**Sounding Out Silence: Embodied Protest and the Emotional Politics of Women’s Fandom under Gendered Regimes**

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**Abstract**

This article explores how women challenge the fallocentric and exclusionary norms of football fandom through feminist-informed practices in both digital and physical arenas. Drawing on comparative qualitative research in the United Kingdom and Iran two contexts marked by distinct sociopolitical and cultural regimes the study demonstrates that women’s fandom is not merely a recreational act, but a deeply political expression of resistance, identity, and emotion. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography with twelve participants, the article identifies three key dimensions of feminist fandom: spatial contestation and risk, emotional resistance and catharsis, and digital sisterhood. In Iran, women resist state-imposed bans through subversive acts of stadium entry and online mobilization, while in the UK, symbolic exclusion is contested through affective solidarity and visibility campaigns. By integrating feminist spatial theory, affect studies, and transnational cultural analysis, the article argues that stadiums can become spaces of embodied defiance and collective empowerment. This research contributes to feminist sports scholarship by repositioning female fandom as a site of everyday activism, affective politics, and cultural transformation.

**Keywords**

Feminist Fandom, Stadium Culture, Digital Activism, Phallocentrism, Affective Politics

**INTRODUCTION**

Stadiums are not neutral venues for sport but gendered spaces embedded within broader systems of social power. 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). Stadiums, as symbolic arenas of athletic supremacy, have long marginalized women’s presence reducing them to passive spectators or visual ornaments rather than full participants (Erhart, 2013; Chiweshe, 2014).

While some reforms have opened gates to women, these changes often remain tokenistic, failing to challenge the deeper structural and symbolic exclusions rooted in phallocentric norms. Dunn (2014) and Cooper et al. (2019) show that stadiums reproduce intersecting inequalities based on gender, race, and sexuality exacerbated in both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes.

This article draws upon a cross-national comparative framework to analyze the lived experiences of female football fans in Iran and the United Kingdom. These two contexts one a liberal democracy, the other a theocratic state highlight the diverse strategies women employ to challenge exclusion, ranging from embodied protest to digital resistance.

In doing so, the study addresses key gaps in existing literature, particularly concerning the affective and spatial dimensions of fandom, and the political agency embedded in women’s presence in male-dominated sports arenas. It also contributes to feminist debates by reconceptualizing fandom as a form of everyday resistance one deeply rooted in identity politics, emotional labor, and claims to spatial justice.

While most research highlights structural exclusion, fewer studies focus on the emotional textures of female fandom how joy, pride, fear, or defiance manifest within constrained environments. In settings like Iran, the act of cheering privately, disguising oneself to attend matches, or engaging in online activism becomes not just symbolic defiance but affective survival. Such moments reveal fandom as both a political act and an emotional lifeline.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: the next section critically reviews feminist literature on fandom, stadium space, and phallocentrism. It then outlines the methodology, presents empirical findings from interviews and digital ethnography, and concludes with a discussion on the implications for feminist sports scholarship and activism.

The article proceeds as follows: it first engages with feminist literature on fandom, stadium spaces, and fallocentrism. It then outlines the research methodology, followed by empirical findings structured into thematic categories. The article concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for feminist theory and policy change in sports culture. This study builds upon and extends insights from recent feminist fan research (see Advancing Gender Equality in Sport Through Matricentric Activism, 2025), while offering a comparative transnational perspective rooted in empirical fieldwork from Iran and the United Kingdom.

Scholarship in feminist sports studies has long interrogated the exclusion of women from fan cultures and stadium environments. Research across feminist sports studies reveals that women’s presence in stadiums is consistently shaped by exclusionary practices. Traditionally, the dominant paradigm in sports fandom positions men as the normative and authentic fan, while women are treated either as passive consumers or aesthetic enhancers (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Erhart, 2013). This representation persists despite growing female attendance and participation in both digital and physical fan communities.

