

# THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract.** *In Romania, women's football has not enjoyed a development that could ensure this sport a high level of competitiveness. During the communist period, women's football existed rather at an amateur level, and while the Golden Generation of Romanian men's football was getting results at international competitions in the 1990s, women's football was barely starting to be formalised. The purpose of this study is to analyse the perception of female football players on different aspects of their professional life. The sample consisted of 126 women with ages between 12 and 34 years (with a mean age of 18), who completed an online questionnaire with 24 items. The statistical analysis was both quantitative (SPSS) and qualitative (NVivo). Respondents were asked to rate various aspects that interfered with the sports profession (family, society, opportunities, football career) and, although 30% already had a job in sports-related fields, some of them still wanted to focus on other areas of activity. Also, the identification of players with this type of sport shows the highest agreement, with an average of 4.59, and the opportunities for women in this field are considered better than ever, with an average score of 3.56, both items in range 1 to 5. The results emphasise that Romanian women's football has experienced a significant increase during the last years, but the main problem identified in this sports sector remains the inequality in terms of media coverage and finance as compared to men's sport.*

**Keywords:** *women's football, social context, Romania, football player, status.*

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## Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, the development of women's football was different from that of men's football in Romania, which has been highlighted over time by their modest competitive performance and the low number of studies conducted in this field of research.

One of the reasons why women's football has not enjoyed the same successful course is the social mentality about an activity predominantly considered a men's rather than a women's sport, which has led to supporting, promoting and attracting investment to men's football teams.

The development of women's football in Romania could not ensure a high competitive level for two main reasons: a first aspect is related to the fact that, in the communist period, women's football was rather amateur in nature, not being validated as a professional sport by

the governing regime at that time; secondly, while the Golden Generation of Romanian men's football was getting results at international competitions in the 1990s, women's football was barely starting to be formalised. In this context, major financial investments went to men's football despite local efforts to consolidate women's football in Romanian cities (Braşov, Craiova, Bucharest, etc.).

Over time, the women's national football championship has undergone many changes as regards the number of participating teams (there were 12 at first), the series of which it was composed (in the 2011-2012 season, it was divided into two series - east and west, and then, since 2012, it has been divided into three series) and also its name (the 2013-2014 season was the first edition named the Romanian Super League).

Unlike men's football, women's football did not enjoy the same interest from specialised institutions in Romania until 2014, when this sport has become a strategic objective of the Romanian Football Federation (FRF) and the Professional Football League (LPF) as a result of reforming the competitive system, increasing the number of female players and making investments in this sector as well. The most important regulation imposed by the FRF was to require men's football clubs in League 1 "to integrate a women's team in their structure" (Valenti et al., 2021), and this strategy was adopted by many European countries. In Romania, this reform policy, along with many other programmes focused on the selection of children and juniors, has proven to be suitable for increasing the number of female football players but insufficiently stimulating to attract sponsors.

The integrative review of women's football research conducted by Valenti et al. (2018) shows that this sport played by female athletes has mainly been investigated through qualitative (sociological and historical) studies based on interviews and document analysis, which is why the number of quantitative data is relatively limited, unlike men's football where a multitude of quantitative statistics and measurements are available to the public. Kirkendall and Krstrup (2021) also point out that studies on training and performance in women's football represent only 25% of the literature dedicated to this sport played by women. A recent study on women's football research carried out by Okholm Kryger et al. (2021) shows that most scientific papers continue to focus on the sociological aspects of this sport played by female athletes, and a much smaller number of studies investigate the performance, sports medicine, strength and fitness specific to women's football.

In order to achieve the objective of our research, namely analysing the social context and the development of women's football in Romania, we will examine the qualitative and quantitative data obtained from a questionnaire survey completed by female football players participating in the Romanian national championship.

Although the interest in elite football is huge at world level, only a small part of the scientific work and research conducted in the last 15 years has focused on women's football, unlike the attention paid to men's football. However, the massive increase in popularity of women's football in recent years, especially during the 2019 Women's World Cup that took place in France, has turned the researchers' attention to this sport played by female athletes.

