**Reclaiming the Game: Feminism, Fandom, and the Challenge to Fallocentric Stadium Culture**

**Abstract**

This article explores how women reclaim stadium spaces through feminist-informed fandom and activism, both online and offline. Drawing on qualitative case studies from the United Kingdom and Iran—two countries with contrasting sociopolitical landscapes—it examines how women challenge the fallocentric and exclusionary culture of football fandom. The study reveals that female fandom is not merely a form of entertainment consumption, but a political practice deeply embedded in everyday experiences, structural resistance, and identity negotiation. Through chants, digital campaigns, community solidarity, and symbolic subversions, women build alternative cultural spaces that contest dominant narratives in male-dominated sports arenas. While certain reforms and visibility gains have emerged in Western contexts, many remain tokenistic and fail to address deeper systemic issues. In restrictive contexts like Iran, women engage in high-risk forms of digital and embodied activism to challenge patriarchal state control. This research highlights female fandom as a transformative form of “everyday feminism,” rooted in emotional labor, cultural production, and the struggle for gendered spatial justice in public life.

**Keywords**: Feminist Fandom, Gendered Space, Stadium Culture, Digital Activism

**Introduction**

Historically, masculine dominance has shaped the culture of sports, positioning men as the central figures—on the field, in the media, and among spectators (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Jones, 2008). The stadium, as a symbol of athletic supremacy, has long served as an exclusive arena for male bodies and expressions, often sidelining or outright rejecting women’s presence (Chiweshe, 2014). Many continue to treat women as cultural intruders or merely as “visual ornaments” who beautify the scene without being acknowledged for building collective spirit (Erhart, 2013; Antunovic & Hardin, 2012). This persistent narrative reinforces the stadium as a site of marginalization structured by unequal gender relations. Dunn (2014) reports that female supporters often face blatant sexism, including verbal harassment, disregard, and symbolic exclusion. Cooper et al. (2019) further argue that stadiums actively reproduce power relations that intersect both gender and race, exacerbating the layers of exclusion experienced by women—especially those from marginalized racial backgrounds. Female fans regularly contend with double standards; they must prove their loyalty while fending off accusations of being “fake fans” or merely seeking attention (Grappendorf et al., 2023). This pattern occurs not only in Western societies but also in more conservative contexts like Iran. In such settings, structural bans prohibit women from entering stadiums. Eskandari (2022) and Afzali (2015) show how Iranian women navigate this ban by using digital platforms to express their love for football, turning their fandom into a form of resistance against state repression. In contrast, countries like the United Kingdom and the United States offer relatively greater access, though Allison and Pope (2021) note that the socialization of female fans remains heavily shaped by dominant masculine narratives, despite emerging changes within certain communities. Women’s presence in stadiums, therefore, goes beyond physical attendance. It constitutes a symbolic struggle to claim visibility and representation. Myrdahl (2009) explains that stadiums operate under spatial norms designed—often implicitly—to exclude those who exist outside heterosexual masculinity. In this context, women’s fandom becomes a political battleground that questions who truly gets to be recognized as a “real fan.” Agyemang et al. (2020) illustrate how sports can serve as a platform for political activism and social negotiation, where gender and racial identities are continually reshaped through collective action. Critiques of fallocentric stadium culture should thus be situated within the broader feminist movement. As Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasize, feminist engagement with sport is not only about inclusion and representation. It also demands the dismantling of value systems that normalize inequality. Therefore, reclaiming the stadium is not simply a plea to “join the game”; it is a call to rewrite the rules of the game itself.

