

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN FOOTBALL. THE BULGARIAN CASE

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BORYANA ANGELOVA-IGOVA /
Боряна Ангелова-Игова
National Sports Academy, Bulgaria,
Department of Philosophy and Sociology of Sport /
Национална спортна академия, България,
Сектор Философия и социология на спорта
21 Acad. Stefan Mladenov Str., Studentski grad /
Ул. Акад. Стефан Младенов №21, Студентски град,
BG–1700 Sofia, Bulgaria /
1700 София, България
boryana_igova@nsa.bg
 orcid.org/0000-0003-3350-702X

KORNELIYA NAYDENOVA /
Корнелия Найденова
National Sports Academy, Bulgaria,
Department of Physical Education /
Национална спортна академия, България,
Сектор Физическо възпитание
21 Acad. Stefan Mladenov Str., Studentski grad /
Ул. Акад. Стефан Младенов №21, Студентски град,
BG–1700 Sofia, Bulgaria /
1700 София, България
knaidenova.nsa@gmail.com
 orcid.org/0000-0001-8084-1069

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This article aims to demonstrate the main problems that female football players in Bulgaria (we can say in most European countries) face in terms of employment, remuneration, media coverage and health support. With the help of a survey and in-depth interviews conducted with female football players, coaches and managers of women's and girl's teams, it was concluded that women in football (in Bulgaria, but elsewhere as well) often work without employment contracts, sponsorships are almost completely absent, no one interested in their media promotion, and motherhood and child-rearing is a private issue, with their clubs making no commitment to them after leaving the club, whether as a result of illness, injury, pregnancy, etc. Overcoming these issues is key to empowering women in sport and is a step towards gender equality.

Keywords: women's football, gender studies, physical education and sport, philosophy of sport, ethnology of sport

INTRODUCTION

Women's sport is a rapidly developing cultural field and the most visible and recognizable sign of the development of women's emancipation and empowerment in a given country. The research of women's sports in this sense can provide information not only about the state of one specific sport, but also shed light on the real position of women in society, the social role and responsibilities that follow.

The present study aims, by examining women's football in Bulgaria, in the context of European trends and problems visible in the same research field, to reveal the real situation of women who chose to engage in one of the most popular sports, considered a symbol of "masculine" culture. To what extent women manage to establish themselves in this area and achieve success is very debatable, but as we will see from the present study, there are positive examples, and we have clearly formulated problems and proposals for their solution. These solutions, in a broader sense, are also applicable to the solution of these same problems in any sphere of professional realization of women.

Similar studies in Bulgaria are rare. Up to this point, they present a historical follow-up of women's football and are a part of a more general study of the history of football in Bulgaria, as the studies of Borisov (2019), Ognyanov (2014, 2015), Angelova-Igova (2019) each devote a chapter to women's football. E. Atanasov (2013) makes the first, and so far only, in-depth study of women's football in Bulgaria, in his monograph "In the world of women's football". Dimitrov, Papapanayotou, and Genchev (2001) draw attention to the need for specific training of women football players, different from that of men. Kyurkchieva (2006, 2020) conducts ethnographic studies into the role of the woman next to the football player, and Yordanova (2014) pays special attention to female football fans.

So far, however, there is a lack of research that deals with the current state of female football players, their development as professionals and the difficulties they encounter in their work environment; difficulties which, dare we say, are also present in the other social roles that women encounter.

METHODOLOGY

In the period 2020-2023, with the support of the European Commission and the Erasmus+ Sport program, a European project was held in six European countries: Bulgaria, France, Finland, Spain, Poland, and United Kingdom. The project focused on women in football and how they can be empowered, seeking to improve their employment prospects, make them aware of their rights, and improve their media image, thus increasing their sponsors' and public support.

A number of studies were conducted in order to understand the problems that female football players have from the point of view of their physical performance (menstruation, pregnancy, raising children, labor-legal protection), contracts with teams and sponsors, and media coverage.

For this reason, we conducted a survey in the form of an electronic questionnaire, using Qualtrics software, which was translated from English into French, Spanish, Finnish, Bulgarian, and Polish. Participants gave their informed consent and agreed to complete the survey. All partners' clubs and associations oversaw the promotion and dissemination of surveys to the different actors through their own networks. Survey data was collected over a four-week period, from 17th March 2021 to 15th April 2021 (with an extension for collecting quantitative data until 5th May 2021 and to obtain further contacts for the focus groups). All data was anonymous. All follow-up contact details were password-protected on a computer, accessible only by the research team.