*Hypothesis:* Perceptions of gender inequality in football vary depending on the age of female players.

## Methodology

### Participants

The research sample consists of 126 female football players with an average age of 18 years; 85.7% of them have between 1 and over 10 years of a competitive experience, and only 14.3% have less than 1 year of experience in professional football. The questionnaire was administered to respondents in collaboration with the football coaches. The participation was voluntary and anonymous.

### Methods

The research methods used were: documentation, questionnaire survey, mathematical statistics and graphical representation.

In Romania, studies on women’s football provide a modest literature in terms of both qualitative and quantitative scientific data. Briefly, the literature review of Romanian women’s football over time reveals the following key moments (Figure 1) (Arhiva Fotbalistelor [Archive of Female Footballers], 2021):

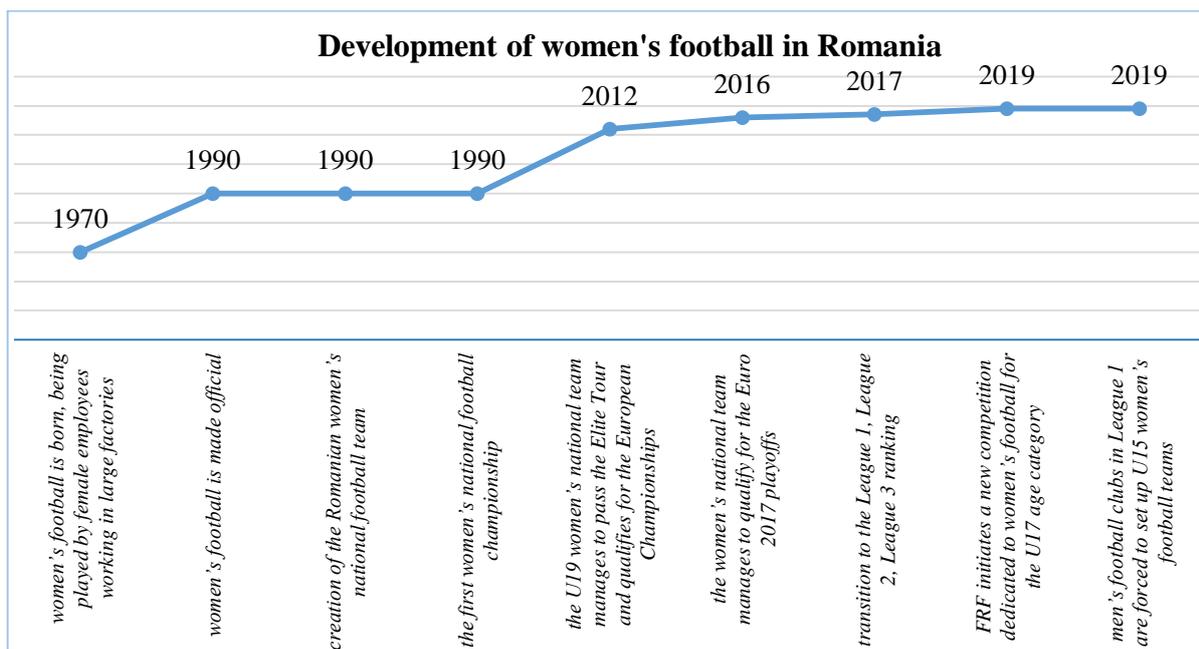


Figure 1. Development of women’s football in Romania

The research participants were administered online questionnaires using the Google Drive platform through Google Forms. The questionnaire was structured in several parts designed to provide an overview of the female football players’ lives so that the data analysis could identify the respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics and provide general information on their football experience; it also aimed at obtaining particular data about the satisfaction

with choosing the football career, the work-family balance, challenges in playing this type of sport and future career opportunities.

