

COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

INTRODUCTION

FIFPRO's top priority regarding Covid-19 is public health and safety. We also recognize our unique position as the global players union for professional footballers to demonstrate the highest standard of leadership in sport as the world addresses this pandemic and its impacts. Several weeks into the crisis it is evident that the spread of the virus has impacted all levels of the football economy as well as the health and well-being of players.

FIFPRO's 2020 Raising Our Game report, on improving industry standards for professional female players, was originally scheduled for publication in February 2020 and is now postponed to April due to the global health crisis. The findings draw on information collected from multiple sources and through various methods, including a player survey, stakeholder surveys, primary interviews with executives and experts, and secondary research focusing on women's football. The report captures the recent growth and development of the women's football industry, demonstrating the significant upward trends that the women's game had recently begun witnessing prior to the pandemic. Its emphasis on setting global labour standards and protecting players' rights and wellbeing, with the common objective to safeguard the women's game, is more relevant now than ever.

We have written this supplement to address our findings from the report in light of the present situation. This briefing provides perspective on the evolving situation, implications of the global health crisis on professional women's football, and recommendations for an open, collaborative approach that seeks and appreciates the view of the players in establishing solutions.



CONTEXT: THE FOOTBALL INDUSTRY AND COVID-19

As this pandemic causes uncertainty and instability worldwide, workers everywhere are experiencing redundancies, unsafe working conditions, unpaid salaries and income losses, and violations to their rights and protections.

Those at the margins will bear the disproportionate brunt of its devastating effects, as the impacts of Covid-19 will hit hardest those who were already situated in precarious conditions and amongst vulnerable populations, and those who were under-resourced and had little reserves to fall back upon. Any inequities that they already experienced will be exacerbated by the pandemic. Unless there is a clear commitment from football stakeholders to stabilize competitions and provide financial assistance to keep leagues, clubs and players in business, the economic standstill will ultimately result in insolvencies of otherwise profitable and stable clubs across many markets.

THE VULNERABILITY OF THE WOMEN'S FOOTBALL INDUSTRY

The current situation is likely to present an almost existential threat to the women's game if no specific considerations are given to protect the women's football industry. Due to its less established professional leagues, low salaries, narrower scope of opportunities, uneven sponsorship deals and less corporate investment, the fragility of the women's football eco-system is exposed by the current situation. The lack of written contracts, the short-term duration of employment contracts, the lack of health insurance and medical coverage, and the absence of basic worker protections and worker's rights leaves many female players—some of whom were already teetering on the margins—at great risk of losing their livelihoods.

Measures are being taken by football stakeholders to ensure female and male players are accounted for in response to the crisis. This has included a coordinated approach to addressing the consequences of the pandemic and applying an overarching approach to dealing with the impact of league shutdowns, postponement of seasons, termination of player contracts, players' loss of wages, benefits, etc. While such efforts to streamline the processes are important, the common objective to safeguard the women's game needs special measures that account for the unique conditions of female players, clubs, and competitions.

HOW IT IS UNFOLDING: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S COMPETITIONS

THE START

There were signs of the effects of Covid-19 on women's football by the end of January, when the 2020 Olympic women's football qualifiers were moved from Wuhan, China to Sydney. The starting date for the qualifiers had to be pushed back due to the regulated quarantine of the Chinese women's football team. Shortly thereafter, the Chinese Football Association postponed the domestic leagues. The final round of the qualifiers has yet to be completed, as the home and away fixtures due to be played in March were also not completed between China and South Korea.



INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS

In late February and in the beginning of March, when men's games (Serie A) began to be played in front of empty stadiums or behind closed doors, many women's national teams were traveling to Portugal (Algarve Cup), USA (She Believes Cup), France (Tournoi de France), Spain (Pinatar Cup) and Cyprus (Cyprus Cup) to compete in international competitions. All tournaments started out smoothly, but by their conclusions, the implications of Covid-19 were beginning to be felt by players, teams, leagues and fans. Italy's women's national team had to forgo the final against Germany due to concerns that Covid-19 disruptions would leave them stranded in Portugal; all teams were advised to take precautionary measures on and off the field, such as restricting handshakes to make sure their players were safe. The final two matches of the Tournoi de France were played behind closed doors.

