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Bend it like Banyana Banyana: gender, empowerment and equality in South Africa through the lens of soccer

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ABSTRACT

Women and girls participating in sports surged around the world in the 1970s and 1980s in response to shifting attitudes on gender norms and equality. While recreational and professional sports participation is seen as a positive opportunity for female empowerment, the sports realm can also be a site for reproducing discriminatory gender norms, structural inequalities and unequal power dynamics from wider society. The primary purpose of this thesis is to use the case-study of women's soccer in South Africa to identify and understand the societal phenomena that negatively affect women and girls' sports participation and experience. Encouragingly, a handful of dedicated social scientists produced pioneering scholarly analysis of women's soccer in South Africa; however, there is a dearth of contemporary journalism and longform, creative non-fiction writing on the topic. Rather than take the form of a traditional academic research report, this thesis combines factual exposition and journalistic storytelling to shed light on the subject matter in an accessible and engaging style. The final thesis comprises two parts: (Part One) a Method Document that reviews the existing literature and presents a history of the global-local development of women's soccer; and (Part Two) a Longform Narrative that imitates the style of a publishable piece of magazine journalism. The Longform Narrative takes the form of a series of interlinking chapters told in first-person point of view and each focusing on a key theme, individual or event. The narrative opens by examining the landscape of inadequate media coverage of women's sports and explaining how that hinders commercial potential and reinforces discriminatory gender stereotypes. Next, the narrative explores how the historical construction of sport as a masculine domain informs important structural-environmental barriers and intrapersonal/ interpersonal influences that negatively affect women and girls' sports participation. Finally, the thesis delves into the legacy of insufficient institutional investment in women's sports, from the glaring gender pay gap to the lack of professional playing structures to the indifference from corporate sponsors. This pattern of insufficient investment handicaps women's earning potential and results in a vastly unequal quality of experience that follows female athletes for the rest of their lives. The thesis relies on interviews, observations, archival documentation and secondary research as its primary source material. The hope is that through this undertaking the thesis amplifies the voices of female athletes; provides novel insight — albeit modest and limited — on broader issues of gender inequality and discrimination; and inspires positive societal change.