



# Women on the field: A study on gender inequality in Italian football and the representation of women in the sports environment.

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## **Abstract**

Gender disparities have been and continue to be a worrying issue when speaking about equality, a human right inherent and inalienable to all individuals. However, these disparities become greater when we explore the sports field, an environment that has been historically occupied and dominated by men, which has not only marginalised females from these spheres, but also has impacted on the women's role in the sports, provoking manifestations of gender inequalities like discrimination, harassment, sexualisation, objectification and violence. This paper explores the mentioned gender disparities by presenting an extensive historical and theoretical analysis, a media evaluation, and an examination of the role of media monitoring in relation to the *Women on the field* project. This material is the framework for the creation and production of the short documentary that takes the name of the project, featuring prominent figures of the Italian sports field, who shared their experiences, with the aim of the film to become an advocacy tool.

## **Keywords**

Gender inequality, sportswomen, football, journalism, Italy.

## **Introduction**

In 2024, women represented 49.72% of the world population (United Nations, 2024), almost half of the human beings on the planet by just a 0.28% difference compared to men. Nevertheless, representing half of the population in the world has not been enough to reach one of the most basic and fundamental rights to all humans: equality.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 1948 "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, birth or other status". Based on the mentioned concepts, men and women should, in theory, enjoy the same rights in every aspect of their lives, regardless of any other external condition or characteristic. Yet, in the 21st century, gender disparities are present and active globally, coexisting in every woman's life. Along this analysis, the concept of intersectionality is considered, in order to recognize the interaction of variables, such as gender, race and socioeconomic class, and how they can improve or, on the contrary, aggravate the access to the already mentioned basic human rights.

The purpose of this work is to present the framework for a short documentary about the experiences of Italian women in the sports field, specifically football players and

journalists, bringing attention to how the gender disparities manifest and affect the principle of equality between women and men. The documentary intends to project the female portrayal and the role that is being reproduced in these spheres, whereas this written paper seeks to showcase the key findings of the documentary and elaborate on the theory, historical background and media role behind those manifestations of inequalities.

## **Methodology and Participants**

This research was conducted through a qualitative approach that reunited two scripted interviews summarised in a short video documentary, which seeks to shed light on the experiences and perspectives of the former captain of the Italian national team, Melania Gabbiadini, and of Sara Zanferrari, an Italian sports journalist and literary critic.

The mentioned interviews were conducted during December of 2024 and they intended to illustrate the challenges both Gabbiadini and Zanferrari have experienced during their careers and how the same situations are being reproduced for most female journalists and athletes in Italy, perpetuating gender discrimination, disparity, representation and violence. These conversations have also been useful to explore possible solutions to work on gender equality in the sports environment.

Both interviews were recorded, transcribed and added to the final documentary. The interviewees were chosen based on the convenience sampling method, because they were accessible due to geographical proximity, time availability and willingness to participate in the research, and especially having in consideration their high relevance of their experiences, considering their trajectory and professionalism.

The interviews were accompanied by a media analysis that acted as crucial theoretical grounding content and a tool for the narrative style of the documentary, allowing an examination of the coverage of women's football across various platforms.

The analysis of this media content, combined with research into historical and theoretical documents, enabled the team to develop a framework for the project. This framework facilitated an assessment of how normative gender roles manifest in the sports field in Italy, influencing the daily lives of professionals. Additionally, it examined how female athletes and professional journalists are portrayed in the media.

## Historical and Theoretical Framework

In principle, women and men are equal human beings that should enjoy the same rights, obligations, opportunities, representation, in spaces free of violence, discrimination and threats. However, this theoretical principle is far from being an actual reality in nowadays society.

Considering gender inequalities and disparities, this project is built around the feminist premise that is to “seek women’s equality and justice in every sphere of life and create opportunities for women to have the same access to the resources that are otherwise freely available to men” (Raina, 2017). It is acknowledged that the feminist theory is a broad and extensive sphere, which is why the study is based on the general principle of searching for equality between women and men.