Stadiums not only reflect visible gender disparities but also actively reproduce power relations rooted in structural sexism embedded within everyday norms and practices (Hays, 1996; McKeown, 2021). These spaces do more than host sporting events—they shape and reinforce symbolic hierarchies between men and women. Henderson (2018) found that specific gender performances are normalized within stadiums, while others—particularly those associated with femininity and queerness—are devalued or subjected to symbolic ridicule. These sites function as "architectures of power," disciplining and molding bodies according to dominant masculine and heteronormative standards (Myrdahl, 2009; Gantz & Wenner, 1991). Feminism, in this context, does not emerge solely as a counter-ideology. Instead, it manifests through lived responses to systemic injustice within sports fandom. Braunstein-Minkove and Metz (2019) explain how women play crucial roles not just in guiding household sports consumption, but also in reshaping the narratives of fandom itself. Allison et al. (2024) emphasize that female fans are no longer passive spectators; they actively produce meaning, assert agency, and push for recognition of their identities. In Iran, Eskandari (2022) documents how female fandom has evolved into a form of resistance against state control over women’s bodies and public mobility. In more open societies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, Delia et al. (2022) report a growing female presence in stadiums, although gender gaps remain in decision-making roles and media representation. Women enter these spaces not just to enjoy matches but to drive social transformation through symbolic and material resistance (Afzali, 2015; Mohammadi, 2020). Their activism often unfolds through digital campaigns for gender equality or physical interventions at matches—using chants, posters, and visual protest to challenge dominant norms (Antunovic & Linden, 2015). In this sense, sport becomes a contested discursive arena, no longer detached from identity politics but deeply embedded in struggles over space and symbolic capital (Agyemang et al., 2020). Dietz et al. (2021) found that female fandom has grown increasingly organized, using collective solidarity, digital networks, and alternative media production to counter oppressive gender stereotypes. By leveraging affective bonds and the connective power of fan communities, women develop cultural practices that transcend structural limitations. Allison and Pope (2021) observe that the process of becoming a fan for women is not merely about developing a sporting interest. It is a gender-conscious formation of identity, grounded in community and collective meaning-making. This challenges the notion of fandom as trivial or apolitical. Instead, it reveals fandom as a politically charged cultural field. Cooper et al. (2019) argue that sport-based social movements, particularly those led by historically marginalized groups, possess powerful potential to reshape broader society. For this reason, framing sport as a feminist political arena is not an exaggeration—it is an unfolding global reality.

In this context, the concept of **phallocentrism** deserves critical examination, as it serves as the ideological foundation for a symbolic system that has historically ignored women's presence and contributions within stadium culture (Nicholson, 2017; Henderson, 2018; Myrdahl, 2009). Phallocentrism in sport extends beyond male physical dominance in stadiums; it encompasses hegemonic narratives that center male bodies and voices as the primary sources of authority, representation, and legitimacy in sporting spaces (Kay, 2009; Gantz & Wenner, 1991). This focus on masculinity not only sidelines women but also diminishes their visibility—even when they exhibit equal passion and commitment as fans or athletes. Meier (2015) illustrates this marginalization by highlighting how female role models in women’s sports rarely receive the same media attention or recognition as their male counterparts. Grappendorf et al. (2023) similarly emphasize that traditional gender expectations often force women to choose between active fandom and conforming to normative domestic roles. These findings suggest that phallocentrism operates not only through overt exclusion but also through everyday social expectations that shape how stadiums function. Myrdahl (2009) argues that the spatial and symbolic design of stadiums fails to promote gender and sexual inclusivity. Feminist interventions in sport, therefore, must address more than just physical access. They must also dismantle the symbolic and discursive structures that limit women’s cultural agency and autonomy (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Antunovic and Hardin (2012) show how blogs and social media platforms enable women to resist dominant narratives and build alternative representations. In the UK, Dunn (2014) observes how female fan communities have forged collective political identities that directly challenge the masculinist idea that true fandom belongs only to men. Resisting phallocentrism means more than critiquing patriarchy in sport. It requires actively reclaiming cultural space that has long excluded gender diversity. Allison et al. (2024) demonstrate how, during global events like the Women’s World Cup, female fans transform stadiums into sites of political articulation. Their activism demands equal pay, fair media coverage, and reproductive rights for female athletes. Critiques of phallocentrism do not remain confined to theory. They manifest in collective actions aimed at transforming stadiums into spaces that welcome, represent, and empower all genders. Feminist movements in sport, therefore, demand more than just a seat in the stands—they call for structural change in how sport defines who gets to be seen, heard, and celebrated.