This article focuses and provides information on the research in Bulgaria. 44 women directly related to football took part in the survey: players, coaches, football managers.

The minimum age for survey respondents was 18 years. The average age of Bulgarian women participating in the research is 26.3, SD 5.8, maximum age 39.

Based on the conducted survey, we selected 10 women: 7 athletes, at different professional levels, and 3 coaches in different women's clubs. The average age of the competitors was 20 years, and 35 for the coaches. This indicator is important as very few of the examined persons were mothers and it was therefore difficult for them to answer the questions related to motherhood, raising children, and reconciling these activities with realizing their professional life. We assume that more problems would arise in this regard. The interviewees agreed to be named.

The focus of this article is to acquaint the academic community with the results of the survey and the in-depth interviews conducted in Bulgaria. Interestingly, they do not contrast with the results of the same studies carried out in other European countries.¹

According to our study, there is no particular difference between "East Europe" and "West Europe" in terms of the problems women have in football. The following emerged as general problems: legal problems (lack of contracts discriminating working conditions); the need for each club to have a men's and women's team; insufficient institutional, media and sponsorship support; inadequacy of training (specific women's needs are not taken into account).²

¹ E-WinS' first look at the final conclusions on best practices of European women in sport, URL: <https://e-wins.eu/2022/03/10/e-wins-first-look-at-the-final-conclusions-on-best-practices-of-european-women-in-sport/>

² Ibid.

There are local differences that will be pointed out further down in the article. We concluded that women in football often work without employment contracts, sponsorships and public promotion are largely absent, and when they lose their ability to work, they do not receive support from their teams.

The survey aimed to find out to what extent women knew their labor rights, could count on support in case of temporary loss of work (injury, pregnancy, maternity), to what extent they were treated in a special way and were worked with to alleviate their physical condition during menstruation. In elite sport, these ailments are essential, but as our research found, they are often overlooked or taboo within the team.

The extent to which football players receive media coverage on sports channels and social networks was also of interest to the researchers. Promoting women's sport, and football in particular, is important in order to set a good example. For 2023, Forbes magazine announced that football player Nadia Nadim was among the most influential women football players on the planet. She was born in Afghanistan. Her father was killed by the Taliban when she was 11 and her family fled to Denmark in the back of a truck. Nadia has scored almost 200 goals in professional football and represented the Danish national team on 98 occasions. She has finished medical school and is studying to become a reconstructive surgeon when her playing days are over. She speaks 11 languages and is cited as one of the best role models for young women. It is important, however, to what extent these stories of female footballers are covered in the media and accessible to a wider audience. Therefore, understanding the ways in which women can promote their activities is essential.

According to the conducted survey and in-depth interviews, we did not notice any contradictions between the two, and in both cases, we used standardized questionnaires developed by the team of scientists working in the project.³

LEGAL ISSUES: LACK OF CONTRACTS, DISCRIMINATING CONTRACTS

After a documentary study and as a result of the interviews with the contestants and the conducted survey, it became clear that female football players in Bulgaria do not work on employment contracts, and are instead offered part time contracts. Therefore, female contestants are not insured, and in case of temporary incapacity, they do not

³ E-WinS' first look at the final conclusions on best practices of European women in sport, URL: <https://e-wins.eu/partners-new/>

receive any social support. Clubs do not make any commitments to them if they are not active players. Some of the coaches are also on part time contracts.

According to Valentina Gospodinova, a woman coach interviewed for the purposes of this research, this is also the main problem in retaining women in football. "There are many talented and successful female footballers at a younger age, but they give up early, they don't get into women's teams because a lot is demanded from them, and in reality they can't even count on getting their fees on time."

Diana Petrakieva is a former NSA player, having won 15 national titles as a player, with experience as a coach in the girls' teams of FC Sofia Ladies, FC Baroko, FC NSA, and currently coaches the newly formed FFC Levski Sofia. Despite her success as a player and coach, she works in university administration to supplement her budget.

In Spain and UK, women footballers have more professional contracts, but they are obliged, when signing an employment contract, to comply with requirements such as: not to become pregnant, not to practice other sports, not to put themselves at risk, not to play for their national teams. These requirements make the contract easy to terminate if the club wishes.

