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Children's rights in football: welfare and work

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In the past couple of years, I have twice been e.mailed by men in sub-Saharan Africa inviting me to buy young girl footballers. In my disgust, I perhaps dismissed the messages too quickly ... I assumed that, somehow, my name had been picked up because of my research work for the English Football Association and that I then became a target for those touting in the business of football trafficking. On reflection I should probably have pursued the idea, written back expressing interest, taken the trail further and found out more about the fate of these girls and those who were managing their aspirations in the game. But I didn't. At the time I was engaged on work for UNICEF, reviewing the available evidence of violence to children in sport across the globe. Although I have worked in the field of abuse and violence in sport for more than twenty years, and thought that I could not be shocked, that work opened my eyes to some truly appalling examples of abuse to children. It also confirmed many of the issues at the heart of this conference. I will say more about the UNICEF work later. Before that, I want to use football as a vehicle for exploring some ideas about children's welfare and children's work in sport. I have been asked to highlight gender issues – or more specifically girls' football – within this theme so will also make some comments about the potentially gendered nature of the children's game and the prospects for girls and women who seek to emulate the established, men's, football system. If we can discern clear centres and peripheries in the men's game then where are they for girls and women? And is there any evidence that the growth of the girls' and women's game might alter the political geography of football?

Of course there are some caveats in my approach today. I am not a footballer, a football coach, referee or even a football parent. Whilst I have done a great deal of research and consultancy within the game of football, I do not see myself as a 'football researcher'. My main concern is with development and social justice *through* sport, whether that be football, lacrosse or

whatever. I came to sport sociology through my own lived experience as an athlete and my dissatisfaction with the plight of women in sport. Ever since, I have looked at these issues through a feminist lens. Those who know me will appreciate that I have some, but not complete, sympathies with recent theoretical advances in feminism but that, at heart, I am an old fashioned socialist feminist. I nod to relativism but cling to a critical perspective. I still see far too much evidence of hetero-patriarchy, especially in sport. I am neither a process-cum-figurational sociologist nor an expert on globalization, let alone global flows in football. I am, still, motivated by policy change since I regard that as the proper business of feminism. So, take it or leave it, what I have to say today will raid notions of discourse, identity and globalization but is grounded in my concerns that global capitalism should not extend to making girls – whether in football or any other sport – victims of violence and abuse.

Welfare and work in children's football

There probably never was an age of innocence for children, despite this being frequently evoked in popular culture (Jenks, 1982; James et al., 1998; Prout, 2005) for childhood is socially constructed. We are constantly confronted by strong images of childhood of the 'devils v. angels' sort that reinforce these constructions. Both have led to state intervention and regulation of childhood, and both bolster paternalistic attitudes to children as subjects. Donnelly and Petherick (2004; Donnelly, 1997) used the child labour laws in Canada to critique youth sports: and a similar exercise in England and other Western European countries might well throw up the same issues of overtraining and exploitation (David, 2005). But exceptions are readily made in sport, where children might 'play' much harder, and for much longer, than many of us 'work' in offices.

How do the findings of my own football research (Brackenridge *et al.* 2002, 2003, 2004, 2008, 2009) reflect upon child welfare and the question of children in football as consumers, citizens, workers or players? There is certainly ample evidence from my own and indeed others' research that some young people in football are being treated more as workers than players. Not one person involved in our studies on child protection, for example, would have willingly signed up to the view that children in football are units of economic production. Yet many argued that others in the game treat them this way. Examples included club officials who urged us to study 'X club down the road because they treat kids terribly' and league officials who readily pointed

the finger at other colleagues for flouting codes of practice or child protection policies. A football club that refused membership to children not deemed to be of a high enough playing standard was privileging, in a very direct way, football performance over child welfare.

The marketization of children's football has led us away from the notion of the child as consumer, or even as citizen, and towards a view of the child as both worker, a unit of labour, and as commodity, to be traded in multinational markets. The marketization process has led to various exploitative practices by unscrupulous stakeholders on the make, whether these be coaches, misguided parents or would-be agents. The system through which young players are enticed leads right from the grass roots of community kickabouts to the highest echelons of the English Premier League.

It is obviously in the interests of the Football Association (FA) to organize and package the game in such a way that it maximises revenue and ensures institutional – and therefore adult - control over people who play football. We might also argue that the decline in the number of adult men playing the 11 a-side game presents the FA with an even stronger economic imperative for focussing on the growth of the game among both boys and girls.

Football for children is certainly changing. Increasingly, young people are experiencing the game as a packaged, adult-supervised, organized one. This notion fits with the apparent commodification of family life and leisure and gains further ground when set against the growth of the commercial, charitable and quasi-state sectors in football delivery.

