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The battle for centre stage: Women's football in South Africa

Mari Haugaa Engh

abstract

From when the first official South African Women's National Football team was established in 1993, Banyana Banyana have been 'making it happen' for women's football in South Africa. National team players have become inspirational icons and role models for thousands of South African women and girls. This *Focus* draws on academic research, media reports and interviews with national team players to highlight the struggles and victories of South African women footballers over the last 40 years. Despite numerous challenges and setbacks, women's football has experienced immense growth over the past 15 years. Highlighting examples of battles for power and leadership, homophobic attitudes and attempts to feminise the bodies of women footballers, this *Focus* illustrates the hard fought victories and disappointing losses in the history of South African women's football.

keywords

Women, femininity, South Africa, football

Introduction

Between 31st October and 14th November 2010, Banyana Banyana participated in the Confédération Africaine de Football (CAF) African Women's Championship (AWC) on home soil. Banyana Banyana got off to a good start in the tournament, beating Tanzania 2-1 in the opening match of the tournament, and they went on to win a semi-final spot when convincingly beating Mali 4-0 in their last group game. However, their hopes of a securing a place in the 2010 Women's World

Cup in Germany were crushed after losing 3-1 to Equatorial Guinea in extra time. In the lead-up to the tournament numerous statements of support were made; President Zuma, for example, reinstated 'Football Friday' and asked South Africans to show Banyana Banyana the same support that was given to Bafana Bafana during the World Cup (Gsport, 2010). However, considering the late announcement of the tournament fixtures, choice of venues, timing of matches and general lack of media coverage, it seems clear that the battle for

women's football in South Africa continues. The AWC match fixtures were announced a mere 40 days before kick-off and most matches were scheduled during day-time on weekdays, making it difficult for fans to watch games. In fact, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) only agreed to screen Banyana Banyana matches, but still failed to screen the third-place play-off match between Cameroon and South Africa. After announcing Sinaba stadium in Daveyton and Makhulong Stadium in Tembisa as the venues for the tournament, Ekurhuleni Councillor Ndosi Shongwe stated that

The hosting of this tournament on the heels of the successful 2010 FIFA World Cup is testimony that the infrastructure built for the World Cup will not lie dormant (SAFA, 2010).

Although both stadia were upgraded for the men's World Cup, they have limited spectator capacities (both have an estimated capacity of about 15 000) and they were not used as match venues during the men's tournament earlier this year. In fact, no women's team has yet been given the opportunity to play on what is considered the 'centre stage' venues of South African football.

In South Africa football is viewed as a game for men, and it remains a flagship masculine sport, serving to maintain and support masculine domination (Pelak, 2005). Men's football dominates 'football lingo', media coverage and participation rates, and despite the recent achievements of the women's national teams, they receive little public recognition and support. The male dominance, however, goes far beyond that of monopolising corporate and popular support; the way in which the game is played, how it is talked about and how players are valued is also constructed in masculine terms. Women who play football are expected to 'play like men' but 'look like women', creating a system in which football

remains understood in masculine terms, even when women are playing the game (Haugaa Engh, 2010). In this context of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, South African women's football has to negotiate a complex terrain of heteronormative discourses and restrictions. Although men have dominated participation as well as administration and leadership of football (Pelak, 2005; Alegi, 2004), research undertaken by Martha Saavedra (2004) and Cynthia Fabrizio Pelak (2010) has shown that South African women have been actively organising and playing football for more than 40 years. From when the first official South African Women's National Football team was established in 1993, Banyana Banyana have been fighting for recognition and support for women's football in South Africa, and national team players have been inspirational icons and role models for thousands of South African women and girls. Despite discrimination, marginalisation and blatant sexism, former and current Banyana Banyana players have persisted in their endeavours and proceeded to make the 'beautiful game' their own.