This article aims to explore how women reclaim stadium spaces through feminist-based fandom and activism, both online and offline. Stadiums, long symbolically constructed as masculine domains, now face increasing challenges to their hegemonic legitimacy as women assert themselves not as passive spectators, but as active participants in shaping the social meaning of sport (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Dunn, 2014). By drawing on empirical experiences from diverse global contexts—including democratic nations like the United Kingdom and more restrictive environments like Iran—this study demonstrates that sport serves not only as entertainment but as a politically charged space filled with gendered resistance (Afzali, 2015; Mohammadi, 2020; Eskandari, 2022). Female fandom goes beyond expressions of team loyalty; it functions as a form of protest against representational systems that marginalize women (Allison et al., 2024; Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019). Within stadiums, women renegotiate their gender identity through symbolic acts such as wearing gender-conscious fan gear, chanting critical slogans, and organizing alternative communities rooted in female solidarity (Antunovic & Linden, 2015; Delia et al., 2022). Fandom thus becomes a vital tool for amplifying women’s collective voice in a cultural environment still governed by phallocentric norms and structural sexism (Hays, 1996; Henderson, 2018). This study also incorporates an intersectional approach to recognize that female fan experiences are not homogenous. Black women, queer women, and women from religious minorities often face layered exclusions within sporting spaces (Andrijiw & Richardson, 2023; Grappendorf et al., 2023). As a result, acts of resistance within fandom must be understood as a mosaic of diverse and complex struggles, not as a singular movement. Cooper et al. (2019) underscore that activism in sport forms part of a broader agenda for social transformation, including the fight against racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. By conceptualizing fandom as a contemporary feminist praxis, this article proposes an alternative reading of power relations in popular sports culture. As Braun and Clarke (2022) argue, scholars must deconstruct women's fan experiences from dominant structures of meaning that media, sports institutions, and cultural norms often uphold. Therefore, this study not only addresses gaps in gender and sports scholarship but also contributes to the critical deconstruction of exclusive stadium culture while promoting safer, more equal, and inclusive participation in global sports arenas.

**Literature Review**

Several studies reveal that women often experience ambivalent treatment within stadium spaces. On one hand, many clubs and organizers welcome women as potential consumers who contribute to the growth of the sports industry by purchasing tickets, merchandise, and engaging in media campaigns (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019; Delia et al., 2022). On the other hand, male-dominated fan communities frequently deny women equal participation, claiming exclusive rights to authentic fandom by positioning themselves as the only “real fans” (Dunn, 2014; Chiweshe, 2014; Jones, 2008). Within such environments, stadiums function as sites of “hegemonic masculinity,” where women’s fandom is reduced to passive or decorative roles—such as cheerleaders, girlfriends, or visual enhancements in televised broadcasts (Meier, 2015; Gantz & Wenner, 1991; Green, 2004). Erhart (2013), in her study of female Besiktas supporters in Turkey, illustrates how women challenge masculine dominance by creating their own chants, wearing distinctive collective fan gear, and building solidarity rooted in shared gendered experiences. These practices act as forms of cultural subversion, disrupting public imaginaries that frame stadiums as inherently masculine spaces. Antunovic and Hardin (2012) emphasize that digital communities offer women a space to express their fandom without having to pass a “masculinity test,” such as mastering statistics, club history, or sports jargon. Through social media, blogs, and forums, women generate alternative discursive arenas that resist male-dominated knowledge structures in sports narratives (Henderson, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Mintert and Pfister (2014) further show that female fan groups like the “Female Vikings” in Denmark have successfully built collective identities capable of rivaling male fan dominance. These examples demonstrate that women’s experiences as fans go far beyond entertainment preferences. Instead, they reflect ongoing negotiations over identity, cultural legitimacy, and resistance against symbolic exclusion (Llopis-Goig & Flores, 2018; Kay, 2009; Cooper et al., 2019). Female fandom, therefore, embodies a dynamic interplay between participation and protest, between visibility and marginalization, ultimately reshaping the socio-cultural fabric of sport from within.