The description of the research sample was made using nominal variables such as age, profession, school level and other demographic variable, the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents were measured using ordinal type variables in order to evaluate satisfaction degree with different aspects such as profession or status using the Likert Scale, and the interval type measurements as age allowed making correlations between variables.

## Results and Discussion

The questionnaire was completed by 126 Romanian football club members participating in women’s national championship. The first part of the questionnaire provided general data on their age, level of education and professional status. Thus, the respondents’ average age was 18 years, the youngest being aged 12, and the oldest, 34 (Table 1). Most of the professional players who responded to the questionnaire were 14 years old, which indicates the increased interest and involvement of a category of young girls in this sport.

Table 1. Age of respondents

Age	
Average age	18
Most common age	14
Minimum age	12
Maximum age	34

The level of education increases with the age of respondents; thus, the average age of those with university studies is 27.62 years, while the average age of primary school graduates is 13.54 years. Most of them have a middle-school background (32%), and only 1% of players have no educational background (Figure 2 and Table 2).

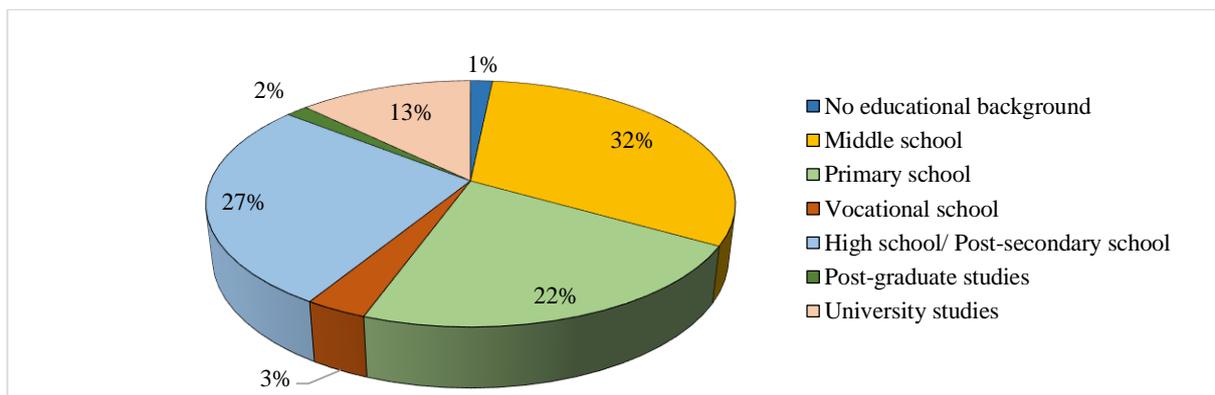


Figure 2. Last school attended

Table 2. Association between age and educational background

	Average age	N	Standard deviation
No educational background	20.00	2	4.243
Middle school	15.45	40	1.358
Primary school	13.54	28	.637
Vocational school	19.00	4	4.000
High school/Post-secondary school	19.79	34	4.036
Post-graduate studies	31.00	2	2.828
University studies	27.62	16	3.845
Total	18.17	126	5.420

Figure 3 suggests, on the one hand, an upward trend in football practice, but on the other hand, it can be seen that the number of female players decreases over time, with only 13.5% of respondents having more than 10 years of experience in this sport.