This *Focus* draws on scholarly work, newspaper articles and interviews¹ with 15 former and current members of the senior national women's football team to show how South African women have succeeded in partaking in sport, despite the numerous class-, race- and gender-based constraints they have faced. Drawing on Pelak's (2010) periodisation of South African women's football and Naidoo and Muholi's (2010) understanding of exclusion and inclusion, this *Focus* highlights the battles fought by women footballers throughout the history of the game. By providing an outline of the historical development of the game, it aims to show how women footballers are intimately involved in constructing new images of sporting femininities and how their battles for centre stage continues to challenge the male domination of football in South Africa.

Emergence and Development Years: 1970-1990

The first recorded and publicised organised women's football matches in South Africa took place in the early 1960s, when the 'Mother City Girls' played curtain-raiser matches in Cape Town. The team was organised under the auspices of the Mother City Football Club, one of three professional men's football clubs in Cape Town at the time (Saavedra, 2004). Apart from a newspaper profile on the Mother City Girls in 1962, very little is known about the organisation and development of women's football at this early stage. However, Cynthia Fabrizio Pelak (2010) argues that white, middle-class women started playing and organising football as early as the late 1960s, indicating that women's football in South Africa has existed in a formal manner for at least 50 years.

In 1974 the South African Women's Football Association (SAWFA), an organisation controlled by White women, though being open also to Coloured footballers, was formed (Saavedra, 2004). Interestingly, Pelak (2010) claims that SAWFA, despite being an organisation controlled by White middle-class women, was partially a non-racial sport structure, and thus contravened Apartheid sports policies concerning racially segregated sports competitions and organisations. This, Pelak (2010) claims, was possible because women's football as a sport was too small and insignificant to obtain much attention by people outside the sport.

Although in its initial organised stages women's football may have been partially racially inclusive, separate structures and leagues soon emerged. In Cape Town, for example, two distinct and racially separate structures existed; Cape Western and Western Province (Pelak, 2010). Both structures sent provincial teams to compete at the SAFWA Interprovincial tournaments held annually between 1975 and 1990 (Pelak, 2010). White domination persisted in the tournaments however, as several all-white teams competed at the provincial SAWFA tournaments, but no all-black teams were ever

registered to compete (Pelak, 2010). Jones (2003) suggests that due to the support given to the sports boycott, and the Apartheid government's shifting policies concerning sports organising as threats of international boycotts became more real, a 'tripartite' of sports organisations existed in the 1970s and 1980s. The tripartite consisted of the official government supported structures, non-racial sport structures and black structures that were aligned to the government (Jones, 2003). In this myriad of sport organisations and structures, South African women's football was not an exception and SAWFA was not the only organising structure of women's football at the time.

Women constituted an important part of the anti-apartheid sports movement

Little is yet known about women's participation in, and contribution to, South African sport during the years of the international sports boycott, but it is clear that women constituted an important part of the anti-apartheid sports movement. According to Hargreaves (2000) and Jones (2003) Coloured women in the Cape were among the most significant contributors to the South African Council of Sports (SACOS) in the 1970s. Hargreaves (2000:20) states that:

During the SACOS era, women were active agents in the sports process, creating for themselves opportunities, conditions and meanings. So that what they now describe as 'so-called' Coloured sport could survive, they took on multiple and complex responsibilities: they were different combinations of players, coaches, umpires, administrators, organisers, selectors and carers, all rolled into one.

In addition to the contributions made by groups of women, there were also a number of inspirational

icons that emerged in this period. Women like Sensei Nellie Kleinsmidt, Cheryl Roberts and more recently, Desiree Ellis, have had a vast impact on the development of women's sport, through their roles as athletes, coaches and role models. Despite discrimination and marginalisation these women endured and they continue to provide inspiration and support for younger women athletes.

Desiree Ellis was one of the early pioneers of women's football, and her achievements have paved the way for future generations of women footballers. Due to the Apartheid regime and international boycotts, Ellis was not awarded an opportunity to officially represent her country until 1993, when the first Banyana Banyana match against Swaziland was staged. Ellis continued to make her mark in South African women's football, and despite being of a mature age compared to many of the other national team members, she remained a member, and captain, of the team for almost a decade. As a coach, FIFA, and Western Cape, football ambassador and regular television commentator, Ellis has cemented her role as an icon of South African football.