Moreover, the process of becoming a fan for women does not unfold in a neutral or natural manner. Gendered social structures shape fan socialization, embedding hegemonic norms that compel women to prove their loyalty and knowledge more rigorously than their male counterparts (Allison & Pope, 2021; Dean et al., 2022; Chiweshe, 2014). Within many fan communities, people often confront women with patronizing questions such as, “Do you really know who the top scorer is?” or “You’re only here because your boyfriend is, right?” (Grappendorf et al., 2023; Dunn, 2014; Crawford & Gosling, 2004). These recurring micro-interactions generate an environment where women must overperform to gain validation as legitimate fans, reinforcing symbolic exclusion. Braunstein-Minkove and Metz (2019) observed that women—especially mothers—often play key roles in introducing their children to sports fandom. Yet, the public domain rarely acknowledges them as genuine fans, especially in spaces like stadiums or online sports forums. This disconnect reinforces a gendered division between the domestic realm, which is culturally assigned to women, and the public arena of fandom, which grants cultural legitimacy predominantly to men (Kay, 2009; McKeown, 2021; Hays, 1996). Grappendorf et al. (2023) further argue that women frequently face tension between fulfilling domestic responsibilities and pursuing their personal interests in becoming active sports community members. As a result, women’s fandom transforms into more than emotional attachment to a team—it becomes a site for negotiating imposed social roles and resisting narrow gender expectations (Green, 2004; Dietz et al., 2021; Gantz & Wenner, 1991). Even in contexts perceived as progressive, such as the United Kingdom, female fans still face challenges rooted in the persistent binary between the “good woman” image and the “public woman” identity. This duality complicates the socialization process for women in fandom spaces and limits the full expression of their sporting passions (Delia et al., 2022; Allison et al., 2024).

Research conducted in politically and culturally repressive regions, such as Iran, adds a crucial dimension to the understanding of female fandom as a form of political practice. Eskandari (2022) and Afzali (2015) reveal that even though legal restrictions bar women from entering stadiums, many continue to express their fandom through creative and often risky means. Some disguise themselves as men, stage digital protests, or establish underground fan communities to circumvent these limitations. Mohammadi (2020) describes such acts as “symbolic contests against the state’s control over women’s bodies and mobility,” where fandom transforms into a strategy of resistance against authoritarian regimes that use sport as a tool of ideological control. These acts of resistance go beyond mere symbolism. Women adopt digital technologies to construct counter-narratives that challenge the state's framing of them as passive citizens (Antunovic & Linden, 2015; Cooky, 2018). In many instances, social media serves as the only safe space where women can articulate their fan identities. These platforms also foster transnational solidarity by connecting fans across cultural and national boundaries (Nicholson, 2017; Agyemang et al., 2020; Myrdahl, 2009). Similar dynamics emerge in Western contexts, where Black women in sports spaces experience dual barriers based on race and gender. Andrijiw and Richardson (2023) emphasize that exclusion in sports culture must be understood through an intersectional lens. In contexts like Iran, women's fandom becomes inseparable from the politics of identity and civil rights. These women do not simply demand the right to attend matches. They also assert their right to be recognized as citizens with voices, agency, and the power to challenge and reshape social structures (Delia et al., 2022; Grappendorf et al., 2023; Henderson, 2018; Meier, 2015). Within this framework, female fandom emerges as a disruptive feminist praxis. Women dismantle hegemonic masculinity by deploying strategies of representation, collective solidarity, and cultural literacy that stretch far beyond the conventional limits of the stadium.

**Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a case study method, which provides the most effective means of exploring the complex social and cultural dynamics that shape women's participation in football fan communities. The research focuses on two distinct national contexts: the United Kingdom, which operates under a liberal democratic system, and Iran, where legal restrictions prevent women from attending stadium events. By selecting these contrasting settings, the study examines how women from different social and political backgrounds negotiate, challenge, and reclaim stadium spaces. The research draws data from twelve female participants who were selected purposively based on their active engagement in fan communities and their involvement in gender-related discourse. These women participate not only through physical activism but also through digital expressions of solidarity and resistance. The selection criteria prioritized individuals with a high degree of involvement to ensure that the collected narratives reflect rich, critical, and deeply personal experiences. These narratives allow the study to investigate how women construct meaning and agency within environments that often marginalize their presence.