Why do children need welfare provisions in football?

We are all too aware of poor parenting that affects young footballers. In the UK, a new voluntary agency – the Children's Football Alliance – is attempting to challenge the tradition of adult domination and to reintroduce a play element in the children's game. This is why ...

[Show Children's Football Alliance DVD 'Come the Whistle']

But we also need to take an international perspective on welfare in football as it is, in every sense, *the* global sport. Award winning investigative sports journalist David Conn recently published some interesting figures about youth development and football in England (Table 1).

Table 1 **Arrested development** (Source: Conn, 2010, p. 10)

8	Age at which professional football clubs first register boys to their academies
£66m	Annual expenditure on academies in English football: each of the Premier League clubs is estimated to invest £2m
10,000	Boys registered at top clubs' academies and centres of excellence, from 8-18 year old 'scholars'
1%	Estimated percentage of trainees who will play football for a living
95%	Percentage of boys at academies aged under 16 who are British
85%	Percentage of 'scholars' aged 16 and above who are British

He commented:

The real challenge is to understand why one of England's top football clubs, which like 40 others has spent millions of pounds developing an academy, and can sign up huge numbers of boys from a very young age, has failed to bring a local player through [for over ten years] and **scours other countries' clubs for teenage talent.**

(The Guardian Sport, 9 Sep 2010, p. 9, emphasis added)

Along with other major sports, football is increasingly used by governments around the world – and especially in the so-called developing world – as a tool of social policy, for improving education, health and communities. Schemes abound in Africa, Asia, South America and even in our own European backyards. Sport, it seems, is the new social medicine – cheap to provide and good at delivering exercise, well-being and social cohesion. It is used to re-build war-torn and climate-stricken communities, to establish peace after conflict and to develop learning and transferable skills - all designed to give children a better future.

But assumptions about the inherent goodness of football, and its value as a vehicle for enhancing children's lives in these settings - safeguarding *through* football - are challenged if we consider for a moment the need for safeguarding *within* football. Some children in the game suffer unhappiness because they are being abused by the very people who should be protecting them. For them, the perceived compulsion to remain in football and yet to stay silent about their trauma can compound feelings of inadequacy and alienation that have been generated by the abuse. What kind of harm or abuse is meant here? 'Child abuse' comprises physical,

psychological and sexual abuse, neglect and bullying. UNICEF uses the stronger and more unequivocally negative term 'violence' as an umbrella description for all such harms and abuses to children (Pinheiro, 2006).

Violences to child footballers, by either their peers or authority figures, may be expressed through:

- Discrimination and harassment on the basis of sex, race or sexual orientation
- Sexual violence:
 - Groomed or forced sex/rape
 - Use of pornography
 - Sexual degradation
 - Sexualized initiations, bullying and hazing
- Physical maltreatment:
 - Overtraining
 - Playing while injured
 - Peer aggression
 - Parental maltreatment
 - Doping/drug abuse
 - Alcohol abuse
- Emotional and psychological abuse
- Neglect
- Child labour and trafficking

(adapted from UNICEF, in press)

'Child protection' is the term given to describe the legal, organizational and cultural system that is designed to prevent children and young people under 18 years old from being abused. 'Welfare' is an umbrella term for the overall system of harm prevention, child protection, safety, social and educational services to which all children should be entitled under their human rights. It is a benign-sounding term but one that suffers somewhat from connotations of need and helplessness. For many in sport, welfare is the antipathy of the rugged individualism that they associate with striving for athletic success. But welfare is also a useful generic phrase describing not only the nature of services for children but also the way in which they are delivered. In

sport, providing for the welfare of the athlete requires us to integrate the way we meet their biopsychosocial needs and to regard them as whole people rather than simply performance machines.

Safeguarding, or providing welfare for children, matters because, without it, there is always a danger that the child's rights will be overlooked or even violated. All children, whether elite athletes or not, are rights bearers whose best interests are enshrined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (David, 2005). This is much more than simply a piece of paper, espousing rights-related rhetoric. It is an agenda for change that applies to all aspects of civil society, sport included.

The adoption of the UN CRC in 1989 gave people under 18 years of age a full set of human rights for the first time. This point marked a crucial shift in child welfare from a traditional protectionist approach to a more dynamic, rights-based approach (David, 2001). Paulo David (2001, 2005) argues that the promotion and protection of children's rights in sport has been a blind spot for sport organizations, despite a large literature on children's sport more generally. He suggests this is because human rights and sport have traditionally existed as separate spheres. The failure of sport to engage in rights debates has left it vulnerable, at best, to accusations of naïvete and frivolousness and, at worst, to charges of negligence and discrimination.