Gender inequalities in the Italian sports environment will be analysed based on the concept of gender disparities proposed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), that defines this phenomena as the “statistical differences (often referred to as “gaps”) between men and women, boys and girls that reflect an inequality in some quantity” (UNICEF, 2017).

The goal is to explore how gender disparities manifest as inequalities, such as bias, blindness, gaps, and stereotyping, and how these further perpetuate exclusion, discrimination, objectification, and violence, particularly in the context of sports in Italy.

The analysis is also conducted taking into consideration the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, since it is still considered the most widely endorsed and visionary agenda for women’s rights, particularly regarding its Section J of the Annex II “Women and the Media”. This Platform, is a resolution adopted by the United Nations in 1995 during the Fourth World Conference on Women and its fundamental aim is to promulgate a set of principles regarding women and men. It works as a key guideline that presents several strategic objectives aimed at achieving gender equality and, although the agenda is ambitious and may have some points to be revised, it explicitly references Sports.

The short documentary production is essentially grounded on the Strategic Objective J.2, found in the previously mentioned Section J, that states: “Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media” (United Nations, 1995). The justification for this statement to be the main inspiration for the project is that, without trying to discourage some ongoing progress, although the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted the first time 30 years ago, the issues to resolve and work on remain basically the same.

Point 245b of the mentioned objective proposes to “the media, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, in collaboration, as appropriate, with national machinery for the advancement of women” to:

“Produce and/or disseminate media materials on women leaders, inter alia, as leaders who bring to their positions of leadership many different life experiences, including but not limited to their experiences in balancing work and family responsibilities, as mothers, as professionals, as managers and as entrepreneurs, to provide role models, particularly to young women” (United Nations, 1995).

The *Women on the field* documentary aims to become an audiovisual product that would give space to its interviewees, as women leaders and role models, to present their experiences with regards to their professional careers, sharing important information about the struggles they have faced in an environment that still discriminates, sexualizes and objectifies women, hoping their testimonies have the capability of increasing awareness about how the Italian sports environment is for women, both for female athletes and journalists, also giving an idea of how it should be, and hopefully becoming sources of inspiration for change.

Following this line, regarding point 245c of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, that is, to “Promote extensive campaigns, making use of public and private educational programmes, to disseminate information about and increase awareness of the human rights of women”, the documentary intends to create awareness and provide a concrete message towards the Italian sports leaders, with particular attention to the condition of female athletes and sports journalists. It also seeks to envision a representation of how the sports industry should evolve in order to support gender equality.

On another hand, regarding Strategic Objective J1, to “Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication”, and especially spotting point 240, which stresses that regulatory mechanisms should be promoted to stimulate a balanced and diverse presentation of women in the media and their participation, the documentary was meant to promote increased female participation, especially in the field of football. In addition to this, as stated at point 242a, the short film intends to highlight the needs and concerns of women leaders in sports in an attractive and stimulating or inspiring way.

To sum up, by showcasing the experiences of sportswomen and women in the media, and raising awareness of the need for a more equitable sports environment, the *Women on the field* documentary has the capability to act as an informative but

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also a call-for-action piece, for achieving gender equality in sports, aligned with the strategic objectives of the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*.

The team paid special attention to making conversation about topics like equal access to opportunities and equal participation in sports, gender equality in sports policies, also applied to sports media, and gender stereotypes within the sports sector were also addressed.

### **The UN WOMEN Sports for generation Equality Framework**

Another crucial document for the production of the documentary, as an informative and advocacy aimed communicational product, is the UN WOMEN Sports for generation Equality Framework, that aims to drive implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action through the sport ecosystem.

The Framework presents a “set of common principles and aligned objectives that will harness the power of sport in making gender equality a reality in and through sport” (UN Women, 2020).

Besides looking at the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the UN WOMEN Sports for generation Equality Framework, references the International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, revised in 2015, which states “equal opportunity to participate and be involved at all supervision and decision-making levels in physical education, physical activity and sport, whether for the purpose of recreation, health promotion or high performance, is the right of every girl and every woman that must be actively enforced”.