Scholars such as Dunn (2014) and Cooper et al. (2019) emphasize how stadiums are structured by hegemonic masculinity and racialized gender norms that marginalize female fans especially Black and queer women. Feminist critiques highlight how these exclusions operate not only through physical access but also through symbolic mechanisms, such as the questioning of women's loyalty and expertise, and the hypervisibility of their bodies (Grappendorf et al., 2023; Henderson, 2018).

Phallocentrism provides a critical theoretical lens for understanding how masculinity is normalized as the central narrative in sports cultures. As Myrdahl (2009) and Nicholson (2017) explain, the stadium operates as a space organized by phallic authority, privileging male voices, bodies, and rituals. Feminist scholars have long argued that sports media, institutional structures, and fan cultures uphold this symbolic economy through repetition and normalization (Gantz & Wenner, 1991; Kay, 2009).

At the same time, scholars such as Antunovic and Hardin (2012) document how women carve out discursive spaces of resistance online, circumventing the “masculinity tests” that often gatekeep traditional fandom. Digital environments enable alternative forms of participation, particularly for women in repressive contexts like Iran, where state-imposed bans inhibit physical access (Eskandari, 2022; Mohammadi, 2020).

Importantly, the literature tends to overlook the emotional dimensions of fandom. Affective politics emotions as both sites and sources of resistance offer a valuable analytical extension. Sara Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions are not private states but social forces that shape bodies and spaces. Within this frame, women’s stadium activism in Iran, such as chanting or disguising to gain entry, constitutes what Probyn (2005) calls “visceral resistance” a bodily defiance against spatial and ideological regulation.

Thus, this review identifies three gaps: insufficient theorization of phallocentrism’s affective mechanisms; limited attention to authoritarian cultural-political contexts; and a lack of recognition for emotional labor in feminist fandom. This article responds to these by integrating feminist spatial theory with affect studies and comparative cultural analysis.

The notion of fallocentrism is central to understanding how power circulates within sporting cultures. Rooted in psychoanalytic and poststructural feminist thought, fallocentrism refers to the symbolic privileging of masculine authority represented through male bodies, voices, and rituals within social spaces (Myrdahl, 2009; Nicholson, 2017). In the stadium context, this manifests in the architectural design, chanting culture, and media narratives that repeatedly center men as the normative participants. Fandom becomes masculinized not only in who is allowed to speak and be seen, but in whose emotional expressions are legitimized. This article argues that such phallic ordering of space produces layered exclusions, particularly against women in societies where gendered public visibility is heavily policed, such as Iran.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist approach to examine how women from different sociopolitical contexts experience and resist exclusion in football fandom. A **multiple case study design** was adopted, focusing on two contrasting national settings: the United Kingdom, a liberal democracy with relatively open public spaces, and Iran, a theocratic regime where legal bans prohibit women from attending stadium events. This comparative lens enables a nuanced understanding of how women negotiate gendered barriers shaped by different political and cultural systems.

Twelve female participants were **purposively selected** based on their active engagement in fan communities and gender-related discourse. Selection considered diversity in **age, race, and religious background** where possible. All participants were involved either in physical or digital activism and offered **rich, critical, and personal narratives** that reflect lived experiences under exclusionary conditions.

Data were collected through **in-depth semi-structured interviews** and **digital ethnographic observation** on platforms including Instagram, Twitter (now X), and Telegram. Interviews encouraged narrative openness while remaining guided by core themes: stadium access, emotional experiences, feminist identity, and resistance. Complementary digital content visual campaigns, posts, and interactions was also analyzed to trace affective practices and expressions of solidarity.

Following **Braun and Clarke’s (2022) thematic analysis**, transcripts were manually coded and themes developed inductively. Core themes that emerged included: “gendered spatial exclusion,” “emotional defiance,” and “digital sisterhood.” Triangulation of interviews, digital artifacts, and visual materials enhanced data validity. **Member checking** was conducted with several informants to ensure interpretive credibility.