Data collection involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews that allowed participants to share their personal experiences freely while remaining aligned with the study’s core themes. This method encouraged openness while maintaining thematic consistency. In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted participant observation on digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (now X), and online fan forums to document digital practices that shape female fandom activism. The analysis drew from three data sources—interview transcripts, visual documentation, and digital archives. To interpret these sources, the study used a thematic analysis framework as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). The process began with verbatim transcription, followed by manual coding and categorization into overarching themes such as "spatial struggle," "female fan identity," and "feminism as community praxis." The researcher applied triangulation to ensure data validity by comparing the consistency across sources and conducting repeated clarifications with several informants through member checking. This rigorous approach strengthened the reliability of interpretations and deepened the study's analytical insight.

This study critically analyzed the socio-cultural contexts of each country using an interpretivist and constructivist approach. The researcher selected this approach to explore how social meanings emerge and evolve through everyday interactions between individuals and the cultural structures that shape their experiences. In Iran, for instance, strict regulations banning women from entering stadiums were interpreted not merely as legal constraints, but as expressions of state ideology and symbolic control over women's bodies (Mohammadi, 2020; Eskandari, 2022). In contrast, women in the United Kingdom challenged dominant masculine norms through more subtle forms of resistance. They built solidarity within female fan communities and produced counter-narratives that redefined their presence in the stadium (Allison & Pope, 2021). These differences highlight how women do not simply occupy fan spaces but also actively reshape the meaning of their participation. Their efforts disrupt the masculine and fallocentric culture of the stadium and offer new ways to understand agency, identity, and cultural transformation in sport.

**Research Findings**

This study identified three major themes that capture the lived experiences of women in football fandom communities in both the United Kingdom and Iran. These themes include: (1) the struggle to access stadium spaces, (2) resistance against gendered fan stereotypes, and (3) feminist activism through digital and collective fandom practices. Each theme consistently emerged from the participants’ narratives and their documented online activities.

**Table 1. Key Themes and Frequency of Occurrence in Interviews**

| **No** | **Key Theme** | **Sub-Themes** | **Frequency (n=12)** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Struggles to Access the Stadium | Legal restrictions, verbal harassment | 11 |
| 2 | Stereotypes Against Female Fans | Labeled as “not real fans” | 9 |
| 3 | Feminist Activism through Fandom | Visual protests, critical posts, digital groups | 8 |
| 4 | Emotional and Digital Solidarity | Peer support among women | 7 |
| 5 | Reclaiming Space through Alternative Media | Fan-made media, chants, banners | 6 |

These findings reflect how women navigate exclusion, challenge dominant narratives, and construct their own forms of cultural and political participation in male-dominated fan cultures.