David (2001) sets out five possible sport situations that, in addition to the usual raft of discriminations based on sex, race, class and ability, can threaten the physical and mental integrity of children in sport:

- 1) involvement in intensive early training (violation of **article 19** – protection from child abuse and all forms of violence, and **article 32** – protection from economic exploitation)
- 2) sexual exploitation (violation of **article 19** – protection from sexual abuse and violence)
- 3) doping (violation of **articles 24** and **33** – right to health and protection from drugs)
- 4) buying, selling and transfers (violation of **article 32** – economic exploitation – and **article 35** – protection from sale and trafficking)

5) restrictions on education because of involvement in sport (violation of **article 28** – right to education)

To this I would add:

6) the silencing of children's voices in sport (violation of **article 12** - the right to have their views taken into account)

Sport – often in the form of football programmes - is regarded by UNICEF as an especially powerful medium for realising the Millennium Development Goals, agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 (United Nations, 2000). Sport is thus conceived as a valuable vehicle for achieving organizational or *extrinsic* goals yet the *intrinsic* merits of sport – pleasure, satisfaction, well-being, fun – are arguably more important drivers of motivation and enthusiasm for sport, without which children's interest may not be sustained.

In Europe, new measures designed to protect young male footballers in professional academies are included in the 2007 European Commission *White Paper on Sport*. However, Platts and Smith (2009) have analysed the White Paper's plans to enhance the human rights and welfare of young professionals and found a number of weaknesses. Perhaps most significant is the effect of cultural traditions in football that are likely to inhibit abuse prevention and welfare promotion. I also think there is a paradox of freedom involved: as statutory protections on national favouritism are lifted to allow markets to be opened up, stimulating more global flow of young footballing talent, so welfare services for incoming overseas nationals are put under more strain. In short, then, the right to play contradicts the right to be safe.

According to McDougall (2008) "There are an estimated 500 illegal football academies operating in Accra alone", with "thousands more operating across Ghana". (<http://football.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,331930357-103,00.html> Retrieved 14 Jan 2008). The boys in these academies are held to binding contracts from as young as seven years old, with their families sometimes investing all their material assets in their son's footballing future, in the hopes of acquiring long-term riches. The football literature is now replete with such tales – from Ivory Coast, to Ghana, to Cameroon - and has given prominence to charities such as ECPAT and the NGO Culture Foot Solidaire that seeks to counter trafficking in the global flows associated with young boys' football (Bennhold, 2006; Poli, 2006; Armstrong and Mitchel, 2008). It remains

difficult to find systematic research data on these issues, although Raffaele Poli at Neuchatel University in Switzerland is often cited as an authority and, among others, he ran a conference on global perspectives on football earlier this year at which a number of papers addressed trafficking issues. If England and France are the core, then Africa and Latin America are semi-peripheries (Bale, 2004, after Wallerstein, 1974), with so-called 'football plantations' as the transitional locations for the many thousands of aspiring young boys (Steckelmacher, 2008; Bale, 2004).

Some resistance to trafficking is evident, however. In an open letter to the IOC dated 4th Oct 2009, the ethics-oriented NGO *Play The Game* ("an independent non-profit organization that aims to strengthen the basic ethical values of sport and encourage democracy, transparency and freedom of expression in world sport" <http://www.playthegame.org> Accessed 4 Apr 2010) called on the IOC to act against trafficking as a form of corruption in sport. FIFA itself is acutely aware of the criticisms surrounding such practices, and has gone some way to tightening regulation but its best intentions are often subverted by illegal agents and organized crime. Similarly, local initiatives to stem the tide of soccer schools, for example by the South African FA, have been of limited success since so much soccer provision lies *outside* the jurisdiction of the affiliated sector.

It seems that the major professional football clubs have not examined their partnerships with feeder organizations through a child protection lens. This is now a matter of urgent concern to international child welfare agencies, especially since they themselves so often work through football players as ambassadors and use leading football clubs as fund raisers.

Listening to children in football

One important mechanism for addressing abuses to children is empowerment, enactment of **article 12**, through which children's right to a voice is realised. Football opportunities for young people seem to be everywhere but how many of them are genuinely consultative? Where adults organise and supervise football 'on behalf of', or 'in the interests of' children, it is likely that the ability of children to direct the activity, or for the activity to be an end in itself and lacking in obligation, will be diminished. For too many adults, children's football is only of any note where it feeds into and supports the regulated, affiliated, institutionalized, adult-led practice.