Growth and Transition Years: 1991-2000

With democratisation and increased efforts towards gender equality and equity, women's football gained momentum in the 1990s, and in 1991 black township women formed the South African Women's Soccer Association (SAWSA) (Saavedra, 2004). The emergence of black women's clubs, teams and organisations sparked a massive increase in participation, and whereas there were only six registered teams in the Western Province in 1991, as many as 22 teams were registered in 2000 (Pelak, 2010). With the influx of black women, more matches and tournaments started being held in townships, which according to Pelak (2010) led White women to abandon the sport due to fears of travelling to, and in, such unfamiliar areas.

The unification of sporting structures was not

a pain-free process, and due to internal power struggles both SAWFA and SAWSA were

dissolved, and existing local clubs and emerging new teams were reorganized under an appointed committee, which eventually became the South African Women's Football Association (SAWFA) (Saavedra, 2004:244).

Following from the creation of SAWFA, non-racial competitive league structures were set up, and in May 1993, in Johannesburg, the first official Senior Women's National Team (nicknamed Banyana Banyana) was selected (Saavedra, 2004). Banyana Banyana played their first official match in May 1993, beating Swaziland 14-0. Over the next few years the team continued to play a number of matches on the continent, and they came close to qualifying for the Women's World Cup in 1997.

However, as the women's game expanded and grew rapidly it also became an arena for coaches, leaders and administrators to further their own careers. Although women's football was organised separately from men's, a high number of men were involved in key positions in SAWFA structures and affiliated clubs (Pelak, 2010). As a result of the increased popularity and professionalism of women's football, gendered power struggles ensued and between 1994 and 1996 numerous problems and conflicts emerged between women and (some) men involved in the leadership of women's football (Pelak, 2010). After years of women complaining and writing reports to SAFA about the situation, a commission was finally set down in 1997. The Pickard Commission Report stated that:

Numerous complaints, in writing and otherwise, were lodged with SAFA who was frequently requested to intervene in order to restore peace and order... Letters were frequently not answered or attended to and matters were simply swept under the carpet....

The Commission is satisfied that SAFA has been extremely dilatory in attending to these problems. It has persistently neglected to give these matters the attention they deserve and has done little or nothing to put women's soccer in order (Pickard Commission Report, 1997:52).

As a result of these findings, the commission suggested that women be given the space to control their own structures (Pickard Commission Report, 1997), but as some men played important and supportive roles in the development of the game, the result of the commission was a series of women's football indabas intended to develop a new path for organisation and leadership (Pelak, 2010). Starting with the establishment of a women's football standing committee within SAFA in 1999, SAFA gradually gained full fiscal and organisational control over women's football until it was fully incorporated in 2000. Despite the loss of autonomy and control, many women welcomed the inclusion into SAFA structures, as this was seen to increase opportunities for financial support and sponsorship (Pelak, 2010). However, the male domination and patriarchal politics of SAFA structures and leadership resulted in a situation where women leaders lost power and the women's sub-committee did not have a representative on the National Executive Committee at all (Naidoo and Muholi, 2010).

The establishment of a national team and a growing interest in the game also within SAFA were among the major victories for women's football in the 1990s. The early members of the national team were breaking new ground for women's football when they stepped onto the field of play in international competitions, and the television broadcasting of their games provided inspiration for younger girls:

It [women's football] was on TV for the first time, the national team, when I was 16.

My mummy called me "look here ladies are playing". I was "one day I am going to be there, just give me time". And she didn't like it, but when I put on that [national team] jersey that day she was proud of me, crying and phoning me after the game (Denise, interview September 2008).

And then in 2000 Banyana Banyana played African Cup of Nations, I see it in the tv. Every time when I come home from school I sit, and then I saw Portia Modise, Veronica Phewa, Sibongile Khumalo, and I say "mmm, wow! There are so many girls playing". I said ok, this is nice, one day I want to see myself there (Nandipha, interview October 2008).

