



**Durham**  
University

Department of Sport  
and Exercise Sciences

Inspiring the extraordinary

## Women and Football Fandom

Reducing sexism and misogyny  
in men's football and expanding  
the fanbase of girls and women



Dr Stacey Pope, Associate Professor,  
Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Durham University



## About the author

**Dr Stacey Pope is an expert in women, sport and inequality. She is a leading academic in the field of women sports fans. She is author of *The Feminization of Sports Fandom* (Routledge, 2017) and co-editor of *Female Football Players and Fans* (Palgrave, 2018). Her most recent research, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), examines women fans of men's and women's football. It also explores men football fans and issues of sexism and misogyny.**

This research briefing paper is informed by research conducted at Durham University. Durham University is one of the world's leading universities. The University received a world top 100 position in the QS World University Rankings 2022. Dr Stacey Pope is based in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, ranked in the top 10 of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) for 2021. The Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences leads research to help reduce inequalities, promote social justice and ensure better health and wellbeing within and through sport, exercise and physical activity.

Dr Stacey Pope was invited to give evidence at the DCMS Committee's "Safety at Major Sporting Events" Inquiry on 25 October 2022. Much of the evidence in this briefing paper was included in Dr Pope's written submission to the Select Committee, which has been published (UK Parliament, 2022). Dr Pope has also given evidence at the UK Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into sexism and inequality in football.

---

Dr Stacey Pope was invited to give evidence at the DCMS Committee's "Safety at Major Sporting Events" Inquiry on 25 October 2022. Much of the evidence in this briefing paper was included in Dr Pope's written submission to the Select Committee, which has been published.

---

By addressing sexism and misogyny in men's football, we can grow the game, significantly increasing attendances and interest. It is the right action to take, *both in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion, and financially.*

# Executive summary

Research demonstrates that men's professional football in England remains one of the last 'bastions' of male domination and has a significant problem in terms of sexism and misogyny. This is also a highly topical issue. My recently published research on this subject was featured extensively in over 450 media outlets worldwide, with a total audience reach of 1.8 billion people.

The research was discussed in Parliament, and I was invited to co-author a report for the organisation *Fair Game*. In response to this, the UK Government told football clubs they "must do more" to tackle gender inequality (*The Telegraph*, 2022).

This research briefing paper is a contribution to this. It is being shared with key stakeholders in the game, including the football bodies, all professional men's football clubs, the media, and key politicians. This will provide a platform to advance change and address the pervasive sexism and misogyny in football.

Currently, the football industry does not cater adequately for women. While some women attend live football matches, others are not able to do so due to gender discrimination and an environment that is not safe, welcoming and inclusive for women. By addressing sexism and misogyny in men's football, we can grow the game, significantly increasing attendances and interest. It is the right action to take, *both in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion, and financially*. This can also help to address the longstanding issue of football fan disorder and so wider issues around safety. Much has been done to tackle racism in football. We now need to challenge and eradicate sexism and misogyny.

The research and recommendations in this report focus on men's professional football. The women's professional game has a very different culture, with a much smaller proportion of fans experiencing sexist behaviour or unwanted physical attention, in comparison to men's football.

This briefing paper provides an overview of the scale of the problem of sexism and misogyny in men's football, the attitudes of men towards women and the experiences of women football fans.

---

This paper offers three key recommendations to address sexism and misogyny in men's football:

1. Introduce a mechanism to identify, report, respond to and remedy sexism and misogyny in football.
2. Redesign stadia to create women friendly environments.
3. Undertake further research to monitor the effectiveness of recommendations 1 and 2 and identify the best future mechanisms to drive forward change, in consultation with women fans.