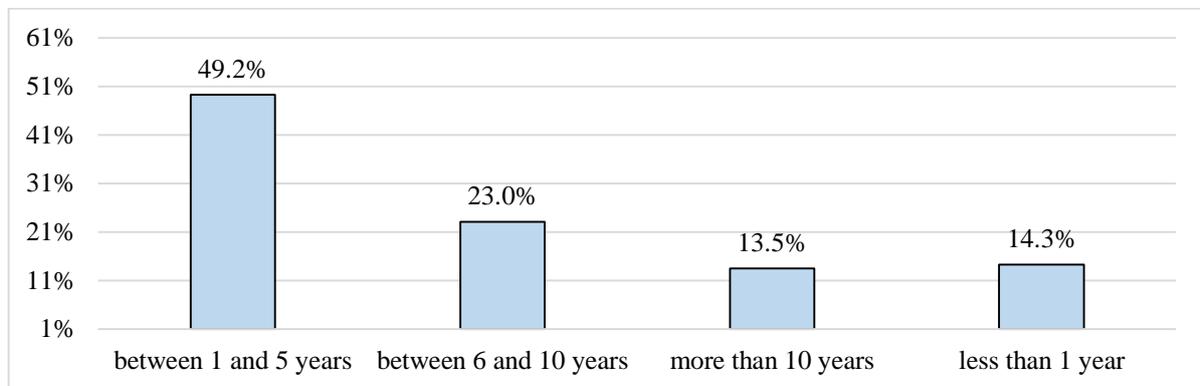


Figure 3. Years of experience in football practice

Professional situation describes the status of female players in the labour market; thus, most female respondents are school or university students (77.8%), followed by full-time employees (15%), indicating that they need a job although they are professional football players (Figure 4).

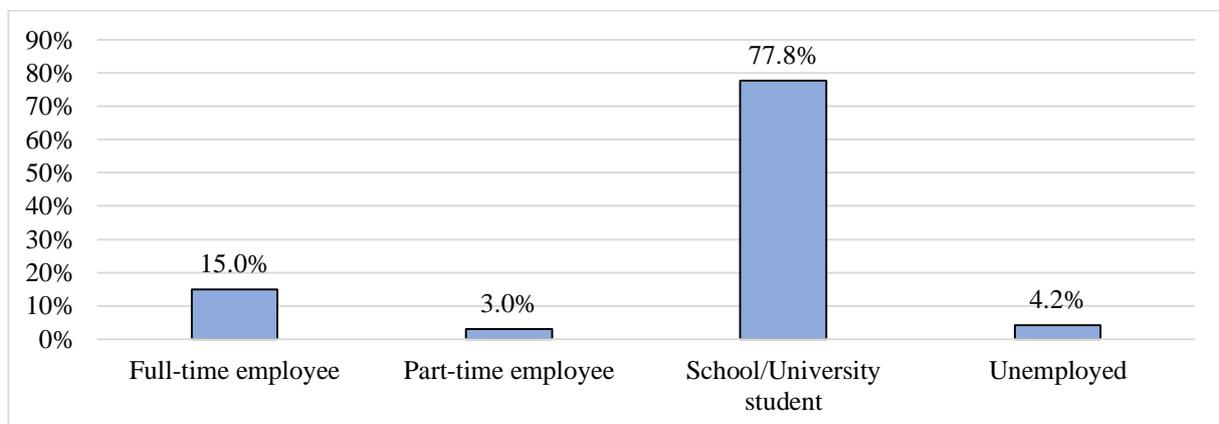


Figure 4. Professional situation

Most respondents play football at least 4-5 times a week, and analysing the association between age and training frequency, it is noted that the frequency of workouts increases with age (Figure 5). This is supported by the fact that female players aged 19 years on average are engaged in several national and international competitions where the stakes are higher. Thus, the performance demands are different depending on the elite sport practised (Bangsbo, 2015), and implementing individualised (high-intensity or endurance) aerobic training for women involved in elite football is all the more necessary as the physical challenges they have to face become higher in international games (Andersson et al., 2010). A study by Larkin et al. (2015) shows that there is a difference in performance between two similarly talented athletes, which arises from the amount of time that each of them devotes to practice to achieve their goals. Thus, the coach can identify athletes who are willing to devote more time to training for their development as elite athletes (Olmedilla et al., 2019), and in women’s football, this is even more important as the need to have a job can reduce the time spent on training.