'Adulthood' therefore rules, for these are the activity patterns deemed by *others* (adults) to be appropriate and 'in the child's best interests' yet actually serving the wider needs of the state and state capitalism.

Power, authority and control in football, as in many other sports, still rest with rival institutions and individuals whose sectarian in-fighting leaves little time or energy for young players. Consultation, when it does happen, is easily used as a mask for continuing paternalism by those for whom radical change would threaten their power base. Perhaps this is just one example of our, adult, obsession with controlling childhood that arises from our uncertainty about the fate of adulthood as we come to terms with social fracturing in late modernity (Parton, 2005).

The modern or 'new' sociology of childhood allows us to challenge the paternal view of children and, instead, to view children as active agents with individual lived experiences. Seeing children as people rather than small, and lesser, adults allows us to break away from the protectionist approach towards more of a rights-based approach (or what Scraton and Haydon (2002) call 'positive rights' or welfare-based rights), aligned with the ideology of social welfare. This perspective, among other things, regards children as active agents of social change, co-constructors of knowledge, and in power relations *with* adults rather than being subjected to the power *of* adults. In short, it shifts us from a sociology *of* childhood to one *for* childhood (Prescott and Hartill, 2004).

But even if we do actively engage children and young people in decision-making in sport, we need to distinguish between simply giving them an opportunity to participate (listening) and giving them meaningful experiences of participation (hearing) (Olle, 2002: 7). Consultation is not the norm in sport, however. I would argue that sport, including football, is well behind other social provisions on this issue, not necessarily because of its failure to consult with children – although I think most schemes do not – but because of its failure to treat seriously the results of any such consultations. Why? Because the vested interests of those delivering youth football would be undermined by listening to children's voices – sport (the fun pursuit of recreational games) would not be 'Sport' (the bureaucratized, commodified and hierarchically-run athletic spectacle). This, then, is a form of paternalism verging on social control. Social control is easily applied in youth sport where adults choose, organize, deliver and evaluate activities and

programmes without inviting comments or contributions from those who consume them – children.

Welfare provisions for children in football therefore encompass a mix of vested interests:

- for the child footballer - providing personal safety, support and life chances
- for sport organizations - optimizing commodity value, commercial success and sustainability
- and for society - reducing worklessness and social disruption and thus benefitting the economy

Finding and maintaining a healthy balance within this mix is a challenge for all of us, especially those engaged in coaching or attempting to deliver elite success in football. The space within this mix for child-centred or even child-directed football is very limited indeed.

The policy responses to the crisis of adult confidence in late modernity also reflect a change in emphasis from worrying about prevention and recurrence of abuse within *private*, family settings (i.e. the immediate protection of the individual from harm) to worrying about lack of personal development and consequent failure to optimize the *public*, civic and economic contributions of all individuals (i.e. the future safeguarding of society from an unproductive or criminal workforce). This has led to a much more interventionist approach to services, sometimes directly through the law or taxation but often through ‘softer’ incentive schemes and/or financial sanctions. One potential example of this in football is FIFA’s interest in working with UNICEF to developing quality standards for child welfare in football clubs.

Football offers an almost perfect vehicle for addressing both children’s rights and social control but I suggest that the latter is the dominant discourse in the game today. Children are certainly engaged in football in large numbers but whether their best interests are served, and whether they have autonomy as athletes, is highly debatable.

The IOC Medical Commission’s *Consensus Statement on Training the Elite Child Athlete* argues that: ‘The entire process for the elite child athlete should be pleasurable and fulfilling’ (IOC Medical Commission, 2005). But an interesting tension seems to exist between the traditional utilitarian ideology (doing what is necessary to succeed) and the humanistic reform ideology

(doing what is best for the child). Is it really possible to push young footballers to their performance limits in the name of success and yet still succeed in empowering them to choose their own sporting paths? Is it possible to succeed at the highest level in football *without* violating rights and safety norms?

Gender relations and girls in football

What constitutes the periphery for the women's game? It seems that cores and peripheries here are defined by a mix of geography and gender politics. Girls and women in football, at least in my own country, occupy a twilight zone between tolerance and assimilation. There are plenty of examples of exclusionary strategies (Witz, 1992) in the history of the women's football that relegate them to the periphery - from bans, to symbolic annihilation through absence, to indirect and direct discrimination, to gender and sexual harassment - and of men appropriating the girls' and women's game to further their own footballing credentials and status. Gary Armstrong (in review, p. 5) argues that football in South Africa "has actively shaped masculine identities" and fostered patriarchy, an assertion found in a number of other gender critiques (Scruton et al., 1999; Williams and Bedward, 2001). "Football has long been associated with masculinity and there is still resistance to girls and women's participation" (Hills et al., 2009, p. 16). There is a case for suggesting, then, that it might be even harder in football than other sites for women and girls to pursue successful inclusionary strategies.