Simona Petkova is one of the most successful Bulgarian football players. She competed for FC NSA Sofia, then played in England for Leeds United Women and Watford Women. She then moved to Italy where she competed for Pink Bari, Empoli Women and San Marino Academy. Since 2020, she has been playing in the first league of the Swiss Women's Championship for Lugano Women, Young Boys Women, and currently plays for FC Aarau. She has won the Woman Footballer of Bulgaria award in 2021 and 2022. She is one of the few who have worked on an employment contract with top teams with worldwide reputations. According to her, the problem of motherhood has not been solved anywhere: "If they find out I'm pregnant, they just won't renew their contract with me at the end of the year. A colleague of mine got pregnant and that's exactly what happened, she didn't sign a contract for next year and I don't know if she's playing football professionally".

European legislation assumes that every person who works on an employment contract must pay the corresponding insurances, so that in the case of maternity, illness, etc. they could receive support from the country in which it is provided. The problem we found with our research is that labor contracts are a big exception in Bulgarian women's football. As a result of the lack of a contract and the failure to pay the necessary insurances, many women remain without social support after they stop playing football. For women in sports, this is a serious problem because their work is associated with a higher risk of injury and permanent damage to health. Very often, due to unpaid insurance, they cannot receive healthcare through the Health Insurance Fund and have to pay for everything themselves.

A good example is the Polish team FC Prądniczanka, in which, in order to tackle this problem and keep women in sports even after the end of their competitive career, women are appointed to the administration of the team, the federation, become referees, etc. They have a special program for employment of women players.⁴

EACH CLUB OBLIGED TO HAVE MEN'S AND WOMEN'S DIVISIONS

According to our research, for women's teams it is best to be of mixed type, i.e. for each club to have both a male and female team. In Bulgaria, similar to international circumstances, this trend is legitimized in an ordinance, which is starting to have a normative character. The National Club Licensing Ordinance of the Bulgarian Football Union (BFS) from May 2022 introduced Article 18 "A", titled "Activity in support of women's football".⁵ UEFA tournaments and/or the First Professional League must support women's football by implementing measures and activities aimed at the development, professionalization, and promotion of women's football.⁶ Three optional activities are indicated for each club. The first option is the inclusion of women's and/or girls' team in official competitions. The second option is to provide support to a women's football club associated with the license applicant. The third option is to organize women's football initiatives. The requirement comes into effect from the upcoming 2023/2024 sports competition year, and is issued with an advisory character for the teams in the Second Professional League.⁷

According to Zlatka Gaberova, the coach of the women's team of Lokomotiv Plovdiv, one of the interviewed coaches, the fact that they are part of a well-known Bulgarian team that has many supporters, a team with a tradition and an established brand is good because they receive more support. For years, the fans of teams in Bulgaria have not included only men, there are also many women who are very devoted to their team. According to the research of Kremena Yordanova (2014) "Don't underestimate the girls, some of them are bigger ultras than you", female fans are far from being only wives and daughters of fans of the team, but have personal interest in football, know a lot about the team and the game, and are there for the love of football (Yordanova 2014).

"It would be nice if every team had both a women's and a girls' team, just like the men's and juniors, so we can be sure that women will be represented and supported. (...)

⁴ URL: <http://www.pradniczanka.krakow.pl/> (accessed November 2023).

⁵ URL: <https://bfunion.bg/Library> (accessed November 2023).

⁶ URL: https://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/uefaorg/Womensfootball/02/60/51/38/2605138_DOWNLOAD.pdf (accessed November 2023).

⁷ URL: <https://bfunion.bg/> (accessed August 21, 2023).

The problem is that not enough attention is paid to the women's teams, even when they show better results than the men from the same club", says Zlatka Gaberova.

Research has shown that there is a worldwide trend towards developing clubs to have equally strong men's and women's teams. A good example in this regard is FC Paris Saint Germain where the club pays the same remuneration to men and women⁸ (Abouna 2018).

In Bulgaria, the most competitive teams are still mostly only female. This is also revealed in the results of the survey. However, in recent years we have seen the emergence of clubs that develop both men's and women's teams. One such example is Lokomotiv Stara Zagora. The club has been developing its women's department for several years. The men's team of the club competes in the fourth level of men's football in the country, and the women have already become champions of Bulgaria for two consecutive years, in 21/22 and 22/23. Another example is FC Pirin Blagoevgrad, competing in the First Professional Women's League, and forming a women's team competing in the Women's State Championship for 3 seasons.