This statement worked as part of the theoretical grounds for creating the interview scripts for the short documentary, assessing topics like representation, decision-making, and related to the latter, opportunity of growth and recognition in the professional sports field, both related to female athletes and journalists.

On the same line, the UN WOMEN Sports for generation Equality Framework, additionally presents the Kazan Action Plan (2017), that serves as an international sports policy reference that relates the field of sport with the Sustainable Development Goals. One of the goals, set in 2015 to be accomplished by 2030, is gender equality, specifically: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (United Nations, 2015).

However, based on the SDG website, the world is not on track to achieve it, and, on another hand, even if, without any doubt, the sport ecosystem is one of the clearest fields where gender inequality is an existing issue, as stated in the Kazan Action Plan point number 5, “except for the general acknowledgement of sport as an

enabler, physical education, physical activity or sport are not mentioned in any of the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda”.

Following the concern for setting doable commitments for sport policy development The Kazan Action Plan references the Declaration of Berlin (2013), that does address gender equality in sports. The Declaration emphasizes the importance of ensuring equal access to sports for all individuals, regardless of gender, and highlights the role of sports in promoting social inclusion and gender equality. It also acts as a call for action that encourages more opportunities for girls and women, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, that should also have the opportunity to access sporting activities.

On the bright side, sport has for years shown its capability to work as an empowerment tool that can transcend cultural differences, “mobilizes the global community and speaks to youth” (UN Women, 2020).

This is a great opportunity for leading actors in the sport ecosystem, some of whom are already implementing gender equality strategies, but the problem is they are doing so in isolation, instead of sharing these good practices with others and expanding them. There is a need for cooperation to achieve the global goals for gender equality.

The *Woman of the field* documentary, based on the current situation for Italian female football players and sports journalists, intends to inspire more alike media products, that speak to a global community and to the youth, in a clear, attractive and inspiring way, sharing general knowledge on the matter together with experiences from role models, aimed at generating advocacy and sharing both bad and good practices in the female sports environment, in order to keep changing, improving, and basically working on them, towards a more gender equal professional field.

The short documentary speaks to the youth, and to future professionals, but also to current stakeholders, political actors, private and organizations, sports influencers, the media, advertising agencies, marketers, and all influential actors of the sport ecosystem that, as stated in the Sports for generation Equality Framework, should learn from one another, work on governance models, gender-based violence prevention and response, investment gap on women’s sport, media representation, equal opportunities, and overall accelerate efforts to really “have a significant impact on gender equality world-wide” (UN Women, 2020).

It is relevant by this point, to underline Principle 4 of the Sports for generation Equality Framework, that served as the main principle taken into mind for the final communicational product. Principle 4 states: “Undertake efforts to promote women’s equal participation and bias-free representation in sports media, including



communications to eliminate harmful gender stereotypes and to promote positive role models" (UN Women, 2020).

And, within principle 4, more specifically, the documentary aimed to address the following points. First, to "tackle the gender stereotypes that exclude women from sport media", by making conversation with Sara Zanferrari, Italian journalist that shared her experience with being undermined in her profession just because of being a woman. Secondly, to "eliminate harassment of female journalists", was also a point discussed with Zanferrari, unfortunately finding out that women may feel the need to present themselves as defensive or even quite aggressive in order to not get harassed, and that many media outlets would not provide any platform for women to demand their rights or report harassment, if occurring.

On another hand, the research specifically focused on the objective to "amplify the voice of female athletes as role models...", by interviewing Melania Gabbiadini, former captain of the Italian national soccer team, who shared her personal experience, highlighting the underrepresentation her team has got on the Italian news media coverage and the overall contempt to women's football.

In summary, the UN WOMEN Sports for Generation Equality Framework provided the team with the ground to choose the right questions to ask on the interviews, and to create a narrative that would allow a strong message and possibly inspire future efforts with the objective of sharing knowledge of how the sport environment behaves and how is the experience of leading role models, to keep working towards a more gender equal field.