## The story in numbers:

 **1.8 billion**  
Potential media reach

 **101k**  
Sky Sports video views

 **1.9k**  
The Conversation reads

 **350**  
Web visits

 **14k**  
Social media reach (DU posts)

 **364**  
Social media clicks, shares, likes and comments (DU posts)



## Sexism and misogyny in football

**Most existing research on sports fans has focused upon football hooliganism and issues of fan disorder. Whilst ensuring the physical safety of fans at stadia is essential, this has meant that there has been a lack of attention to fans of women's football and women's sport, as well as women's experiences as fans of men's football.**

The recent success of England hosting the UEFA Euro 2022 tournament, and the triumph of the Lionesses, combined with new research in this area (Allison and Pope, 2021; Pope and Allison, 2022), shows the potential for the transformation of football fan culture. A peak television audience of 17 million watched the Euro final on television in the UK and 87,192 people attended the final – the most for any Euros fixture, men's or women's. UEFA Euro 2022 offers lessons for men's football – it showed that football fan culture does not have to be a hotbed of sexism, racism and homophobia and can be an *inclusive space*.

The contrasting images of fans at UEFA Euro 2022 with the disturbances at the men's Euro 2020 final at Wembley Stadium illustrates this. During and after the UEFA Euro 2020 final at Wembley, 86 people were arrested and 19 police officers were injured. At the 2022 Euro final at Wembley, no arrests were made.

In the aftermath of the 2020 crowd disturbances, English football faced questions about the 'mob mentality', yet this ignored the *linked problem of misogyny* (Pinder, 2022). Creating an inclusive atmosphere *for all* has the potential to resolve issues of crowd safety. Some may argue that fan violence and abuse have always been significant parts of the culture of men's football, yet historical research on the hidden history of women fans during football's 'golden age' in the 1950s and early 1960s, clearly shows that the football stadium was broadly perceived then to be a safe space and a place where home and away fans enjoyed conversing together (Pope and Williams, 2018; Pope, 2022).

Our research (Allison and Pope, 2022) shows a perceived welcoming space for all was a key motivation for fans of women's football. Interviewees felt that women's football was a 'family friendly' space and a space that was much more welcoming to women, children and LGBTQ+ fans. This culture of inclusivity was commonly contrasted against men's football, with many fans finding women's football to be a much safer environment, with far less vulgarity, drunkenness and physical aggression than they sometimes experienced at men's football. Women fans described the UK men's football culture as "daunting" because of "hooligans" and saw the atmosphere as "angry" and "hostile". In contrast, "when we went to the women's games it was just so inclusive. And everyone talked to everyone".

---

Men's professional football in England remains one of the last 'bastions' of male domination and has a significant problem in terms of sexism and misogyny. Sexism and misogyny in the men's game must be challenged and eradicated.

Men's professional football in England remains one of the last 'bastions' of male domination and has a significant problem in terms of sexism and misogyny. Sexism and misogyny in the men's game must be challenged and eradicated. Some changes will be easy and relatively inexpensive to make. Others will need time and resources. But the alternative is to stay on the current trajectory and do nothing, leaving major problems of sexism and misogyny in the men's game. Doing nothing means that men's football will continue to operate in the dark ages, failing to cater adequately for 51% of the population.

While some women attend live matches, others are not able to do so due to gender discrimination and an environment that is not safe, welcoming and inclusive for women. By addressing sexism and misogyny in men's football, we can grow the game, significantly increasing attendances and interest. It is the right action to take, *both in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion, and financially*. Addressing sexism and misogyny and creating a more welcoming environment for women (and families) can also help to address issues of fan disorder.

---

There is still huge potential to further expand the fan base of women football fans at men's live football matches in the UK. There is no intrinsic reason why women cannot become 50% of fans at men's football games.



