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Women's football: sexed bodies and interfering discourse : if gender is the social organisation of sexual difference through various social practices, discourses, and politics of representation, to what extent can the media popularisation of female soccer in South Africa be read as an interference in the hegemonic organisation of gender relations and heteronormativity?

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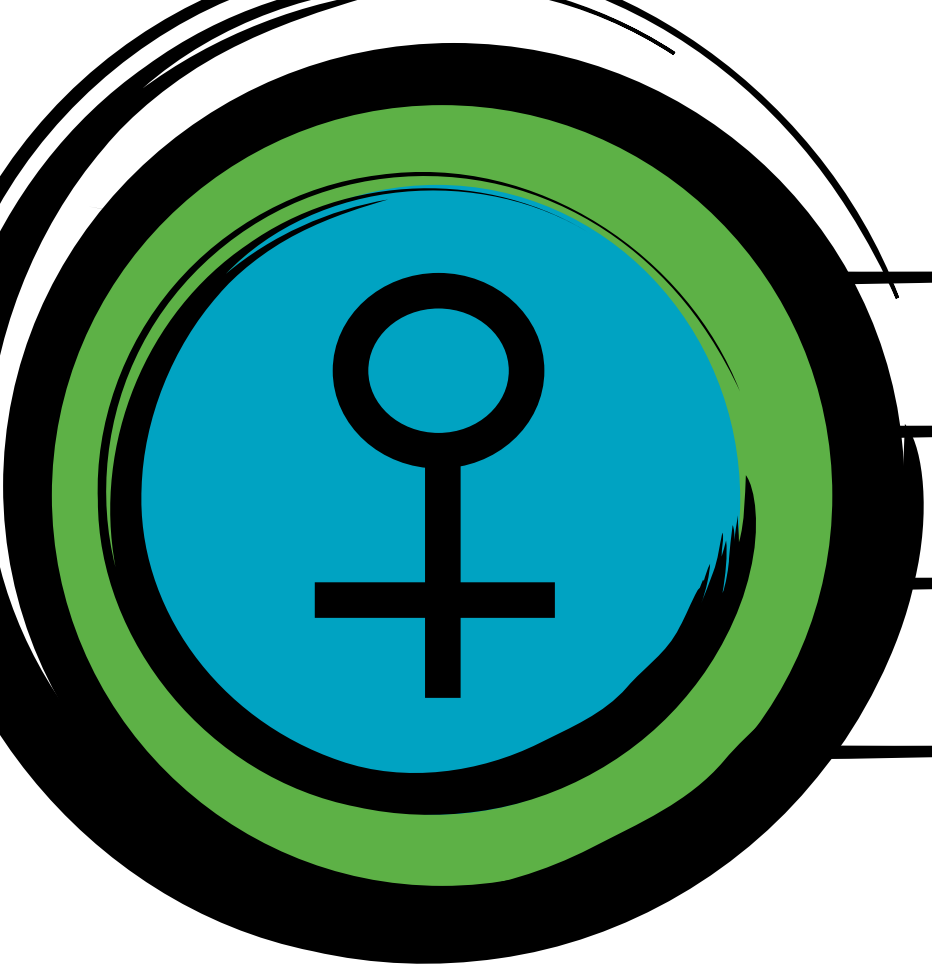

Sisters still sidelined

SA'S FEMALE FOOTBALLERS STRUGGLE TO MAKE THEIR MARK

With the 2010 Fifa World Cup no longer a mirage in the minds of South Africans, **Sibulele Siko-Shosha** questions whether the world's largest soccer tournament will have any impact on the women's game in South Africa

When launched with much fanfare in 1993, the South African women's national first soccer team, Banyana Banyana, was generally viewed as only the tomboy cousins of their male counterparts.

Now, as the nation rallies behind the boys in Bafana Bafana for the 2010 Fifa World Cup, and the media hype over the women's squad had dwindled down to a trickle, the question must be asked: after almost two decades of having a national female football team on the international circuit, how much has women's soccer in South Africa developed?

The beautiful game's still not pretty enough

Perhaps the best indication of the snail's pace at which women's soccer in South Africa has been crawling is the time it took to establish a competitive league. Although a women's football league was established in South Africa in 1993, a functional and competitive league was only launched in 2009.

In the game of soccer money talks, and the lack of big sponsorships for women's soccer is viewed by commentators as the biggest obstacle to growth — a plight not unique to South Africa.