It is clear that the turn of the century was an incredibly important time for the development of women's football in South Africa. It provided women who had for years been experiencing discrimination and marginalisation with long sought-after recognition and appreciation, while also laying the groundwork for future developments and victories. The above two quotes show the important role that women like Desiree Ellis, Veronica Phewa and Sibongile Khumalo played as role models and inspirational icons for young players. In the words of Desiree Ellis: "We are playing for fame and not for fortune" (Southafrica.info, 2002).

A Decade of Struggles and Victories: 2001-2010

In 2001 a new phase of women's football in South Africa begun when the SAFA Sanlam National Women's League was launched (Saavedra, 2004). The league comprised more than 300 teams, and the top teams in each province competed annually in the Sanlam Halala Cup tournament (Saavedra, 2004). The establishment of the national league and the Halala Cup was crucial in developing the games, as it provided a space for regular and

national competition, serving to keep national team players fit, while at the same time providing a space for new talent to be discovered (Saavedra, 2004). The founding of the Sanlam league marked the entry of corporate sponsorship into women's football, and Vodacom, Cadbury, Nike, ABSA and SASOL soon followed Sanlam as sponsors of women's football.

The growing development structures and increased exposure of the national team in international competitions soon yielded results, and Banyana Banyana took home a number of awards and titles in the 2000s. They won the first COSAFA Cup in 2002, came second in the All Africa Games in 2003 and 2007, won the SCSA Zone IV Games in 2006 and came second in the CAF African Women's Championships in both 2000 and 2008. However, despite increased support, acknowledgement and improved results, the last decade has also been shaped by a lack of commitment on the part of SAFA, attempts at feminising and 'sanitising' women footballers and displays of homophobic violence and assault.

A season of setbacks: 2004-2008

At the beginning of 2004, hopes were high for the future of women's football in South Africa. In the previous year the team had managed to secure second place in the All Africa Games, losing only to a strong Nigerian team, and they came very close to qualifying for the Athens Olympic Games. The team and its players were receiving positive accolades, and Portia Modise's name was starting to become a household name. However, SAFA's support of the team was limited, illustrated by their inability to hire committed and dedicated coaching staff for the national teams. As shown in this *Daily Sun* article (Z Ciliwe, 23rd September 2004, *Daily Sun*, "Banyana bow out after farce"):

The circus which led to Banyana's downfall began four months ago when coach Gregory Mashilo was fired. Since then the players have

not seen enough action. They last played in May and only got together in camp two weeks ago. Orlando Pirates development coach Augusto Palacios was hired as caretaker-coach. He had the added responsibility of coaching the SA under-19 side. On the eve of Banyana's first game against Ghana, Palacios left the country for Nigeria with the junior side, taking with him four of Banyana's key players and leaving stand-in coach Steve Kompela with the remaining 13 players.

According to Fran Hilton-Smith, manager of all three women's national teams, SAFA continued to show further disregard for the women's game by appointing coaches who were already committed to men's teams. When Banyana were left without a coach on the eve of an important match, she herself, alongside Sheryl Botes, had to step in to fulfil the coaching role (Naidoo and Muholi, 2010). As women's football became incorporated into SAFA structures following the Pickard Commission, it increasingly became victim of power struggles, fractional politics and male domination. The emergence of women's football structures within SAFA, and the (limited) inclusion of women in leadership positions seems also to have challenged "men's collective sense of entitlement to control the sport" (Pelak, 2006:384)

In this unstable environment Banyana Banyana did not achieve the same results as in previous years; the team was without a permanent coach for almost a year and as their popularity dropped attempts were made at blaming the players' 'lack of femininity' and lack of adequate sponsorship for their dismal results. Ria Ledwaba, then Chairperson of the Women's Committee of SAFA was quoted as saying "We don't want our girls to look, act and dress like men just because they play soccer" (-, 12th March 2005, *City Press*, "Banyana Captain Hits out at Ledwaba"). As part of an effort to sanitise and 'feminise' women's football and

get rid of the 'tomboy' label, national team players were made to attend etiquette classes and told to keep their hair long so as to appear feminine. Efforts were also put into providing the team with more 'feminine appropriate' clothing and apparel. Despite pressures, Banyana Banyana players resisted part of this 'feminisation' and one former player remembers that when the team threatened to strike unless they were given their 'old and comfortable clothes back' SAFA rescinded and parts of their old kit were returned (Denise, interview September 2008).

