted in inefficient player recruitment and development. By comparison, all countries shared the lack of financial support, training facilities as well grassroots infrastructures. In addition, despite having larger populations, women's football participation rates in the selected countries lagged behind those of neighbouring and/or traditionally rival football nations (see for example Table 1).

Within their respective confederations, Brazil, China and Italy present relatively low numbers of registered female players both in absolute and relative terms. More precisely, China contributes to 7.1% of women's football participation in the AFC. In comparison, Japan has more than twice women's football participants, despite its population size being less than a tenth of China. Even larger disproportions can be observed when comparing China to Australia. In fact, the population of Australia is less than 2% that of China. However, participation in women's football is more than five times higher. Brazil accounts for 3.7% of CONMEBOL women's football participation, despite it being the country with the largest population in the region. Comparatively, populations of Argentina and Venezuela are 21% and 15% smaller than Brazil's. Yet, participation in the women's game is more than seven times higher. In Europe, Italy sits within the top 10 countries in terms of population size. However, it reports 1.7% of total women's football participation in UEFA nations. This is between five and seven times lower than number of participants in traditionally rival football nations such as Germany and France, which have relatively comparable population sizes. Overall, this raises concerns regarding the development of policies and strategies aimed at encouraging the football participation of women in the selected countries.

4.4.2 Policy Stream. Policy makers evaluate possible actions that are available as potential solutions to resolve a given problem (Kingdon 1984). In this regard, findings show that integration between men's and women's football sectors was perceived as an instrument that could ease some of the challenges the women's game has historically faced in the three countries. While Italy started the policy of integration in 2015 and Brazil and China adopted it 2019, it is important to note that promoting the collaboration between men's and women's football clubs has been a popular practice in other countries such as England, France and Germany for decades (Aoki *et al*. 2010, European Clubs Association 2014). Therefore, although NAs of those countries never

Table 1. Women's football participation in Brazil, China and Italy and a selection of neighbouring and/or traditionally rival football nations.

Country	Confederation	Population size	Total registered female players (% share of respective confederation)
China	**AFC**	**1,376,048,000**	**20,359 (7.1%)**
Japan	AFC	126,573,000	51,000 (17.9%)
Australia	AFC	23,968,000	113,027 (39.6%)
Brazil	**CONMEBOL**	**207,847,000**	**3,449 (3.7%)**
Argentina	CONMEBOL	43,416,000	27,911 (29.8%)
Venezuela	CONMEBOL	31,108,000	24,427 (26.1%)
Italy	**UEFA**	**59,797,000**	**25,896 (1.7%)**
Germany	UEFA	80,688,000	197,575(12.9%)
France	UEFA	64,395,000	142,037 (9.2%)

The fourth column presents the number of total registered female players in the country: sum of adult players (18+) and youth players (<18). In parentheses is the countries' relative share of total registered female players in the respective confederations (Total registered female players in AFC = 285,328; CONMEBOL = 93,715; UEFA = 1,536,954). Authors' own calculations. Data source: FIFA (2019a).

adopted a formal policy to oblige men's clubs investing in the women's game, policy makers of Brazil, China and Italy have ostensibly 'learned' from these cases. Policy learning is a well-established practice within many governments and domestic policy areas (Houlihan 2009). This was particularly clear in China, where the President of the CFA stated they implemented the policy of integration as a result of lesson-learning from other countries' successful practices to promote women's football.

In line with the proposition of the MSF, the formulation and implementation of the policy of integration culminated around specific windows of opportunity (Kingdon 1984, Exworthy and Powell 2004). Further to the crisis of sporting results, policy windows opened up due to other (women's) football-specific events. For instance, Brazilian women's football gained attention from policy makers, via the governmental programme *PROFUT*, when a financial crisis hit professional men's clubs. In China, the *Reform Plan* for football put forward by the central government in 2015 created a window of opportunity for the CFA to reiterate the policy agenda in favour of women's football. In Italy, a wave of institutional change internal to the NA between 2014 and 2015 created a suitable environment for the newly elected board to regain control over the women's football sector and launch a dedicated development programme.

In addition, the pre- and post-2019 FIFA Women's World Cup represented ideal windows of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to remind stakeholders about the importance of supporting the development of women's football. As China and Brazil implemented the policy of integration a year after the publication of the 2018 FIFA Women's Football Strategy document, it is possible to speculate that such action was a result of exerted pressure from international football institutions. Furthermore, a 'big window' of opportunity opened around this time with the changing normative expectations from supranational organisations such as the United Nations about the role of sport governing bodies in the fight against gender inequalities (e.g. United Nations 2019). This has likely cascaded to FIFA, the football confederations and ultimately the NAs.