### **The Importance of Media Monitoring for a Gender-Equity Sports Documentary**

Media monitoring plays a crucial role in dealing with gender representation. According to Djerf-Pierre, M., & Edström, M. (2020), the GEM-Index (Gender Empowerment Measure), among other tools, shows how underrepresentation and stereotyping in the media keep systems of inequality in place. It is a principle wherein "you can't be what you can't see" (Djerf-Pierre, M., & Edström, M., 2020). Monitoring allows us to critically assess visibility and the roles ascribed to women.

The GEM-Index further reveals that mere visibility is not enough; the type of representation is equally important. A documentary so informed by such monitoring can break stereotypes and present achievements to shine in a counter-narrative against the dominant discourses in male-centered sport media.

By grounding the project in data-driven insights, the documentary becomes a tool of advocacy, one that sets standards and contributes to changing media environments, embracing the notion of gender equity inside and outside the playing fields.



Media monitoring has proved to be one effective way to gather foundational insights into producing a short film on women in sports. It exposes persisting biases in framing women into "soft" news topics or excluding them from expert or authoritative roles. These findings have helped form the narrative for the documentary in a way that, besides approaching the general struggles of women athletes, it talks about the barriers within sports journalism and media representation.

### **International initiatives for improving gender disparities**

As an additional input to this research, it is relevant to include several initiatives that are being promoted by non-profit organizations and Non-Government Organizations (NGO), as complementary efforts to the ones already initiated by international organizations such as the United Nations and the already mentioned Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

The most outstanding initiatives found are encouraged by *Women In Sport*, an NGO founded in 1984 in the United Kingdom. The actions carried out by Women in Sport include researches about sports education boys and girls receive in the UK and several social media campaigns that seek objectives such as empowering women focused in weight lifting; breaking the stigma around the menopause, sports and exercise; and encouraging daughters and mums to connect through exercise (Women In Sport, 2024), among others.

The International Working Group (IWG) on Women & Sport is another exceptional organization that works towards gender equality in sports. It is considered the world's largest network focused on advancing equity and equality in sports and physical activity for women and girls worldwide. The network is a remarkable example of a commitment to achieve gender equality, it reunites around 600 organizations and aims to bring "stakeholders together to make the changes needed to the structures and values of sport around the world" (IWG Women & Sport, 2025).

Likewise, the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF), established in 1974, acts for the efforts that many other organizations are promoting to fight gender disparities in sports. The WSF's mission is to "enable all girls and women to reach their potential in sports and life" (Women's Sports Foundation, 2025). This goal is being fueled by the financial aid provided to aspiring champion female athletes, the funding to groundbreaking research in the topic, and the extensive aid supplied to diverse communities to encourage girls and women to get active.

### **Media Analysis**

The portrayal of women in sports media remains a significant hurdle in achieving gender equality in the field. Despite incremental progress, the narratives surrounding female athletes and sports journalists often reinforce traditional stereotypes and diminish their professional achievements. A closer examination of Italian media

reveals recurring patterns of objectification, underrepresentation, and trivialization of women's contributions to sports.

Research and monitoring tools like the GEM-Index (Djerf-Pierre & Edström, 2020) have underscored the critical gaps in visibility and equitable representation. For instance, while men's sports dominate primetime broadcasts and receive comprehensive analytical coverage, women's sports are relegated to off-peak hours or presented with a focus on personal lives rather than professional performance. An example from an article published the 3rd of July of 2024, on the Italian newspaper "La Gazzetta dello Sport", describes Alisha Lehmann as a "social media queen" and "wife of Douglas Luiz", overshadowing her accomplishments as a skilled footballer. Then, the reader faces the lead of the article, which clearly makes an inappropriate selection of words by saying "La Juve, together with the Brazilian midfielder who also took her", objectifying her to a thing that can be taken, like a prize.

Similarly on the "Corriere dello Sport", headlines about sports journalist Diletta Leotta often emphasize her physical appearance, using phrases like "thrilling neckline" (Corriere dello sport, 2024, November 26) and "sexy transparencies" (Corriere dello sport, 2024, November 11) rather than her journalistic expertise.