The findings reveal that women's fandom is not merely an emotional expression of loyalty to a team but also functions as a symbolic resistance against gender-exclusive social structures. Most participants emphasized that their presence in the stadium was rarely perceived as legitimate. Instead, they often faced scrutiny from male fans and stadium security, who questioned their authenticity as “real spectators” (Dunn, 2014; Erhart, 2013; Jones, 2008). Many women reported hearing dismissive remarks like, “You’re just here because of your boyfriend,” or “You probably don’t understand the tactics,” which reinforced the perception that true fandom belongs only to men. These narratives support the argument that stadiums remain social spaces shaped by hegemonic masculine norms, where women are relegated to subordinate roles or viewed as decorative figures (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Gantz & Wenner, 1991; Chiweshe, 2014). One Iranian participant described her attempt to physically enter the stadium as a “radical act” that challenged the patriarchal order imposed by the state. Legal restrictions that prevent women from accessing stadiums not only represent control over women’s bodies but also symbolize a broader denial of their right to public space (Afzali, 2015; Mohammadi, 2020; Eskandari, 2022). Although recent years have seen increased media representation of women in sports, participants pointed out that these depictions often serve a symbolic purpose and fail to address the underlying structural barriers (Delia et al., 2022; Dietz et al., 2021). Some British informants acknowledged progress, such as the introduction of family-friendly seating areas and campaigns welcoming women into stadiums. However, they also noted that these initiatives often remain tokenistic and are rarely accompanied by deeper institutional reforms (Allison & Pope, 2021; Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019). Beyond representation, female fandom has evolved into a political space where women actively negotiate their gender identities. Many participants explained that their involvement in fan communities serves as an act of defiance against social expectations that frame women as domestic caregivers or companions to male sports enthusiasts (Green, 2004; Grappendorf et al., 2023; McKeown, 2021). Through creating banners, chants, and digital content, they produce alternative narratives that confront the fallocentric culture of stadiums (Nicholson, 2017; Henderson, 2018; Myrdahl, 2009). These women not only claim physical presence but also establish new cultural practices that affirm their autonomy as subjects within sports fandom (Antunovic & Linden, 2015; Agyemang et al., 2020; Allison, 2024). Thus, women’s fandom operates as a form of activism that blurs the line between entertainment and civil rights, transforming the stadium into a symbolic battleground over identity, power, and gender representation.

Furthermore, women's fandom not only expresses identity but also shows how women actively create safe spaces—both physical and digital—within the symbolic and structural constraints of stadium culture. Several participants described the stadium not merely as a site for watching matches but as a social space filled with invisible boundaries that systematically exclude women from active participation (Antunovic & Linden, 2015; Henderson, 2018; McKeown, 2021). Within such settings, fandom allows women to build supportive and empowering communities as a form of resistance against dominant narratives that often treat them as “guests” in the world of sports. Through collective activities like designing posters, chanting, and launching online campaigns, these women reimagine stadiums as emotionally and symbolically inclusive spaces (Green, 2004; Grappendorf et al., 2023; Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019). This dynamic is especially evident in Iran, where legal prohibitions against women’s entry into stadiums have sparked creative and risky forms of digital activism. Female fans in Iran use platforms like Twitter, Telegram, and Instagram to share experiences, mobilize solidarity, and demand equal access to public spaces (Afzali, 2015; Eskandari, 2022; Mohammadi, 2020). In some cases, women disguise themselves as men to enter stadiums, documenting these acts and spreading them online as protests against the state’s patriarchal policies. These actions demonstrate that fandom has evolved beyond a recreational pastime into a politically charged practice that embodies resistance and meaning (Agyemang et al., 2020; Allison, 2024; Chiweshe, 2014). Even in countries with broader civil liberties, such as the United Kingdom, female fans also build safe digital spaces. Initiatives like the online communities “HerGameToo” and “This Fan Girl” promote alternative narratives about women in sport (Delia et al., 2022; Dietz et al., 2021). These digital environments play a crucial role—not only offering psychological safety but also serving as platforms for education and organizing. Informants from both countries reported that online communities provide access to knowledge, networks, and moral support that physical stadiums often fail to offer. Therefore, female fandom emerges as a flexible form of cultural activism that goes beyond traditional modes of protest like demonstrations or petitions. It becomes a form of everyday political practice deeply embedded in gender identity and women’s social experiences (Nicholson, 2017; Dunn, 2014; Kay, 2009; Meier, 2015; Jones, 2008). This activism is not solely about physical presence in stadiums—it raises broader questions about who has the right to claim public space, who qualifies as a legitimate fan, and who is allowed to speak in the discourse of popular sport.