Given the **political sensitivity of the Iranian context**, anonymity and digital safety were prioritized. While findings are not generalizable due to the **small sample size (n=12),** the richness of the data allows for **deep interpretive insights**. Further research across additional authoritarian or postcolonial societies is encouraged to expand the applicability of these findings.

The study adopts a **constructivist paradigm,** viewing knowledge as emerging from the dynamic interaction between individuals and their sociocultural environments. For example, Iranian stadium bans are interpreted not merely as legal prohibitions, but as **symbolic enactments of gendered state power** (Mohammadi, 2020; Eskandari, 2022). Meanwhile, UK participants engage in subtle resistance and community building that disrupt masculine-coded stadium culture (Allison & Pope, 2021). This orientation positions fandom as both an **emotional and political practice,** shaped by structures yet rich in agency and transformation.

**MAIN ARGUMENT USING SUBHEADINGS**

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) emotional resistance and affective practices, and (3) feminist solidarity through digital and communal activism. Each theme reflects how women navigate exclusion, challenge dominant narratives, and construct their own forms of cultural and political participation within male-dominated fan cultures.

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

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| No | Key Theme | Sub-Themes | Frequency (n=12) |
| 1 | Spatial Contestation and Risk | Legal restrictions, verbal harassment | 11 |
| 2 | Emotional Resistance and Catharsis | Visceral protest, affective memory | 10 |
| 3 | Digital Sisterhood and Solidarity | Networked care, digital campaigns | 9 |
| 4 | Symbolic Inclusion and Resistance | Token reforms, media stereotypes | 7 |
| 5 | Everyday Feminism as Resistance | Informal activism, unspoken feminist practices | 8 |

**Spatial Contestation and Risk**

In Iran, stadium access is not a matter of ticket availability but a politically charged act of embodied defiance. One participant described her experience disguising herself as a man to enter a football match: “My heart raced the whole time. I knew I could be arrested, but I needed to feel I belonged there.” This account exemplifies how stadiums function as spaces of personal emancipation and political resistance. Legal prohibitions on women's entry symbolize a broader denial of access to public life, and women’s defiance becomes a direct challenge to patriarchal control (Afzali, 2015; Mohammadi, 2020; Eskandari, 2022). This phenomenon must be understood within the broader context of the **Islamic Republic of Iran**, a theocratic state governed by Twelver Shi’a Islam, where religious doctrine directly shapes public morality and gendered access to space.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In Iran, these restrictions must be understood within the broader political-theological framework of the Islamic Republic, where interpretations of Shi'a Islam are institutionalized into law. Public morality codes, including gender segregation in sports venues, are rooted in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) that views the presence of unveiled or vocally expressive women in male-dominated arenas as threatening to religious order (Afzali, 2015). This theocratic structure distinguishes Iran’s exclusions from those in secular democracies like the UK, where gender boundaries are maintained through cultural rather than legal enforcement. Women's defiance in Iran is thus not only cultural dissent but a direct transgression of state-religious authority.

In contrast, participants in the UK faced more symbolic forms of exclusion: discomfort, objectification, infantilizing media portrayals, and patronizing comments from male fans. Yet, these experiences also cultivated a collective sense of resistance. As one UK participant shared, “Just showing up with my scarf and banner feels like activism.” In both settings, the stadium is not simply a sports venue it is a contested space where legitimacy is continuously negotiated.

**Emotional Resistance and Catharsis**

Across both countries, women characterized their fandom as deeply emotional and politically charged. Iranian participants, unable to legally attend matches, described women-only gatherings where they watched games, chanted, and expressed themselves freely. These acts embody what Probyn (2005) calls “visceral protest” a way for the body to resist silencing through emotion. One respondent explained, “The only time I feel free to scream is during a match.” Fandom becomes a form of psychological survival under authoritarian restrictions, where affect acts as micro-political resistance.

Similarly, British participants connected their fandom with both joy and mourning. One noted, “Sometimes I cry during the anthem because it reminds me ofeverything we’ve had to fight for just to stand here.” Fandom thus functions as affective memory, anchoring historical struggle in collective emotional experiences. These emotional expressions are not private feelings but public statements that disrupt patriarchal norms.