Articles often focus on the physical appearance of female sports figures rather than their skills or achievements. For example, coverage of Diletta Leotta's post-pregnancy fitness or her wardrobe choices on the pitch exemplifies the trivialization of women in sports media. Such representations not only distract from their professional roles but also reinforce harmful stereotypes that limit women's agency and perpetuate a male-dominated narrative.

This biased coverage perpetuates a male-centric narrative that sidelines women's agency and expertise. Such representations not only shape public perception but also impact the aspirations of young women. The normalization of gender stereotyping in media discourse fosters environments where female professionals feel undervalued and face systemic barriers.

These issues are evident in traditional media; however, social media platforms often amplify their impact, with popular pages like "Che Fatica La Vita Da Bomber" and "Pastorizia Football Club" perpetuating sexist tropes through memes and posts. For instance, posts highlighting Alisha Lehmann focus on her relationship status and social media presence instead of her professional capabilities. Similarly, sexualized depictions of Diletta Leotta frequently dominate discussions, overshadowing her contributions to sports journalism. This pattern extends to other female professionals, as reflected in the harassment faced by journalist Greta Beccaglia, who was sexually assaulted live on air on "ToscanaTV", an incident that sparked widespread debate but also revealed the entrenched culture of sexism in sports media.

Now, even though media monitoring evidences these gender inequality issues, it also highlights avenues for progress. Data-driven advocacy can disrupt entrenched stereotypes by amplifying empowering portrayals of women in sports. Documentaries like “Women on the field” serve as powerful counter-narratives, showcasing female athletes and journalists as role models who transcend societal constraints. By addressing the imbalance in representation and emphasizing professional achievements over personal attributes, communicative projects can challenge the status quo and contribute to a more inclusive media landscape.

The analysis of Italian sports media underscores the urgent need to reframe narratives around women in sports. Amplifying their stories, acknowledging their achievements, and eliminating harmful stereotypes are essential steps in fostering a culture of equity both on and off the field.

### **Discussions surrounded the conducted interviews**

After the extensive literature review and media analysis previously presented, the interviews for the documentary were carried out, and they highlighted the stories behind Melania’s and Sarah’s careers. Along this section of the document, it is shared and analyzed, which are considered the most relevant quotes from the conversations with them, in order to provide first-hand input to the research.

Related to the portrayal and importance that the media provide to female athletes and journalists in the sport of football, Melania Gabbiadini noted the difference between the cases of Italy and Sweden, announcing that during important matches of the female Champions League or of the National Team, news related to these games and encounters were found “on the last page [of the newspapers], there were 5 or 6 lines, just enough to let people know something happened. We played a European Championship in Sweden, and during the tournament, the Swedish women's team was on the front page of a newspaper equivalent to our “Gazzetta dello Sport”. In that respect, we are way behind” (Gabbiadini, M, personal communication, December 2024).

Gabbiadini also emphasized: “When we play matches, they’d be broadcast delayed, two days later”, which not only represents a complete disregard towards sports played by women, but also has further impacts that are related to visibility. In Italy, not only adults but also younger generations, coexist with this male-dominated image of sports that continues to be reproduced and normalized.

In other words, if nowadays girls and boys in Italy watch sports where only men participate and where only the finals, tournaments and championships played by men are being the topics of discussion and debate, the vicious circle will never break, and that is the reason why the media is a key actor when constructing more

equal societies, because they hold the power of amplifying the voices of people who deserve to be equally heard, in this case, sportswomen.

Following with the same example, the mentioned gap between Italy and Sweden calls to reflection on how countries, that even belong to a same continent, and that follow (in theory) similar social values of quality, freedom and social welfare, can have such important differences when it comes to public discourses and the image they project in topics such as gender equality.