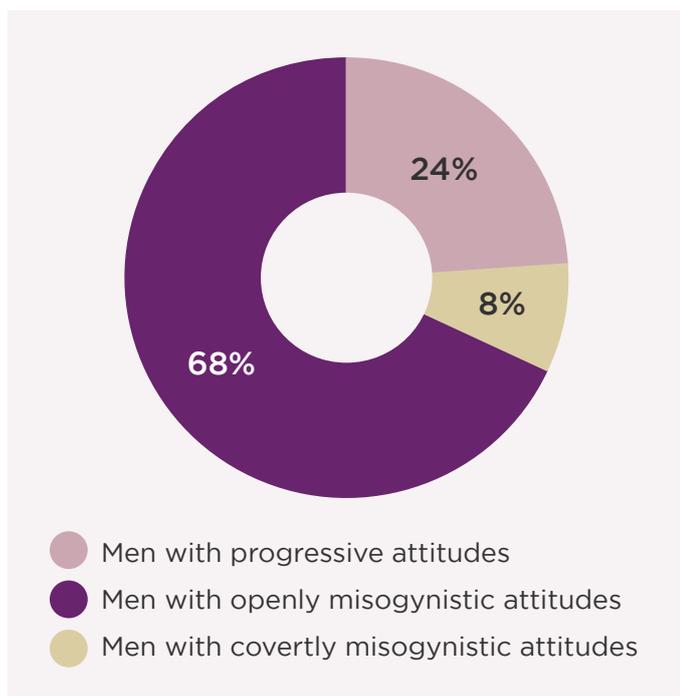
## Women fans: an under-developed audience

Progress in tackling gender discrimination has substantial potential to increase the numbers of women fans at matches. Women do have a history of attending men's professional football matches in England and the numbers are increasing. For example, women fans are estimated to make up 26% of fans at Premier League matches and 30% of fans who follow or watch the Premier League on TV or online (Pope, 2017; Global Web Index, 2019). Ultimately there is a need to create safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces for all areas of football. Achieving this will require both better governance and the development of mechanisms to address the distinctive and complex nature of gender discrimination, in all its forms.

There is still huge potential to further expand the fan base of women football fans at men's live football matches in the UK. In doing so, this can help to significantly enhance attendances at lower league and non-league clubs, increase club revenues and create a more gender equal split, which could foster a more inclusive environment. There is no intrinsic reason why women cannot become 50% of fans at men's football games. Other professional sports in the UK and overseas have a much better gender balance in their fans.

# 'It's a man's world': football fandom, sexism and misogyny

Football has been largely the domain of men throughout much of its history. The 'feminization' or 'opening up' of more opportunities for women to become fans over the past three decades has not automatically led to greater gender equality. Recent research led by Durham University has shown that misogyny among men football fans remains very common (Pope et al. 2022). The findings were based on a survey of 1,950 men fans on UK football fan message boards. The results show that those expressing hostile, sexist or misogynistic attitudes were by far the most dominant group. This suggests a backlash against advances in gender equality. The study identified three different types of men fans.



### Men with progressive attitudes

Men with *progressive attitudes* accounted for 24% of respondents. They expressed more gender-equal attitudes. They showed strong support for equality in media coverage of women's sport. Many said that the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup marked a positive turning point in terms of the representation of women's sport. The media was seen as having a responsibility to more fully promote women's sport.

### Men with openly misogynistic attitudes

Men with *openly misogynistic attitudes* made up 68% of respondents. Men in this group saw women's sport as inferior to men's sport, particularly in relation to football. Some suggested that women should not participate in sport at all – or if they did, it should be 'feminine' sports such as athletics, rather than football. There was extreme hostility against increasing media coverage of women's sport, which was labelled as 'positive discrimination' or 'PC nonsense'. There was an anti-feminist 'backlash' against women invading this traditionally male-only space of sport in all roles in football, including as fans and players.

### Men with covertly misogynistic attitudes

Men with *covertly misogynistic attitudes* made up 8% of fans. This group would express progressive attitudes in public, but in more private moments revealed misogynistic views. Men in this group would adapt what they said, depending on the social situation or who they were with.

These findings demonstrate that misogyny towards women in football is rife. This is supported by my research examining the lived experiences of women football fans (Pope, 2013; 2017). Numerous studies have shown that women's presence in men's football as fans represents a threat to male-dominance, with various strategies used by men fans to undermine women's fandom and status as 'real' or 'authentic' fans (Pope, 2017).