Despite a lack of support, both within and outside SAFA, players and administrators persisted, and due to the efforts of Fran Hilton-Smith 2006 also saw the establishment of a women's football academy at the High Performance Centre at the University of Pretoria (Naidoo and Muholi, 2010). Later in the year Hilton-Smith was made the administrator of women's football, and a new coach, Augustine Makalalane, was appointed to Banyana Banyana. According to Naidoo and Muholi (2010) the introduction of Makalalane was seen as a victory for those involved, as he was seen as a coach as well as a friend to the players.

2008 was an ambivalent and emotional year for women's football in South Africa. In March 2008, former Banyana Banyana midfielder Eudy Simelane was found dead just a few hundred meters from her home in Kwa-Thema, Johannesburg. Eudy was one of very few openly lesbian women in her community, and her rape and murder is considered a clear example of hate crime against South African lesbians (Martin, Kelly, Turquet and Ross, 2009). Such hate crimes form part of efforts to control women's sexuality and agency, and Zanele Muholi (2004) argues that black lesbian women are at particular risk of hate crimes and 'corrective' rape as they occupy identities at the intersection of racist and sexist discourses concerning black women's sexualities. Since the murder of Eudy Simelane, Banyana Banyana players have become

increasingly aware of the dangers of not appearing 'feminine enough':

They [are] killing...they are raping and then they kill...I mean that ja you think that you look feminine because well you just got your hair done or something like that, but you don't (Anna, interview October 2008).

Eudy's murder has had an emotional impact on women footballers in South Africa, not only on those who knew and played with her. In the time following the murder and trial, more awareness has been raised concerning hate crimes; and football teams such as the Chosen FEW are making an important effort towards ending homophobic

Banyana Banyana players have become increasingly aware of the dangers of not appearing 'feminine enough'

prejudice, violence and assault by challenging the core of racist and heterosexist beliefs about women (Naidoo and Muholi, 2010:139). Former Banyana Banyana Captain Portia Modise is a member of the Chosen FEW, a lesbian activist football team set up by the Forum for Empowerment of Women (FEW) in Johannesburg. Modise has played an important role in speaking out against the crude stereotyping and prejudice that many women footballers are faced with. According to Naidoo and Muholi, Portia Modise and her teammates "clearly represent a challenge to mainstream gendered and heterosexist representations of the world of football".

As a testimony to their strength and resilience, Banyana Banyana emerged from the turmoil of Eudy's murder victorious, as they went on to secure second place in the 2008 CAF African Women's Championship. The subsequent naming of Banyana player Noko Matlou as the 2008 African Footballer of the Year marked a milestone

in South African football as this was the first time any South African player had received this honour.

A new start?

ABSA and SASOL, following the signing of an expansive sponsorship contract in the beginning of 2009, are now the official supporters of women's football in South Africa. ABSA supports the regional 'development' leagues (named the ABSA league) and corresponding tournaments, and their contribution amounts to about R20-million (Erasmus, 2009). SASOL has come on board to support the top-level (SASOL) league as well as the national teams (Erasmus, 2009). Following the involvement of SASOL, and the launch of the SASOL league, women's teams across South Africa have received much needed support in the form of transport allowances and equipment, and the national team has been able to take part in international competitions more frequently than previously. In 2010 Banyana Banyana took part in international tournaments in both Cyprus and the Netherlands; according to Fran Hilton-Smith:

It was basically unheard of, for Banyana Banyana to travel to two major international tournaments in one year, before Sasol came on board (Gsport, 2009).