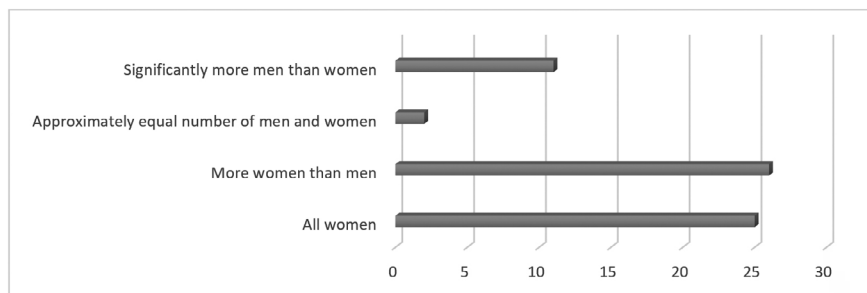


Figure 1: Ratio between men and women in clubs⁹

A peculiarity in the formation and development of women's football clubs which currently participate in the championships for women and girls is the fact that all of them, with the exception of Lokomotiv Plovdiv, appear and develop independently of men's football clubs. Looking back in time at the establishing of women's football in Bulgaria and its development until the end of the state socialist era, almost all women's teams were established as part of men's sports clubs, such as Academic, CSKA, Danube, and others. That was a consequence of purposeful state policies. Today, there is a return to this policy. In the last 20 years, the emergence and development of women's football

⁸ However, the PSG men receive more advertising and sponsorship contracts, therefore are significantly better paid

⁹ The research in Bulgaria was conducted between January and May 2021.

clubs is a consequence of the personal interest of individuals who have played football in the past. Such examples are the teams from the cities of Varna, Stara Zagora, Sevlievo, Burgas, and others.

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S TEAMS AND ADEQUACY OF THE TRAINING PROCESS

Valentina Gospodinova is the coach of FC NSA girls' team. FC NSA is a university team, it is not part of the leading teams with a long history and tradition, such as CSKA, Levski, Lokomotiv, Ludogorets, etc., but in terms of women's football, it is one of the most successful teams with 18 State Championships won, one in 1991 and the rest in 17 consecutive years from 2005 to 2021. According to Gospodinova, "this is due to the support it receives from the National Sports Academy. The girls have the opportunity to train on some of the best grass stadiums, with outstanding specialists. They have the support and good example of the previous generations of football players."

Elena Stambolieva, who plays for FC NSA, regrets that the men's university team is not as good as the women's team. "Often the men from FC NSA are amateurs and play worse football than us, that's because those who are good, play for a lot of money. A male football player in Bulgaria, even if he plays for a village team, receives a salary above the national average. We women are among the best in Bulgaria, but we don't get paid. We rely on royalties and prizes from competitions."

On a global scale, a serious problem is the lack of female coaches. Even when it comes to women's teams, the coaches are often men. This would not be a problem if girls and women did not share their anxiety about discussing topics related to their monthly ailments with men (Forsyth 2022).

According to the research of Mileva (2012) and Zhelyazkova-Koynova (2002), adolescent athletes need specialized training. In this regard, women have a better approach to girl and child athletes. Whether this is a result of the dominant culture or a natural maternal instinct is unclear, but a serious need for more female coaches to work with children and girls exists, at a higher level as well. However, our research shows that female football coaches are very rare.

According to the three coaches, and according to our survey and interviews with football players, female players share problems related to their female ailments more easily with female coaches. Gabriela Naydenova from FC Lokomotiv Stara Zagora, the team who won the State Championship in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, would not allow herself to comment on health problems of a similar nature with the coach or the sports doctor. If the

coach was a woman, she would have been more inclined to describe her problems.

The main problem in Bulgaria, which turned out to be the same in Poland (Zmuda Palka and Gang 2023), is that women football players are considered amateurs, not professionals. A very small proportion of women work on employment contracts and have the relevant institutional support. The success of FC NSA Women is often explained by the fact that girls enroll as students in individual training, receive education, scholarships and, although symbolic, such social privileges have an impact, and the best female football players compete for the team.

According to our survey, a very small part of football players in Bulgaria are involved in football exclusively, i.e. when football is their profession. Even female coaches often need to rely on extra work to make a decent living.

It is also typical for women's football in Bulgaria that the athletes often combine their training and competitive activities with studies or work; in some cases, the girls even train and play football, work, and study all at the same time. Those results are presented in figure 2. Only 20 of the female players surveyed indicated that they only play football.