My research shows that women are routinely required to 'prove' their status as 'real' fans in ways that are simply not necessary for men. There are many accounts by women fans describing men who thought that 'women in football is a bit of a joke'. Some women recalled extreme hostility to their presence in the stadium. Some men fans refused to speak to women who did not 'belong'

at football. Women fans recalled being told to 'Shut up, you're a woman, what would you know?' Or that they should be 'At home, washing the pots and doing all of the laundry' (Pope, 2017; Pope, 2022).

There are consequences for women who enter the traditionally men's space of the football ground. Women are seen to be 'encroaching on their (men's) patch' or 'taking over their (men's) sport', causing some men to feel 'threatened' or 'intimidated'. As a result, men are likely to be 'challenging'. This was not viewed as a space for women who are 'easily offended' (Pope, 2017; Pope, 2022). These findings are supported by a recent survey by the Football Supporters' Association (2021) focused upon women's match day experiences.

## The gendering of football stadia

My recent research (Pope, 2017, 2022) has examined women's feelings towards football stadia. The stadium provoked a strong 'sense of belonging', with many women fans discussing their 'love' towards the stadium itself. But unlike men fans, such positive sentiments are balanced with how stadium spaces are largely 'unfriendly' landscapes for women.

Despite the recent 'feminization' of sports fandom, with women now making up around one quarter of fans attending live matches (Pope, 2017), football stadia remain highly gendered in their design. Women fans bemoaned the lack of women's toilets and the poor condition of those that did exist; for example, no sanitary bins, mirrors, hangers, or locks on doors. This does not help to create a welcoming and inclusive space. When issues are raised, clubs are not obligated to respond. This lack of consideration for basic facilities raises issues around equality, diversity and inclusion that, at present, are not being fulfilled to a satisfactory level.

Women are highly committed and passionate fans and therefore are prepared to accept poor facilities in stadia, which they do not encounter in other public spaces. Other factors can prevent some women from attending matches, relating to how welcoming stadia are for very young children. Caring responsibilities remain highly gendered.

---

Recent research led by Durham University has shown that misogyny among men football fans remains very common. Those expressing hostile, sexist or misogynistic attitudes were by far the most dominant group. This suggests a backlash against advances in gender equality.

My research (Pope, 2017; 2022) has found that men and women fans may follow different fan 'careers' across their lives, with many women compelled to take 'fan breaks' as the result of motherhood. Men's football clubs usually discourage taking young children to the stadium or even ban young children from these spaces, making it impossible for some women to attend matches for a number of years. Although some women do later return as fans when their children are older, many are lost as live attendees at the point that they stop attending matches.

Women fans feel that clubs need 'strong women' in football leadership to bring about change and improve facilities, but suggest that this is unlikely, given how entrenched football is as a male-dominated sport. Sports stadia have been designed by and for men. Clubs and governing bodies must do more to create gender-inclusive stadia spaces. All that is needed is the will to listen, learn, and to act.

---

Caring responsibilities remain highly gendered. Many women are compelled to take 'fan breaks' as the result of motherhood. Although some women do later return as fans when their children are older, many are lost as live attendees.

# Recommendations: tackling sexism and misogyny in football fandom



**Football does not operate in a vacuum, and as public attitudes towards sexism and misogyny are changing, football needs to change too. At present, the industry is ill-equipped to deal with these issues.**

The recommendations set out here lend weight to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) agenda in the recent *Fan Led Review of Football Governance* (2021), chaired by MP Tracey Crouch CBE. One of the key strategic recommendations in this review is that:

- Football needs to improve equality, diversity and inclusion in clubs with committed EDI Action Plans regularly assessed by the Independent Regulator for English Football (IREF).

In order to do so, it is recommended that:

- IREF should mandate that each club have an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan, focusing on the organisation's EDI objectives and how it is going to achieve them, assessed as part of the annual licensing process (Recommendation 23).

Sexism and misogyny need to be included within this EDI agenda. Football has seen the introduction of campaigns to tackle issues such as racism and homophobia in the sport. Yet to date there is no mechanism to tackle sexism and misogyny in football. This needs to change.