The discussion reveals that feminist expressions within female fandom do not always emerge through overt slogans or explicit actions. Instead, they often take shape through community solidarity, shared routines, and identity affirmations embedded in everyday fan practices. Many participants described how they built supportive all-women communities that fostered safe environments—not only for watching games but also for sharing stories, confronting discrimination, and expressing pride in being women in male-dominated sports spaces. These practices show that feminism within fandom operates as a cultural force that flows through horizontal relationships, reinforcing a sense of belonging and resistance to structural exclusion (McKeown, 2021; Green, 2004; Grappendorf et al., 2023). Through chants that promote gender equality, posters designed with anti-sexist messages, and visual items that assert women’s identities as fans, female supporters create countercultural spaces that challenge dominant symbols in fallocentric stadium cultures (Nicholson, 2017; Henderson, 2018; Myrdahl, 2009). These actions go beyond mere symbolism; they represent concrete expressions of identity politics that dismantle hegemonic masculine norms in sports fandom (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Chiweshe, 2014; Crawford & Gosling, 2004). For example, in the “HerGameToo” movement in the UK, women composed chants that not only cheered their teams but also addressed sexism among fans and in media coverage (Allison & Pope, 2021; Delia et al., 2022). Interestingly, many of these feminist forms do not get labeled by the women themselves as “feminist activism” in the conventional sense. Rather, they emerge organically as expressions of solidarity and the desire to effect real change in their environments. One informant from Iran described how creating a WhatsApp group exclusively for female football fans, sharing safety tips, and warning each other of risks while sneaking into stadiums reflected a struggle not officially defined as “politics,” but deeply rooted in resistance (Afzali, 2015; Mohammadi, 2020; Eskandari, 2022). These practices illustrate how feminism in the context of fandom takes the form of “everyday politics,” grounded in women’s personal and social experiences, and becomes a quiet yet significant transformative force (Meier, 2015; Dietz et al., 2021; Agyemang et al., 2020). Therefore, fandom should not be viewed solely as a site for entertainment or consumption. Instead, it serves as a social platform where women build collective identities, challenge cultural norms, and negotiate their presence within patriarchal and exclusionary structures.

Interestingly, several participants from the United Kingdom observed emerging changes in stadium policies and atmospheres, especially regarding improved female-friendly facilities, enhanced safety measures, and greater visibility of women in mainstream sports media. They pointed to initiatives such as anti-sexism campaigns launched by football clubs, inclusive family stands, and increased media coverage of female athletes as signs of progress in expanding access and representation for women in sports spaces (Delia et al., 2022; Allison & Pope, 2021; Grappendorf et al., 2023). They also acknowledged the role of advocacy groups like “HerGameToo” and “Women in Football” in reshaping public narratives that portray women not just as passive spectators but as active members of the sporting community (Braunstein-Minkove & Metz, 2019; Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Dietz et al., 2021). In certain cases, clubs have invited women to participate in fan community decision-making processes that had previously been dominated almost entirely by men (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Chiweshe, 2014). However, these participants emphasized that such changes have not eliminated deeper structural issues. While visibility of women in sports media has improved, their portrayal often remains symbolic and stereotypical—highlighting physical appearance or nurturing roles rather than athletic competence and sports knowledge (Meier, 2015; Green, 2004; Henderson, 2018). Some fans expressed concern that inclusion campaigns are used by clubs to project a progressive image rather than initiate meaningful internal change (Nicholson, 2017; McKeown, 2021; Gantz & Wenner, 1991). In many cases, men still control key decision-making roles within clubs and fan communities, demonstrating that representation does not automatically lead to redistribution of power (Kay, 2009; Dunn, 2014; Cooper et al., 2019). Their critique of symbolic inclusivity underscores the need to distinguish between cosmetic participation and substantive engagement. Representation of women in sports loses its significance if not accompanied by decision-making authority, equitable access to resources, and cultural shifts that challenge longstanding masculine norms (Mohammadi, 2020; Eskandari, 2022; Afzali, 2015). Therefore, it becomes crucial to view reforms in stadiums and media not as marketing strategies but as steps in a long-term process toward genuine gender justice. These reforms must aim to transform the historically fallocentric and exclusionary culture of sports spaces. In this context, female fandom emerges as a vital site for reinterpreting the role of sports in society. As a space of resistance, fandom can drive cultural transformation and serve as part of a contemporary feminist movement focused on the politics of representation and public space (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nicholson, 2017; Antunovic & Hardin, 2012).

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