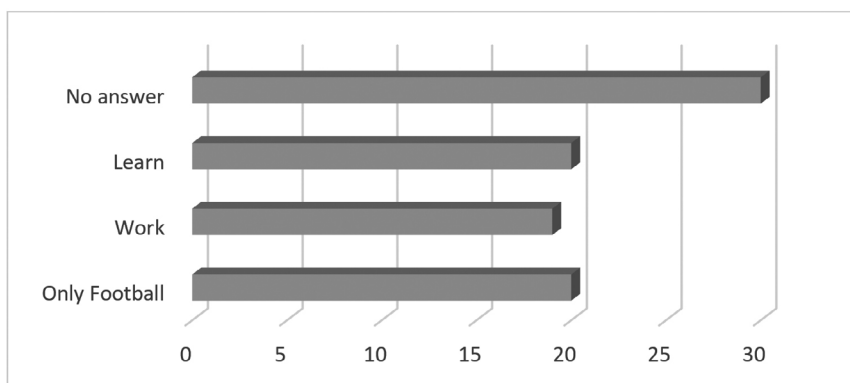


Figure 2: Do you do anything other than football?

Sometimes the lack of adequate training and performance of female competitors is not only the reason that they are not prepared for a more serious professional appearance at the international level, but is also used as an argument to pay them less. One of the reasons why women are paid less is that they train less than men and participate in fewer championships. However, this is the result of the inadequate management of women's football and the neglect of women's achievements. It is a fact that women in Bulgaria rarely train professionally and with the intensity necessary to achieve major sporting success. This cuts off their opportunity to appear on the world stage and win prestigious international titles. From the conducted interviews with athletes and personal observations, as part of

the E-wins project, we found that only 3 of the teams participating in the women's football championship have a regular training process. In the other teams, only a part of the athletes participates in the training days, 3 to 7 of the individual exercises, as their presence is determined by their main preoccupation, work or study. Also, these teams hold at most 3 training sessions per week, as basically almost the whole team gathers for training the day before the match. This approach in the training process is the reason why only 2 to 3 high-level matches between prepared and equal teams are played in the state championship. This is obvious from the 17-year run of dominance by the NSA team (2005 to 2021) (Naydenova and Angelova-Igova 2022:54).

In the last 10 years, tournaments for women and girls have been held. Their participation was necessitated by the need to select girls for the national teams under 17 and 19 years. At the moment, there are tournaments for girls divided in the following ages: the U 17 has three groups of ten teams; U 15 two groups - thirteen teams; U 13 four groups - twenty teams. It is noteworthy that in the championships for juveniles, there are many more teams and athletes than in women's championships. Very few of the girls continue to compete in the women's competition, because there is a lack of financial support, so they prefer not to be professionally involved in football and look for professional fulfillment in other better-paid fields.

The state championship for women, as well as the three championships for underage girls are organized by the Sofia Zonal Council and the Women's Football Commission of the Football Union. According to the Bulgarian Football Union, in the 2018/2019 season, the number of registered players in the various championships for women and girls over the age of 18 was 522, and 2536 under this age. So far, all football players have the status of amateurs.

In practice, only female athletes from big clubs can compete at a high level and have professional growth. Girls from small towns with small clubs, no matter how good they are and how talented they are, cannot make it beyond their county borders because they do not have the opportunity for more serious competition and more significant championships. This is a problem for both players and clubs. In this sense, if they are part of men's clubs, they will have clearer match regulation and opportunities.

MEDIA COVERAGE AND PROMOTION OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Another part of our research was devoted to media coverage of women. Football in Bulgaria, and in most of the world, is an extremely popular game. Football players receive huge fees from deals with sponsors, while clubs profit from selling television rights to

broadcast the matches. However, women are nowhere near as popular as men. In our opinion, the interest in women's football could be significantly improved with more media coverage of women's championships and if female footballers were more often featured in the media. Teams have public relations officials who take care of the image of the team and the competitors. However, such specialists are missing from the women's teams, or they deal only with the men's team.

Women's football is featured on one of the country's sports websites, www.sportal.bg. The site live broadcasts one match of the women's football championship every week. This statement of ours is also supported by the football players we have interviewed. According to women footballers, as we can see in the result of our survey, women are not equally represented in the media. 41 % answered that are not equal at all, only 7 % think that are extremely equal, 20 % are not sure 17% think that are not equal and 15 % feel equally presented.