This point is sustained by the data presented in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023 ranking, where Sweden was located in the position 5, with a score from 0-1, of 0.815, while Italy made the place number 79, with a score of 0.705 (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Moving on, another key finding that arose from the interviews had to do with the language journalists choose to portray female athletes. Gabbiadini revealed discriminatory descriptions from the news media, such as: "They just play fiercely, that's it. They [journalists] focus on that aspect, because they believe we're not capable of having the same technical abilities as men" (Gabbiadini, M, personal communication, December 2024).

At the same time, the media should consider the overall attention that is given to women sports players. This clear sum of lack of representation, stereotyping and misuse of language in the Italian Sports media, related to female sports teams and players is an act of disrespect and discrimination that should not be made, because it has no valid grounds.

In line with this, more opportunities within the media outlets are crucial for the gender equality to also raise on that field:

As Sara Zanferrari stated: "...it was practically a stroke of insight from my newspaper to let me write, kind of on faith, you know?" (Zanferrari, S, personal communication, December 2024).

Finally, reflecting on the general Italian mindset on the topic, Gabbiadini stated: "The mindset here in Italy is that anything a woman does is always valued lower than what men do".

Italian culture pretends for women to be interested in other things and they have to work harder to gain the respect of their male colleagues. In order to work towards the improvement of this issue, more spaces for women to demand their rights should be open to both journalists and athletes, who also should be allowed to more managerial, decision-making positions.

As the UN Women “*Snapshot of Gender Equality across the SDGs*” (2024) underlined: “In 51% of countries, there is at least one restriction preventing women from doing the same jobs as men”.

Based on this premise and on the previous discussions, we strongly believe that as stated in the UN Women publication “*Equal is greater.*” (2024): “When governments, the private sector and others at the national level focus on concrete priority actions, big changes can happen. It’s not about doing everything at once. It’s about doing first what delivers the most with limited resources – and doing it together.” That is the key for further changes and for a real path to gender equality, not to only establish on paper what should be the best practices or to implement the strategies once, but to make an everyday work, make it a commitment to everyone, because gender inequality is not only about disparities and lack of opportunities, is about the loss of human rights, discrimination, a decreased quality of life and welfare, and in the latest situations, about violence.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

The documentary and paper here presented, explored the experiences of two role model professionals, together with an extensive theoretical background and media analysis framework. However, the qualitative methodology, although it provides a profound and detailed approach, prevents the work from being properly generalized to a broader population.

Additionally, due to the stipulated length of the documentary, it was not able to extend the discussion and include more recommendations from the respondents or the *voiceover* to improve the gender inequalities in the sports environment, which challenges the depth of the analysis, even if some international initiatives were presented in this paper.

Nevertheless, we do believe that the research contributes to the academy and the general public, and enriches the female perspective and role in sports in Italy, since it promotes debate among students, professors, athletes, inviting the readers and/or watchers to question how sportswomen are being portrayed, their main challenges and the opportunities they deserve. Also, the work presents its audience to an easy-to-understand analysis of the behaviour of new media on the matter and the overall gender inequalities mirrored on it.

### **Conclusions**

The *Women on the field* project has as its main goal to expose the issues faced by women in the professional sports environment and sports media. In order to not just highlight existing issues but to also inspire others (especially young women and

leaders) to work towards a more gender-equal environment within the sports industry, the project put the spotlight on two role models and produced the documentary as the crucial outcome to get to the audience.

At the same time, along with this paper, and as future communication professionals, the project invites a critical reflection on content production and consumerism, advocating for a gender-sensitive approach that is key in nurturing a more inclusive and equitable media landscape.

The project also encourages taking the discussion of the presented issues outside the academic setting, using social media forums, and having conversations with friends, family, and colleagues. Content, such as the documentary, can become a conversation starter to raise awareness.

Educators, particularly those in communication and related fields, need to be cognizant of the need to discuss gender inequalities and the importance of media monitoring. Disciplines such as political science, law, and business, which often intersect with sports, also have a place in these discussions.

Finally, it is important that leaders in news media, sports teams, and other relevant sectors provide a platform where women can share personal experiences and discuss the most relevant issues concerning gender inequality in their respective fields.

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