However, from a policy perspective, it is important to highlight the different approaches undertaken by the AFC, CONMEBOL and UEFA. While the Asian and European bodies *encourage* all men's clubs to use some of their resources to support the creation of a women's team (AFC 2019, UEFA 2019), the South American confederation decided to *oblige* men's clubs participating in the continental *Copa Libertadores de America* to establish a women's section (CONMEBOL 2018). Obliging integration can result in effective policy implementation at the club level, which can facilitate introduction of more female teams in the short term. However, policy makers have to take into consideration the financial and managerial implications of this new policy to men's clubs and therefore cater for the possibility that a rigid top-down 'obligation' may cause severe consequences to some clubs. An 'encouraging' approach, on the other hand, might take longer to become fruitful for women's football development but can be more sustainable in the long run. As such, while only a few policy attempts targeting specifically the women's game were made prior to the second decade of the 2000s, findings of this study show that policies on women's football can follow a gradual and incremental pattern (Travis and Zahariadis 2002).

4.4.3 Political Stream. The political stream serves to depict the general political environment and trends in which the policy process occurs (Kingdon 1984). This stream was evident in the NAs' decision to implement the policy of integration as greater attention started to be paid towards the role of sport and sporting governing bodies in empowering women and attempting to reduce broad societal issues such as gender equality. In particular, as indicated in the method section, gender equality remains a prominent problem across the three selected countries. In support of this argument, previous literature indicates a negative relationship between a country's level of gender inequality and its international success in women's football (e.g. Brendtmann *et al*. 2016).

Discussing how gender balance in a society is regulated and how this can affect sports is complex. Many institutions such as social norms, religious traditions and legal regulations influence this. Also, these institutions vary across countries and change over history (Damjanovic and Selvaretnam 2020). Nevertheless, as societies develop and accumulate physical and human capital, women become more productive, which drives social norms towards gender equality (Damjanovic and Selvaretnam

2020). It follows that the profound transformations Brazil and China[15] have seen over the past decades contributed to shift their economic structure and reduce gender earnings inequality (Agénor and Canuto 2015, He and Wu 2018). From the perspective of women's football stakeholders, this has favoured the opening of a 'big window' of opportunity as the problem of gender equality has certainly entered the public and political discourses, and, as such, influenced public entities concerned with the promotion of women's sports in the two countries.

Compared to Brazil and China, Italy has not gone under major transformations in its economy recently. Yet, indicators of gender disparities demonstrate that the country is far from the majority of other European Union member states. For example, Italy lacks an adequate infrastructure for promoting, coordinating and monitoring initiatives in favour of gender equality (European Parliament 2014). In addition, there were concerns over the Italian government's policies to address gender inequality, highlighting that progress on these aspects have been mainly a result of pressure from the European Union and domestic citizens. However, Italy has progressed at a much faster pace than other European Union member states since 2005 (EIGE 2019). For instance, introduction of legislative quotas has had an impact in increasing the number of women on company boards (+33%) and parliamentary seats (+23%) between 2005 and 2018. This is in line with a recent study that verified empirically the effectiveness of gender quotas in favour of women's career progression (Maggian *et al*. 2020). However, the share of women in the highest decision-making bodies of national Olympic sports organisations remains as low as 12% (EIGE 2019). Therefore, it is possible that, being football the most popular and practiced sport in the country, the decision of the Italian NA to act in support of women's football was partly influenced by the societal view supporting that public institutions should proactively engage in initiatives to reduce national gender inequality.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Summary of results

This article examined the context and the timing under which NAs of Brazil, China and Italy implemented a policy demanding men's football clubs to integrate a women's team within their structure. Using the MSF, three case studies were analysed with a comparative purpose to identify and explain the factors influencing the formulation and development of such policy initiative in women's football. Findings indicate that the policy of integration was a consequence of factors relating to the problem, the policy and the political streams, which converged at the opening of both 'big' and 'little' windows of opportunity (Kingdon 1984, Exworthy and Powell 2004). This study discusses that NAs were expected to find solutions to cope with the declining performances of women's national teams and the relatively low participation rates. Moreover, it is likely that the steps made by neighbouring and traditionally rival football countries in the women's game started to put further pressure on the selected NAs to reconsider their women's football strategies. Furthermore, it is realistic to think that the pressure exerted by FIFA and respective confederations influenced NAs' plans in relation to women's football. Finally, this study indicates that the development of women's football has likely entered the public agenda concomitantly with the increased societal need for public authorities to act in favour of gender equality.

This study supports the idea that the development of policies can be gradual and incremental (Travis and Zahariadis 2002). Also, as a number of NAs have started to follow the route of integration between men's and women's clubs to foster the women's game, it is possible to argue that policy makers are 'learning' from each other. Following FIFA's guidelines to enhancing the profile and visibility of women's football, the policy of integration represents an element of convergence among NAs to further the growth of the women's game. Reflecting the significance of this policy, even the newly elected President of the German NA, a leading country in women's football, contemplated about demanding all professional men's clubs to establish a women's section in an attempt to face the recent crisis of results of the German women's national team (Schwermer 2019). Similarly, the

Russian NA has recently commented on the possibility to emulate the policy of integration in order to uplift the conditions of their women's football teams (Russian Football Union 2019).