Despite this data, the Bulgarian women's teams are among the few that receive television coverage and their matches are broadcast live. Sports channels, such as Diema Sport, Sportal.bg and B1B TV, live broadcast their matches.

Globally, we are witnessing a growing interest in women's championships. An example of this is the Women's World Cup 2023. The semi-final match of the Women's World Cup between Australia and England (lost by the Australian women 1:3) became the most watched live telecast in the Australian history.¹⁰ 42% of Australians (over 11 million people) watched the match on television. This number does not include the people who watched the match through various streaming channels on the internet. The "Matildas" have become Australia's favorite team and a true inspiration for the next generations. Sometime later, again at the world championship, a new milestone was reached. Almost two million people visited the stadiums of the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. This is, of course, a new record – but what is more impressive is that the previous record has been surpassed by over 600,000 more visitors (over 30%).¹¹ Five of the ten most attended women's matches in the history of the World Cup were held at this tournament.

According to our research, most women in football (not only in Bulgaria, but also in the countries where the research was conducted) rely on social networks to promote their activities (Leiva-Arcas and Sánchez-Pato 2022). Given that the younger generation prefers the internet over mainstream media, this also shows a new trend towards an increasing interest in women's football. However, this creates a gap between generations. Fathers will have a harder time watching their daughters play football, and the experience will not be as

¹⁰ URL: <https://keepup.com.au/a-league-women/> (accessed August 21, 2023).

¹¹ Ibid.

much of a family celebration and ritual as it is between fathers and sons. Nevertheless, the positive trend is present.

CONCLUSION

Women in football face serious problems in all three areas investigated: labor rights, media coverage and healthcare and support. In particular, labor rights and healthcare are not only a problem for women's football, but for women in general, as they are in many ways disadvantaged in terms of less comprehensive insurance, and, as this problem could also be relevant for men in some unpopular sports, then motherhood and menstruation can be noted as typically women's problems. Raising children, motherhood, for which women receive financial support from the state if they have insurance, but do not receive pension insurance (this is the case for the whole of Europe), are mainly women's problems. In the case of sports, pregnancy and motherhood further complicate professional realization because they hinder performance. In order to keep women in sports, specific protection and assistance programs are required.

In order to develop women's football, or any "new" field for women, it should be treated as new, and the approved practices for men should not be applied to it.

Another serious problem discussed in our research is the so-called "equal treatment of men and women in sport" in terms of physical exertion, training, and expectations. Men and women are not the same, they should have equal rights, but the requirements for them should be developed according to their sex differences. Especially in sports, the sex distinction should be very clear. Women can develop their skills in any sport, but according to their feminine characteristics. Menstruation, specific body characteristics, loopholes in the law, the macho environment that surrounds them, all of this should be considered, and women should be compensated.

In conclusion, we can say that after we have outlined the main irregularities in women's football, we have the opportunity to overcome them through various training, guidelines, online platforms available to all coaches and managers by popularizing good examples.

Overcoming inequalities between men and women is possible and ethically, economically and politically necessary. Therefore, there is a need for good insight into the situation and problems to propose possible solutions. We hope that the present study of a small part of the female world can serve as a step towards solving these global problems for women.

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*Boryana Angelova-Igova
Korneliya Naydenova*

Cilj je ovoga članka pokazati glavne probleme s kojima se nogometašice u Bugarskoj (može se reći i u većini europskih zemalja) suočavaju u pogledu zaposlenja, plaće, medijske pokrivenosti i zdravstvene podrške. Uz pomoć ankete i dubinskih intervjua provedenih s nogometašicama, trenericama i menadžericama ženskih i djevojačkih momčadi, zaključeno je da žene u nogometu (i ne samo u Bugarskoj) često rade bez ugovora o zaposlenju, bez sponzorstava, bez interesa za njihovu medijsku promociju. Majčinstvo i odgoj djece privatno je pitanje, a njihovi klubovi ne preuzimaju nikakve obveze prema njima nakon odlaska iz kluba zbog bolesti, ozljede, trudnoće itd. Svladavanje ovih problema ključno je za pojačavanje uloge žena u sportu i korak je prema rodnoj ravnopravnosti.

Ključne riječi: *ženski nogomet, rodni studiji, fizičko obrazovanje i sport, filozofija sporta, etnologija sporta*



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