Inclusionary strategies are illustrated in a recent decision by the English FA to raise the age at which girls can play together with boys. This is both a technical (skill) and political (power) breakthrough for the girls' game in England (Hills et al., 2009). However, minor gains in representation or sponsorship do nothing to challenge the harmful practices that beset the boys' and men's game. It is tempting to ask whether girls' football is simply tolerated as an economic benefit for The FA, and whether The FA's overall engagement in the girls' game is simply a financial ploy to help keep football alive in the face of the recession and of a massive decline in the adult men's game.

Rather than seeing the women's game challenging or making an effort to break away from the model of the sport developed for boys and men, there appears to be a desire among many to mimic the men and to aspire for (illusory) parity. But this generalization cannot be

substantiated. In my own football research, those who welcomed girls and women in the game, including parents, coaches and male players, perceived them as a civilizing influence – welcome because of the effect that they had on the boys’ behaviour rather than because they, in themselves, are rights bearers. Yet this plays on traditional stereotypes - of both males and females – in ways which leave no room for transforming local gender relations, let alone disrupting the overall gender order of football through transformative methods of ‘doing gender’ such as gender bending or gender play – “dismantling and/or redramatization or gender differences” - that are now evident in some other sports (Pfister, 2010, p. 235). Far from undergoing the ‘sex change’ that Pfister suggests has happened in some sports, where females are actually colonizing previously taboo ‘male’ sports, I would argue that football, at least in my own country, is still resolutely a male preserve: there is not much evidence of gender mainstreaming here. (It is interesting to speculate whether in the United States, where soccer/football is reputedly the fastest growing sport for women and girls, the situation might be very different).

In England, the women’s game has ambivalent status of in the eyes of The Football Association. It is included because it must be under contemporary equalities legislation but there is still considerable reluctance among many professional clubs to support women’s teams or to grow the women’s own professional league. Indeed, several women’s clubs have folded and many are under strain – and that is despite the huge growth in participation in girls’ football. This paradox of popular grassroots growth (‘feminization’) versus obstinate institutional sexism can only lead to tears. Perhaps the main hope for genuine transformation of the gender order in the game lies in the steeply rising growth curve but, as the Black majority in apartheid South Africa knew too well, numerical supremacy does not guarantee political parity. Indeed, Pfister points out that “mere authorization to take part in a sport does not mean that gender differences are ... eliminated” and that, instead, this may simply “lead to new and more subtle forms of gender enactment” (2010, p. 238).

What are the risks of harm to girls in football? And are they different or greater than those experienced by boys? From an evidence perspective we simply do not know, but it would be odd if football did not reflect wider social patterns of risk and harm. In which case, we might expect boys to face higher levels of physical abuse than girls, and girls to suffer more sexual harassment

than boys. One thing seems clear: if girls continue to be appropriated into the male model of football they should come to expect *all* of the harms that the boys already face, and more. For their commodity value will be less, so their scarcity value greater. They will be vulnerable to sexual exploitation and other abuses, whether trafficked or not, unless and until the football authorities are willing and able to adopt comprehensive child protection measures, backed up by very tough sanctions.

Is an attempt to stem the growth of the girls game simply an act of paternalism that stifles the agency of the women involved? Might I be imposing western moral judgements from a bygone age on a generation of women for whom their soccer identity is but one part of their overall expression of self? Perhaps. But, since the structures of control and leadership in football are still, almost exclusively, male then the prospects for young girl footballers – whether trafficked to Europe from Africa or ferried to practice in an SUV by adoring middle class parents in Greenwich Connecticut – seem pretty bleak to me.

Conclusions

Despite the many intrinsic benefits of football for children the professional exemplar inevitably leads to interest in and, for some, obsession with potential extrinsic gains. These material rewards undoubtedly set the tone for much that happens in the junior game. As talented young players – boys or girls - progress towards the higher echelons of the game they become more and more subject to the scrutiny and control of the business of football, cast more and more as commodities and investments and less and less as human beings. As for girls' football, I would still argue, as I did almost a decade ago, that their progress has been characterized by liberal accommodation rather than radical change.

... and just in case you think that England has managed to eradicate violence to children in football, have a look at this covert DVD, filmed at one of our quality-accredited Charter Standard clubs for children. I, for one, do *not* want this to transpire for girls' football ...

[Insert covert DVD of poor parent behavior in junior football]

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