This would lead to an expansion of girls and women attending matches and would help the financial sustainability of clubs, especially non-league and lower football league clubs, which are more dependent upon ticket sales and match day revenues. There is an opportunity to grow the game and match day attendances through inclusion. But all clubs at all levels of the

sport have a responsibility to create a welcoming environment for girls and women fans. There is a need to create an environment in football, both within and beyond the stadium, that is:

## Safe

A safe space where girls and women are safe from misogyny and harassment

## Welcoming

A space where girls and women are treated on equal terms

## Inclusive

A space that is fully inclusive for all girls and women

To do this, everyone involved in football, including players, managers, clubs, fans, football bodies, the media and sponsors, need to take a stance against misogyny, and help to create an environment for women that is safe and welcoming. But this alone will not be enough. There needs to be institutional support for gender equality, to ensure that this is embedded within clubs and the sport's governing bodies. In order to create a space that is safe, welcoming and ultimately inclusive for women, the recommendations below are proposed.

---

There needs to be institutional support for gender equality, to ensure that this is embedded within clubs and the sport's governing bodies.

Tackling sexism in football needs a distinctive approach, that brings together existing approaches to discrimination in sport with specific research on anti-sexism and misogyny.



### RECOMMENDATION 1:

Introduce a mechanism to identify, report, respond to and remedy sexism and misogyny in football

The Lionesses' triumph at Euro 2022 has both highlighted and challenged sexism. The EE campaign *Hope Not Hate* aimed to tackle online sexism by shining the spotlight on why sexist hate is not a 'woman's problem', using high profile men and women footballers and the England men's team manager Gareth Southgate. The grassroots movement *#HerGameToo* has made great strides in raising awareness of issues of sexism since its launch in 2021. But sexism in football has long term roots and is endemic. These initiatives alone will not resolve the issue. Actions will need to be implemented by both Government and the sports' governing bodies to create real change. Proposed next steps are:

- For all clubs to be *required* to sign up to a charter to pledge their commitment to tackling sexism and misogyny, as well as confirming that they will take forward future mechanisms identified to address this.
- To establish a *national hotline* to identify, report, respond to and remedy sexism and misogyny in football. Many women fans do not feel confident stewards and clubs can deal with complaints appropriately. A national hotline would ensure data collected would be transparent and that clubs are taking appropriate measures.
- Should an Independent Regulator for English Football be established as per the recommendations set out in the *Fan Led Review of Football Governance (2021)*, sexism and misogyny need to be part of the EDI Action Plans that would be regularly assessed.

### RECOMMENDATION 2:

Redesign stadia to create women friendly environments

There is a need to make stadia inclusive spaces for women. Therefore, there is a need to look at the design of stadia and the match day environment, and to develop recommendations to create a fully inclusive space for women. The introduction of childcare facilities could address the issue of women's 'fan breaks' (Pope, 2017). This would also lead younger generations to develop a connection to the club.

Research has also highlighted the poor condition of basic facilities for women in football stadia, such as toilets. This needs to be addressed. When making recommendations to create a women friendly sports stadium, this needs to be done based on research with women fans, and by working with women supporters. Some of these changes are easy to do, are relatively inexpensive, and could be done now, within the existing stadia. Others will require longer term planning and resource. Therefore, the proposed next step is:

- To share research from women fans about the condition of the match day environment with football's governing bodies and the clubs and identify ways to create a more inclusive environment for women.

As well as drawing upon the voices of women fans to develop these solutions, proposed solutions should also be discussed with women fans to ensure that they meet their needs. Such changes should also include creating spaces that are safe for young children.

### RECOMMENDATION 3: Undertake further research

Further research needs to be undertaken, by Durham University, to monitor the effectiveness of the changes implemented in recommendations 1 and 2 and to identify the best mechanisms to drive forward change. Such research will require resources. Research should be undertaken in collaboration with Government, football governing bodies and key organisations working in this space. Sexism is distinctive from other forms of discrimination, and so we need better evidence and understanding, to inform a more nuanced approach to promoting change. Tackling sexism in football needs a distinctive approach, that brings together existing approaches to discrimination in sport with specific research on anti-sexism and misogyny.