**Digital Sisterhood and Feminist Solidarity**

Women in both Iran and the UK emphasized the significance of digital platforms as spaces for organizing, expressing solidarity, and countering exclusion. From anonymous Telegram channels in Iran to Instagram campaigns and communities like *HerGameToo* in the UK, digital spaces served as counterpublics where women could strategize, vent, and create change. These platforms offered emotional support, tactical advice, and visibility.

One British fan reflected, “Even if I’m alone in the stadium, I know there’s a thousand of us online watching, shouting, supporting.” Feminist solidarity took the form of “networked care” an empathetic, politicized mode of interaction that amplified individual experiences into collective action. In Iran, where physical presence was often impossible, digital sisterhood became the primary site for fandom and resistance.

**Symbolic Inclusion and Institutional Resistance**

Several UK participants acknowledged recent improvements in stadium infrastructure and female visibility in sports media. Anti-sexism campaigns, family zones, and inclusive messaging signaled change. However, many critiqued these shifts as tokenistic. While clubs promoted diversity for branding, decision-making structures remained dominated by men, and media representations of women often reinforced stereotypes rather than dismantling them (Delia et al., 2022; Grappendorf et al., 2023).

This critique underscores the difference between symbolic inclusion and substantive transformation. Representation is not enough without redistribution of power, access to resources, and a cultural shift that challenges masculine dominance in sports. As one fan noted, “Being seen isn’t the same as being heard or respected.”

**Everyday Feminism as Resistance**

Importantly, many participants did not label their actions as “feminist,” yet their practices revealed a deep political consciousness. Iranian fans shared safety tips, disguised their identities, and organized private fan spaces through WhatsApp. British fans designed banners, composed chants against sexism, and engaged in media critique. These activities reflect what scholars call *everyday feminism* resistance rooted in lived experience rather than ideological doctrine (Dietz et al., 2021; Agyemang et al., 2020).

This form of activism challenges the assumption that fandom is apolitical or trivial. Instead, it reveals sports culture as a vibrant arena where gender, identity, and power intersect. Women’s fandom becomes a cultural praxis that reclaims space, articulates belonging, and redefines what it means to be a fan in fallocentric and exclusionary arenas.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that female fandom is not a marginal addition to sports culture but a transformative force. Whether sneaking into stadiums, crying during national anthems, or building digital networks of solidarity, women engage fandom as both protest and pleasure redefining the stadium as a feminist space of resistance, community, and change.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has argued that female fandom especially in the contexts of Iran and the United Kingdom serves as a potent form of everyday feminism. Far from being peripheral, women’s presence in stadium culture constitutes a transformative political act. Through embodied defiance, affective expression, and digital solidarity, female fans disrupt fallocentric norms and reclaim public space as a site of belonging, resistance, and joy. For policymakers and sports institutions, these findings suggest the urgency of moving beyond tokenistic inclusion. Reforms must target structural inequalities by addressing harassment protocols, ensuring representation in fan governance, and supporting grassroots feminist fan movements. For instance, stadiums could incorporate gender-sensitive design, community liaisons, and participatory planning processes that center marginalized voices. At the grassroots level, feminist movements in sports should be supported as legitimate contributors to democratic life. Initiatives such as “HerGameToo” in the UK or underground fan networks in Iran show that fandom can serve as a launching pad for broader campaigns on gender justice, freedom of movement, and emotional citizenship. Future research should expand comparative analyses to other regions shaped by colonial histories, religious conservatism, or political repression. Moreover, the role of male allies and evolving masculinities in fan spaces deserves closer scrutiny. Ultimately, reclaiming the game is not just about physical access but about redefining what participation, visibility, and emotional legitimacy mean in global sport. Feminist fandom is not a footnote to sports culture it is rewriting the story from the stands.

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1. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic state governed by Twelver Shi’a jurisprudence, where religious doctrine directly informs public policy and gendered access to space. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)