FURTHER ESCALATION

By mid-March, many domestic leagues around the world and specifically in Asia, Europe and the Americas had either been cancelled, suspended or postponed. In Africa, both the Women's Under-20 World Cup qualifiers scheduled for the end of March and April's Women's 2020 Nations Cup qualifiers were postponed. On March 18th, with news from UEFA that the Men's Euros 2020 would be postponed until 2021, it was clear that football stakeholders would have to deal with a clash with the Women's European Championship, which was set to be held in England in 2021. Two days later, when the new NWSL Commissioner, Lisa Baird, announced that the start of the regular season will be delayed depending on how the situation develops. At the same time, the W-League final in Australia was getting ready to be played behind closed doors.

As countries in and outside of Europe have gone into different levels of lockdown trying to manage the pandemic, UEFA announced on March 23rd that the Women's Champions League final - originally scheduled for 24 May, 2020 - would be postponed. A day later, the IOC announced that the 2020 Olympics would be postponed until 2021. The Women's European Championship has now been postponed until 2022.

WHAT PLAYERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THE CRISIS

Players have raised numerous concerns, with some general trends emerging amongst the experiences. The open-ended questions around the economy, competition calendar, and job security are issues all players are contending with.

INCONSISTENT COMMUNICATION

There is a wide disparity in how players are receiving information about the ever-changing situations in their countries and in which they are playing their club football. Some get frequent updates; some get almost none. Leaving such key people isolated at such a perilous time is not only disappointing, but also extremely short-sighted in the development of a just and sustainable long-term industry.

MENTAL WELL-BEING

Playing careers in the women's game are fragile at best, and short and sporadic in nature. To be left in the dark about league developments, to see wages cut and clubs forcing players to apply for temporary



unemployment is difficult. Furthermore, being placed in isolation in foreign countries is extremely unsettling. Players who are abroad are finding themselves facing the worst health crisis of the modern era separated from friends, family, and support systems. They are trying to juggle obligations to employers with the human desire to be near to the ones they love most. Transparency, honesty, and compassion is what they require.

UNCERTAINTY

The majority of players have had experience with previous clubs on the verge of bankruptcy or uncertainty around wages at some point in their careers. They have been part of the industry growth, from the emergence out of amateur and semi-professional status into this transition towards professionalisation. It has been a long journey, and it is difficult for players to see that hard-earned recognition and visibility at risk.

WEIGHT OF EXPECTATION

One thing all players have in common is that they love to play. Players feel the responsibility of putting on a great product and growing their sport into a thriving industry. Maintaining their fitness while in lockdown is challenging, and without proper facilities or the ability to compete against others it is impossible to be match fit. Yet they know when football begins again, they'll be expected to perform at an elite standard. This adds mental and physical pressure to an already challenging and stressful situation.

PHYSIOLOGICAL HEALTH

While little research exists today about the physiological implications of such a dramatic change in mental, emotional, physical and social environments for professional female athletes, early insights show significant changes in menstrual cycles, with more frequent and severe symptoms, and changes in cycle length and pattern which adds to the stress of the situation. Changes in training load, diet, and sleep disturbances can also add to these disturbances. The return to football will provide a challenge, with probably a short 'pre-season' scenario, and a significantly reduced break after the season has concluded. For athletes who have experienced Covid-19, the potential to be immunocompromised is significant and must be considered when determining readiness.

PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S FOOTBALL AND DAMAGE LIMITATION

The growth of professional women's football and its journey to becoming a strong and viable industry is threatened by the implications of the current crisis. Below we detail some of the realities of the game prior to Covid-19 and as presented in the 2020 Raising Our Game Report, as well as ways within the context of the global health crisis to keep women's football on track.

1. WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IS PROVING ITS VALUE

While women's football has long been viewed as a cost to the industry, it is in fact an asset of great value — to the sport and society — that can steer the industry in a positive and sustainable direction. The non-monetary forms of value that women's football has long been cultivating through its position on



the margins—including important forms of social capital, ties to local communities, player solidarity, and opportunities for education —requires our focus now more than ever.

HOW TO LIMIT DAMAGE: Leverage this value by investing in the women’s game rather than curtailing it. Look for innovative pathways that propel rather than hinder the social capital behind the game. Get ahead or even ‘leapfrog’ major issues by creating working environments whereby players are not exploited, their rights are valued, and they are accorded full respect. The resulting impact will be long-term prosperity and success across the entire spectrum of football business.

2. THE INDUSTRY IS GROWING

There is greater commercial interest in women’s football; attendance in league and national team competitions shows signs of incredible potential, broadcaster viewership is increasing, and many new sponsors have recently appeared as high-profile partners. While little data has been gathered thus far on the potential losses of revenue and earnings in the women’s football industry, commercial interests, sponsorships and investments that had recently started moving into women’s football are at risk of retreating.

HOW TO LIMIT DAMAGE: Give professional women’s football priority access to facilities, times and situations that enable fans to attend games, sponsors to drive revenue, broadcasters to reach wide audiences, and players to perform in optimal conditions.

3. INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENTS ARE KEY

The women’s football industry has seen its rise to prominence come largely through the international game. The premier international tournaments, such as the FIFA Women’s World Cup and Olympic Games, provide the boost that drives visibility, increases popularity, and gives prestige to the sport. Furthermore, the international game, and by extension National Associations, are key to players’ economic earning potential through sponsorship, pay-to-play or central contract models for remuneration, and opportunity to get scouted for employment opportunities in one of the few professional leagues throughout the world.

HOW TO LIMIT DAMAGE: Consider and prioritise the international game in the re-build of the women’s football industry, and further, as it drives attention to the professional game.

4. PROFESSIONALISM IS UNDERWAY

More women’s leagues and clubs at the domestic level are forming and professionalizing, others are reforming, and elite competitions are taking new shape. However, the professionalization process in women’s football that had only recently made great strides is now at risk of receding. Without having secured solid structural foundations for long-term sustainability, some women’s leagues and clubs are releasing players, cutting contracts and closing down.



HOW TO LIMIT DAMAGE: Build a common vision that unites national strategies and implements regulatory interventions to achieve sustainable growth and employment. Drive growth and opportunity through innovation and long-term investments that prioritize securing the jobs and career paths of female players.

APPLYING GLOBAL LABOUR STANDARDS IN PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

The absence of basic worker protections and worker's rights leaves female players vulnerable – in the current crisis and beyond. While these standards are applicable for all players, they are particularly relevant for women's football due to the current crisis. **We must establish, implement and enforce global industry standards for working conditions in women's football** to protect the players the future growth of the industry.

PROFESSIONAL STATUS

FIFPRO's 2017 Global Employment Report on the working conditions of female players, revealed that just 18% of players are professional according to the FIFA regulations: they meet the criteria of having a written contract and being paid more for their footballing activity than the expenses incurred. The rest, 82%, would be considered amateurs. The pandemic is now exposing how without such legal status, players' rights are at risk as they are excluded from the scope of national employment protections and support measures. Moreover, players without recognized professional status are unable to join unions, which limits their possibilities for engaging in the necessary social dialogue with employers to address their conditions in this crisis.