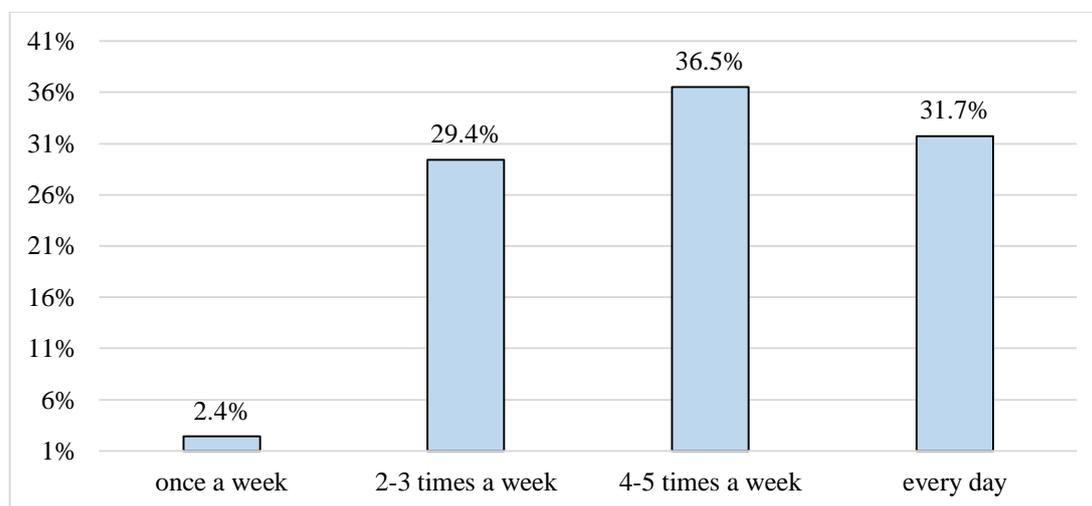


Figure 5. Frequency of football practice

Table 3. Association between respondents’ age and training frequency

How often do you play this sport per week (training, matches)?	Average age	N	Standard deviation
once a week	24.00	3	9.539
2-3 times a week	16.97	37	5.167
4-5 times a week	17.74	46	5.798
every day	19.35	40	4.521
Total	18.17	126	5.420

As noted by Scraton et al. (1999), “the organization of youth sport is identified as a crucial factor in influencing girls’ and young women’s opportunities to play football”. Thus, based on the fact that women’s football has an upward trend (most of our female respondents are school and university students playing this sport for 1 to 5 years), we can consider that this

growth has been determined by the FRF strategies implemented in recent years for the development of this sector. Thus:

- in 2014, the first U15 junior female competition is organised with regional and national phases;

- since 2015, the Romanian Football Federation has taken part in the FIFA-supported project called “Live Your Goals”, which aims to increase the attractiveness of women’s football and the number of female players; according to the strategy adopted by the FRF (n.d.), women’s football had a promising trend between 2014 and 2019, and 26 new teams were registered in women’s competitions during 2020 compared to 2014;

- in 2019, the Romanian Football Federation has initiated a new competition dedicated to U17 women’s football, and 27 teams participated in the 2021 Edition of the Junior League;

- one of the most important strategies for the development of women’s football in Romania was adopted by the decision of the FRF Executive Committee of 3 July 2019, according to which men’s football clubs in League I were forced to set up U15 women’s football teams starting with the 2020-2021 season in order to be licensed. This led the League 1 teams (approximately 10) to both set up their own women’s football teams and conclude collaboration protocols with already existing teams, so that 144 women’s football teams competed in 2020 compared to 43 in 2014.

Table 4 shows the extent to which the following statements on gender equality reflect the views of female football players.