Tackling sexism in football needs a distinctive approach, that brings together existing approaches to discrimination in sport with specific research on anti-sexism and misogyny.



## Concluding Comments

Lessons can be learned from the enormous success of Euro 2022, which could be a much-needed catalyst to initiate positive change in English fan culture and to address gender inequality. By addressing sexism and misogyny in men's football, we can grow the game, significantly increasing attendances and interest. It is the right action to take, *both in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion, and financially*. This also has the potential to address issues of crowd disorder.



In order to create an environment that is safe, welcoming and inclusive for women, this research briefing paper has identified the following recommendations:

1. Introduce a mechanism to identify, report, respond to and remedy sexism and misogyny in football.
2. Redesign stadia to create women friendly environments.
3. Undertake further research to monitor the effectiveness of recommendations 1 and 2 and identify the best future mechanisms to drive forward change, in consultation with women fans.

By addressing sexism and misogyny in men's football, we can grow the game, significantly increasing attendances and interest. It is the right action to take, both in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion, and financially. This also has the potential to address issues of crowd disorder.

*“Lessons can be learned from the enormous success of Euro 2022, which could be a much-needed catalyst to initiate positive change in English fan culture and to address gender inequality.”*



## References

- Allison, R. & Pope, S. (2021) Becoming Fans: Socialization and Motivations of Fans of the England and U.S. Women's National Football Teams. *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 39(3): 287-297.
- Football Supporters Association (2021) Women at the Match. Available at: <https://thefsa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Women-at-the-Match-report.pdf>
- Global Web Index (2019) *5 Things to Know about Premier League Fans*. Available at: <https://blog.gwi.com/chart-of-the-week/premier-league-fans>
- Pinder, R. (2022) Women Share their Harrowing Experiences of Sexual Harassment at Football Games. *joe.co.uk*. Available at: <https://www.joe.co.uk/sport/footballs-misogyny-problem-316209>
- Pope, S. (2013) "The Love of My Life": The Meaning and Importance of Sport for Female Fans. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*. 37(2): 176-195.
- Pope, S. (2017) *The Feminization of Sports Fandom: A Sociological Study*. London: Routledge.
- Pope, S. & Williams, J. (2018) A Socio-Historical Account of Female Experiences of Football's Golden Age in England. In *Female Football Players and Fans: Intruding into a Man's World*. Pfister, G. & Pope, S. (eds.) Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 157-184.
- Pope, S., Williams, J. & Cleland, J. (2022) Men's Football Fandom and the Performance of Progressive and Misogynistic Masculinities in a 'New Age' of UK Women's Sport. *Sociology*. 56(4): 730-748.
- Pope, S. (2022) Arts and Humanities Research Council Project. Grant number AH/N004841/1.
- Pope, S. & Allison, R. (2022) Euro 2022 Can Be a Catalyst for Women's Football in England – Here's How. *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/euro-2022-can-be-a-catalyst-for-womens-football-in-england-heres-how-187874>
- Pope, S. (2022) Newcastle United in the 1950s. Available at: <https://womenfootballfans.org>
- Pfister, G. & Pope, S. (eds) (2018) *Female Football Players and Fans: Intruding into a Man's World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- UK Parliament, 2022, DCMS Committee, SAF0014, 'Safety at major sporting events'. Written evidence by Dr Stacey Pope: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/378/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/publications/written-evidence>

## Contact us

For further information about this project please contact:

Dr Stacey Pope, Associate Professor  
Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences  
Durham University  
42 Old Elvet, Durham, DH1 3HN, UK

Email: [stacey.pope@durham.ac.uk](mailto:stacey.pope@durham.ac.uk)

 [@StaceyPope20](https://twitter.com/StaceyPope20)

## View our video

For more about our sports research at Durham University, please watch our short video:

['What do we do in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences? Our research'](#).

Or visit our Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences website:

[durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/sport-exercise-sciences](https://durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/sport-exercise-sciences)