"To my knowledge it is only the United States that has been championing the support of women's football," says Mazola Molefe, sports journalist for *The Times*.

Banyana Banyana team manager, Fran Hilton-Smith, believes the unwillingness to put some serious financial muscle behind women's soccer is because men are still seen to dominate the game: "In this country, men's football is seen as being the most relevant while women's football has and still is being received as more of an amateur sport."

This presents a bit of a "chicken and egg" situation for the female football league: they



An all-female football team from the Cape Flats get ready to battle it out in England branded kits *Photo: Alistair Berg / www.dreamsandgoals.net*

need sponsorships to make their mark as serious professional players, but the sponsors generally prefer to back the already money-generating men's game.

These challenges aside, there has been some progress in the last 17 years. Soccer has surpassed other sports to become the top national women's sport, and is now on par with athletics and netball.

And some big-name sponsors, like Sasol and Absa Bank, have come on board to sponsor the birth of the women's provincial and regional leagues respectively.

Hilton-Smith points out that these undisclosed cash injections have changed the face of the girls' game in South Africa, with about 140 teams playing in the Sasol provincial league and several hundred teams partaking in the Absa regional league.

"Local leagues have now become more competitive and increasingly organised," she says, adding that an increased availability of funds has also enabled a few players to receive salaries, while expenses for transport and other necessities are now covered.

Creeping up the rankings

As for Banyana Banyana's progress, there's a lot for our nation to be proud of, with the team ranked 56th in the 2010 international football rankings — a great improvement to the 73rd position which they occupied in 2007.

> 'Men's football is seen as being the most relevant while women's football has and still is being received as more of an amateur sport'
> —Fran Hilton-Smith

One of the most noteworthy accolades for the squad over the past year is that 24-year-old Banyana star, Noko Matlou, took home the CAF 2009 Woman African Player of the Year, the first major individual award to be taken by a South African footballer ever.

Despite these improvements, Molefe says the women's team is still not getting the support and coverage they deserve, something he believes impacts negatively on their performance.

"The South African Football Association has been playing a key role in drumming up the support for women's football," he says. "However, with that said, I think that the lack of coverage of Banyana Banyana's games has caused the country to be a bit disenchanted with women's football."

Molefe also reckons Banyana Banyana should work harder to win the games that matter the most: "I think that Banyana should focus their energies on getting increased recognition on the world stage through winning their international games."

In Africa, however, the quick-footed ladies



SA's national women's team Banyana Banyana bring home the trophy

have upped their game and, led by former team star Augustine Makalakalane as head coach, are now ranked second to the mighty Nigerians on the continent. After bumping Ghana out of the number two spot, the odds are high that Banyana Banyana will qualify for the 2011 Women's World Cup hosted by Germany, a tournament the South African team has yet to qualify for.

Another positive sign is the team's recent thrashing of neighbouring Namibia in an international friendly. They are now training for the biennial Confederation of African Football Women's Championship, which will be hosted in South Africa in October this year.

World Cup spin-off

Although Bafana Bafana has hogged most of the 2010 Fifa World Cup limelight, there have been a few positive spin-offs for the women's squad, according to Hilton-Smith, who says South Africa's hosting of the mega sporting event has definitely increased awareness of women's football in the country.

"Although Banyana Banyana hasn't been directly linked to anything that has to do with the Fifa World Cup, a lot of interest around the women's teams have been primarily because of the World Cup," she says.

"There has been a lot of spin-off in terms of publicity, which is something that excites us greatly."

Grooming future footballers for the pitch

The future growth of women's football is, of course, dependent on the younger generation of aspiring players, something that Hilton-Smith is keenly aware of.

To ensure the ladies' league grows from strength to strength, she established the Women's Football Academy at the University of Pretoria in 2003.

While at the academy young women players from the under-17 and under-20 teams eat, breath, sleep and live football. They train almost every weekday from 06h00 to 16h00, while also receiving attention from world-class sports scientists, trainers and psychologists from the University of Pretoria's High Performance Centre.

Hilton-Smith says the academy has opened up previously unimaginable opportunities for numerous young football starlets, a handful of whom will graduate and go on to represent South Africa on the national team.

"It is something I take great pride in," she says. "It's my contribution to ensure the continuation of developing women's football in South Africa." TBI



Banyana Banyana player Portia Modise