In the wake of increased exposure in 2009 and 2010, new Banyana Banyana players have entered the international spotlight and in 2009 the captain Kylie-Ann Louw was awarded a football scholarship to study at Stephen F Austin University in the United States (Louw, 2009). Noko Matlou has also travelled overseas recently and she is studying and playing football in Canada (Gsport, 2009). Louw and Matlou have then joined the ranks of players such as Portia Modise, Lena Mosebo, Veronica Phewa, Rose Jijane and Gloria Thato in representing South African football internationally (Gsport, 2008). Due to Sasol's sponsorship new

faces have also emerged in Banyana Banyana. As part of the first season of the Sasol League in 2009, Sasol sponsored a football roadshow travelling around the country to create awareness about the provincial Sasol Leagues. This opportunity was also made use of to spot future talents through naming 'Diski Queens of the Match' throughout the country, thus contributing to an increased awareness of women's football in various locations. The selected Diski Queens later got an opportunity to go up against Banyana Banyana in a friendly match (Gsport, 2009).

The Battle Continues

This *Focus* has tried to highlight the individual and collective displays of power and resilience that have formed the history of women's football, and that has created a diversity of inspirational icons and role models for young South African women. From the exploits of former Banyana captain Desiree Ellis, who proved that women can play exceptional football well into their thirties, to Kylie-Ann Louw, who represents a new generation of footballers, South African women's football is made up of a group of exceptional women who have all fought battles to make the game their own. In this complex terrain of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion from the sporting core, women footballers in South Africa continue to battle for centre stage. This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion is evident when examining the historical development of women's football in South Africa; as women have started to play football in increasing numbers, rising expectations have also been placed on them to conform to a heteronormative gender order. As Banyana Banyana started participating in international and continental tournaments and received more media coverage than previously, concerns grew as to the 'appropriateness' of their appearances and they were thought to have to 'learn' how to be women. This signals that the inclusion of women in the game of football is based, firstly,

on the successful performance of femininity and, secondly, on proficiency and skill demonstrated on the field. Similarly, while women's football is included into official structures and governing bodies, leadership and administration of the game is still mainly left in the hands of male officials.

Similar processes of inclusion and exclusion of women's football are also evident when looking at the two major football tournaments hosted in South Africa this year. Although the 2010 FIFA World Cup was presented as a celebration of (South) African cultures and football, it is uncertain whether it will have a lasting legacy on the women's game. South African women and girls could benefit from the construction of new sporting facilities and infrastructures, but as no funding or support was channelled into women's football leagues, clubs or teams it is unlikely that the situation has improved at all for the thousands of women and girls who play football in South Africa. In the lead-up to the African Women's Championship, discourses of 'national pride' and an 'African legacy' were utilised by SAFA and government officials to illustrate their support for Banyana Banyana. However, the choice of venues, timing of games and limited media coverage illustrated clearly how limited and conditional the support of women's football in South Africa is. Despite fears that the newly constructed World Cup stadia will remain underutilised, no women's team has been granted the opportunity to make use of the facilities, and Banyana Banyana are made to play their games at second-grade stadia.

Footnotes

1. All interviews were conducted as part of the fieldwork for my Masters degree at the University of Cape Town. They were performed between August and October 2008, in Pretoria and Cape Town. The interviews were performed in connection with football training and a national team camp in Pretoria. Semi-structured interview schedules were prepared, and all participants were informed of the aim and objectives prior to the start of the interviews. All participants consented to taking part in the research, on the condition of anonymity. Therefore, all participants

have been given pseudonyms, and biographical details have been excluded to ensure the anonymity of interviewees.

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MARI is a passionate football player and supporter, and she has been involved in football in various roles since 1989. She moved from Norway to Cape Town in 2004, and in 2010 she completed her Master's in Gender Studies at the African Gender Institute at UCT. Mari has been researching and writing about women's football in South Africa since 2006. Her masters thesis focused on issues of physical empowerment and power in the lives of elite-level women footballers in South Africa. In 2010, she was one of the contributors to the CODESRIA publication entitled "Gender, Sport and Development in Africa" (edited by Jimoh Shehu), and she has presented aspects of her research at conferences in South Africa and Egypt. She currently works for SCORE, as the Coordinator for Research and Development. E-mail: mari.engh@gmail.com