5.2 Implications

Obliging men's clubs to invest in women's football is one of the instruments available to NAs in their attempt to build capacity and boost the economic and commercial conditions of women's football in the short run. Nevertheless, implementing the integration between men's and women's football clubs top-down raises a number of questions not only on the long-term sustainability of such investments, but also on the viability of this initiative in countries where the men's football market is smaller (Valenti 2019). In addition, following integration, women's football teams risk becoming victims of the men's clubs' decision-making until they achieve financial self-sufficiency (Welford 2018). In view of this, the strategy undertaken by football governing bodies for the development of the women's game resembles that of co-option outlined by Hargreaves (1990), whereby women's football is provided the resources by the men's game to try and 'catch up' in what remains a male preserve. This implies women's football potentially be seen as the 'big brother's little sister' (Woodhouse *et al*. 2019). Also, with men's clubs entering the women's football market, similar financial and sporting inequalities displayed in the men's game risk replicating in the women's sector. A major threat posed by this scenario is market polarisation, that is, the more dominant men's clubs from the more powerful football nations 'cannibalise' the women's game at the expenses of clubs and nations with limited resources in men's, and consequently, women's football (LTT Sports 2020).

An alternative possible scenario exists for women's football. This involves stakeholders negotiating a non-men's football dependent model. Following Hargreaves's (1990) indications on the political strategies available to women's sports, this denotes the women's game concurs to self-realise and create separate entities and governing bodies to control the administration, organisation and management of the women's game. Yet, while an independent framework could help guarantee the specificities of women's football are taken into account, this would likely determine a deceleration of the commercialisation process. Therefore, the most critical question for (women's) football stakeholders continues to be whether the women's game should follow the same path taken by the hyper-commercialised men's game, or instead, identify and implement a different business model (Valenti *et al*. 2018). Such model would rely on large (if not exclusive) involvement of public structures and initiatives to sustain the promotion of women's football. For example, broadcasting of games would occur through public or community-owned media, and recruitment of players through school and university programmes. As a result, the development of women's football would be tied mainly to economically, socially, culturally and environmentally sustainable investments (Dunn 2016, Añorve 2020).

5.3 Limitations and future research

There are two key limitations in this study. First, it relies entirely on secondary data to enable understanding of social phenomena surrounding the policies and politics in women's football. Related to the collection of secondary data, it is important to highlight that the lack of official data remains one of the major constraints of studies on women's football. For example, gathering official information on women's football participation over historical periods for Brazil and China was particularly challenging. Also, although findings of this research are based on a framework (i.e., MSF) which allows exploration of public policy agenda in a heuristic manner, there is urgency for future researchers to complement findings with quantitative measures. In addition, future research should focus on a larger sample of nations, and possibly directly involve main stakeholders for interviews. Second, the comparative approach offered an opportunity to advance understanding of how women's football is developing across countries. However, the selection of cases is tied to the opportunity to examine policies of nations that are positioned at the highest levels of the game. Directing the attention towards countries

that do not present the same characteristics might lead to the identification of different conclusions pertaining to NAs' actions and policies in support of women's football development.

Notes

1. Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) proposed the 'garbage can' model, explaining that organisations often operate in a state of anarchy and chaos. As a result, they suggest that, when running into a problem, decision makers do not follow the rational approach of gathering facts and weighing the evidence. Instead, organisations mix and match problems and solutions with choice-opportunities as they are being generated.
2. Wood (2018) reported the existence of more than 3000 women's teams, which competed in organised tournaments in the 1980s.
3. The nickname Brazilians utilise to refer to national football teams.
4. Marta has been named FIFA World Player of the year six times, as many times as Lionel Messi, the most awarded male player ever.
5. Section I, article 4, X of the Law no. 13, 155 of 4 August 2015 promulgated by the Presidency of the Brazilian Republic. Full document is available from https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2015-2018/2015/Lei/L13155.htm.
6. For the sake of comparison, *Copa Libertadores* is the South American equivalent to the European *UEFA Champions League*.
7. China did not participate to any AFC Women's Asian Cup before 1986 due to political reasons.
8. *Kengqiang Meigui*, or 'Steel Roses' in English translation, refers to independent and confident females, was used by Chinese to represent the national women's football team following their great performance in the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup.
9. Players of these teams received local government subsidies as their salary to represent the province to play in national tournaments.
10. Political credit here refers to political rewards, such as promotion, for sport officials at provincial level based on their teams' performance at the National Games.
11. The first international competition for women's football national teams was organised officially by UEFA in 1984.
12. Mudialito was a worldwide tournament for national teams in women's association football. The competition was one the most prestigious women's football events, prior to the advent of the FIFA Women's World Cup. Nowadays a similar type of competition is the Algarve Cup.
13. Referred as 'UEFA Women's Cup' before 2008.
14. In June 2020, the Federal Council of FIGC approved the launch of a project aimed at recognising professionalisation of women's football, starting from the 2022/23 season (FIGC 2020).
15. Brazil and China are part of BRICS, an acronym coined by economist O'Neill (2001) to identify countries that are at a similar stage of newly advanced economic development such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

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