Table 4. *Gender equality in the opinion of female football players*

Likert Scale	Statements					
	Career opportunities in this field are better than ever for women	Women who choose this career have a more difficult job than men with the same career	Development opportunities in this field are the same for women and men	Women’s performance in the field is as recognised by others as men’s performance	Female athletes are as well paid as men in this field	Female football players are as well paid as male football players
Agree	24.6	35.7	16.7	6.3	7.1	4.8
Fully agree	11.9	16.7	10.3	5.6	.8	.8
Disagree	23.8	7.9	20.6	34.1	24.6	21.4
Fully disagree	2.4	2.4	26.2	38.1	51.6	57.9
Neither agree nor disagree	37.3	37.3	26.2	15.9	15.9	15.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Respondents show the strongest disagreement with the statement that *Female football players are as well paid as male football players*, the average score being 1.81 in range 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree). However, they have a positive outlook on this field, thinking that career opportunities for female football players are better than ever, with an average score of 3.56 (Table 4).

For example, the ratio of men’s and women’s average salary was 27 in France, in 2019. Specifically, the total budget for League 1 (French Men’s National Football Championship) was 1.9 billion euro, while the budget allocated in the same year for Division 1 (French Women’s National Football Championship) was only 19 million euro, which is 100 times less. Economic analysts Arrondel and Duhautois (2020) explain the main causes of gender

inequality in pay. Thus, an important aspect is that most clubs do not make enough profit, and the main expenses are related to the remuneration of athletes, but the level of their salaries depends on the club budgets, which in turn are dependent on TV rights and sponsorships.

In recent years, the increased budget for Division 1 of women's football in France has been due to the media interest in this sports sector, which has led to a considerable increase in club revenues. However, women's football clubs still fail to fully cover their financial needs. For women's football teams supported by men's teams, the financial deficit was covered by professional clubs, as noted by Arrondel and Duhautois (2020). On the other hand, Archer and Prange (2019) show that the development of this sports sector would be accelerated, in terms of both professional recognition and performance, if larger amounts of money were invested in the professionalization of women's football.

Table 5. Average scores for the perception of gender equality in sport

Statements	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error
Career opportunities in this field are better than ever for women	126	3.20	1.012	.090
Women who choose this career have a more difficult job than men with the same career	126	3.56	.942	.084
Development opportunities in this field are the same for women and men	126	2.64	1.311	.117
Women's performance in the field is as recognised by others as men's performance	126	2.07	1.140	.102
Female athletes are as well paid as men in this field	126	1.81	1.002	.089
Female football players are as well paid as male football players	126	1.69	.950	.085

Note: Average scores were calculated in range 1 (full disagreement) to 5 (full agreement).

Table 6. Correlation between age and opinions on financial equality

		I feel that I am paid as well as others in my field	Age
I feel that I am paid as well as others in my field	Pearson Correlation	1	-.390**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		< .001
	N	126	126
Age	Pearson Correlation	-.390**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	
	N	126	126

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 shows a negative correlation between age and perceptions of equal pay, in the sense that the older the respondents, the more they believe that there is inequality in the way women and men are paid. This confirms the hypothesis that 'Perceptions of gender inequality in football vary depending on the age of female players'.

Table 7. Correlations regarding women's perception of gender equality

		Statements					
		Career opportunities in this field are better than ever for women	Women who choose this career have a more difficult job than men with the same career	Development opportunities in this field are the same for women and men	Women's performance in the field is as recognised by others as men's performance	Female athletes are as well paid as men in this field	Female football players are as well paid as male football players
Career opportunities in this field are better than ever for women	Pearson	1	.175*	.379**	.383**	.314**	.281**
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.049	< .001	< .001	< .001	.001
	N	126	126	126	126	126	126
Women who choose this career have a more difficult job than men with the same career	Pearson	.175*	1	-.056	.007	.030	-.009
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.049		.534	.939	.740	.919
	N	126	126	126	126	126	126
Development opportunities in this field are the same for women and men	Pearson	.379**	-.056	1	.606**	.265**	.353**
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	.534		< .001	.003	< .001
	N	126	126	126	126	126	126
Women's performance in the field is as recognised by others as men's performance	Pearson	.383**	.007	.606**	1	.545**	.641**
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	.939	< .001		< .001	< .001
	N	126	126	126	126	126	126
Female athletes are as well paid as men in this field	Pearson	.314**	.030	.265**	.545**	1	.778**
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	.740	.003	< .001		< .001
	N	126	126	126	126	126	126
Female football players are as well paid as male football players	Pearson	.281**	-.009	.353**	.641**	.778**	1
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.919	< .001	< .001	< .001	
	N	126	126	126	126	126	126

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is a strong positive correlation between the perception that development opportunities in this field are the same for women and men and that women's performance in the field is as recognised by others as men's performance, with a correlation coefficient of .606 in range (Table 7).