CONTRACTS

Our 2017 Report also revealed that the average length of a female players' contract is 12 months, and 47% of them have no contract at all. Amendments and adjustments to current regulations such as the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players (RSTPs) represent important measures, but these actions will do little to protect or accommodate the needs of the many female players around the globe who do not have written contracts or who do not meet the RSTP definition of professional but who play under professional obligations. As leagues are postponed and competitions cancelled, many female players will not be protected against lost wages nor supported in employment disputes.

EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS

FIFPRO's 2020 Raising Our Game Report revealed that housing (51%), health insurance (44%), and food (37%) are significant features of compensation in professional women's football, and many clubs seemingly relinquish responsibility for remunerating their players financially by providing these additional resources. We must ensure that players are not left without these essential items as a result of the crisis.



WAGES, COMPENSATION AND PAYMENTS

Many professional female players worldwide are unable to make ends meet solely through their club income. Our 2017 Report revealed that more than 60% of paid players take home less than \$600 a month; only a tiny fraction make more than \$4,000 a month. 37% say they are paid late. This means many players are required to subsidize their club salaries through second jobs and off-season contracts with second clubs, patchworking together a livelihood in the sport. For top female national team players, the financial compensation and payment for services provided by their federations—although frequently fragmented, minimal, and inconsistent—often represents critical livelihood income. Therefore, as mega-sporting events like the Olympics and FIFA windows are postponed, a compensation scheme that directly and adequately remunerates female players in a timely manner is essential.

MATCH CALENDAR

There are pressing issues related to the international match calendar. In some cases, there are too many clashes between club and country; in other cases, there aren't enough opportunities for players to get anywhere near enough competitive matches. As women's football enters its rebuilding phase, the international game will play a critical role in this, particularly if leagues are shortened or seasons abandoned completely. Through international football, visibility of the sport is increased and provides a downstream effect that grows fan interest and the popularity of leagues. Yet in many countries the federation is not utilising the international match calendar windows allocated. If federations do not utilise international windows, particularly post Covid-19, many top players who would have recently been part of major international competitions will be further left stranded without competitive sporting opportunities. This all points to the need for FIFA and the regional confederations to better coordinate the women's international match calendar with leagues, and the current crisis presents an extraordinary opportunity to do so.

WORKLOAD

The rescheduling of competitions and leagues will have significant implications for the workload of players and the professional women's game must be prioritized. In the return to play, the football industry will likely need to hold matches within tighter windows to compensate for lost time. In-season and out-of-season breaks must be protected. Adequate rest and recovery periods for players must be assessed and ensured within the formatting of new schedules as football returns to play.

INDUSTRY ACTIONS FOR THE PROTECTION OF PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Each day presents new developments concerning Covid-19 and in the last weeks we have seen how all football stakeholders are not only affected by the situation, but also how they are reacting to it. FIFPRO seeks urgent action from governing bodies in the international football community to ensure they implement comprehensive plans and policies with specific targeted measures for the women's game.

- Prioritize player care, health, safety and well-being in all decision-making processes.



- Use this crisis as an opportunity to address shortcomings in professional women's football and establish global labour standards for the working conditions of players.
- Apply special financial measures and conditions for female players, clubs, and competitions where necessary.
- Ensure that pre-crisis investments are secured and are not withdrawn from the women's game so that we can sustain and even build momentum.
- Demand no person on the basis of their gender is excluded from any financial incentive, remuneration program or activity receiving financial assistance.
- Develop systems of solidarity and support in the football industry to help ensure the women's game doesn't suffer extreme damage.
- Situate the women's football industry for inclusion in government funding, particularly for vulnerable organizations like small and medium sized clubs and women's football more broadly.

CONCLUSION

We have to protect players as people and as workers and avoid mass unemployment and recession. The women's football industry will require innovation and intervention from across the private sector and public sectors, from policymakers and governing bodies, to broadcasting companies and sponsors. We must employ an open, collaborative approach that seeks and appreciates the view of the players. Our ultimate goal must be to not only to limit damage to our industry, but to build a more solid foundation.