Respondents who believe that female athletes are as well paid as men in this field have a positive opinion on the statement that women who play football are as well paid as men who play this sport, and therefore there is a strong positive correlation between the two variables, with a correlation coefficient of .778 (Table 8).

The COVID-19 pandemic had the greatest impact on the physical condition of female players, with 38.9% of them claiming that this aspect had deteriorated. The consequences of the pandemic on the physical condition of athletes have been reported in numerous scientific studies (Teodorescu et al., 2021). Thus, Clarkson et al. (2022) call on academics to analyse the side effects caused by the health crisis on elite women's football in historical, sociological and economic terms but also from a managerial and psychological point of view. According to the above authors, the COVID-19 pandemic found this sports sector in an already precarious situation due to lack of infrastructure, low salaries and very poor conditions compared to those in men's football clubs, outlining that there is no solid support for women's football.

Our research shows that, in Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic consequences with the lowest impact refer to financial benefits, 63.5% of respondents claiming that they have remained the same (Table 9).

Table 9. *Consequences of the pandemic*

	Specify how the aspects related to your sports activity have been affected by the COVID-19							
	Training conditions	Financial benefits	Interaction with team members	Individual performance	Group performance	Unity and group cohesion	Players' physical condition and shape	Visibility of women's football
Similar	62.7	63.5	54.0	50.8	54.0	61.1	33.3	40.5
Better	11.1	4.8	14.3	31.0	21.4	18.3	27.8	22.2
Worse	26.2	31.7	31.7	18.3	24.6	20.6	38.9	37.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

A study conducted by the International Federation of Professional Footballers (FIFPRO, 2020) shows that, in 47% of the countries included in the research, the salaries of female football players have been either substantially reduced or completely cancelled. The results of this study published on the FIFPRO platform on 11 November 2020 indicate that 40% of respondents have not received any psychological or financial support from their clubs.

## Conclusion

Women's football in Romania has had a significant upward trend since 2014 due to the policies and measures imposed by the Romanian Football Federation and two international governing bodies, FIFA and UEFA, in order to increase the visibility of this sports branch involving female athletes, attract sponsors and raise the number of children and junior players. Currently, the number of women's football teams at national level is 3 times higher than in 2014, namely 144 teams, and the number of women's competitions is 7 due to the establishment of new junior teams. In this regard, the most important strategy adopted at national level for the development of women's football is the obligation for men's clubs in League 1 to set up women's teams, as required by the Romanian Football Federation in 2019.

Although most respondents believe that career opportunities for female football players are better than ever, it is noted that gender inequality in pay, media promotion and other socio-professional issues are less perceived by junior athletes playing in women's football teams. However, as they get older, these differences between women's and men's football are perceived much more acutely. Thus, the older the players, the less satisfied they are with aspects of their professional life, which is why giving up their football career is taken into account more often by far.

According to the present research, lack of financial support at a professional level leads senior female players to pursue a dual career, having a part-time or full-time job, while juniors want to pursue university studies in another field than sport, although they do not exclude a profession in the field of sport.

Biases regarding women's football arise from two important dimensions of the phenomenon, namely its low popularity and the lack of funding. These are subtle, almost imperceptible forms of discrimination that, on a large scale, support the blocking mechanism in creating a system able to help women's football to emerge from the shadow cone in which it has been held for decades. Of course, these biases cause other problems such as the lack of supporters.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are available upon request to the contact author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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