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Football in the time of COVID-19: reflections on the implications for the women's professional league in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the efficacy of the Colombian institutional response to the COVID-19 crisis from a gender perspective. The Colombian Professional Women's League has been characterized by perpetual crisis since its launch in 2017. Far from the affirmative action needed to remedy its historic marginalization, an environment of conscious institutional inertia had already placed the league in severe doubt before the onset of COVID-19. It is argued that stark asymmetries of power underpin persistent gender differentiation and that an untenable development model has been laid bare and exacerbated by the pandemic.

Introduction

This article considers a group placed in a position of extreme precarity by the COVID-19 pandemic: women footballers from the Colombian Professional Women's League (CPWL). The CPWL was launched by the professional Colombian football federation DIMAYOR in 2017. In order to understand how Colombian institutions have dealt with COVID-19, it is important to place the response within the context of an institutional culture of inertia vis-a-vis the growth of women's sports, allied to a prevailing political environment inclined towards national populism in which sport is far from insignificant.

The continued discursive deployment of (men's) football is testament to the social significance attached to it across diverse political and cultural settings. For example, in Turkey under Recep Erdogan, Bolivia under Evo Morales and significantly Colombia under Juan Manuel Santos' (men's) football has all too often become a central plank of populist politics.¹ Similarly, Silvio Berlusconi and Mauricio Macri have used Milan and Boca Juniors as the respective vehicles to accrue sufficient social capital to reach the presidencies of Italy and Argentina respectively. It is difficult to imagine a female equivalent to these examples – owing to the persistence of male hegemony over the social meanings generated by the game. Indeed, it has been easier for women to reach the presidency of their respective countries than it has to become presidents of football clubs. In the context of South America Michelle Bachelet, Cristina Kirchner and Dilma Rousseff have all done this whilst a woman president at one of South America's major clubs remains a distant prospect.² In the case of Colombia, the previous president Juan Manuel Santos tweeted 381 times about the men's team at the Brazil World Cup in 2014, but only 21 times about the women's team while they competed in the Canada World Cup of 2015. The current conjuncture in football then, is characterized by an omnipresent tension between traditional socially masculine meanings and a growing feminist consciousness on the continent, exemplified by the immense popularity of the #MeToo and

#NiUnaMenos movements.³ Through the lens of football we are able to see both progress on gender equality and the ferocity of reactions against it.

There has already been scholarly engagement on the potential for gender differentiation in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Indeed, underpinned by the usual economic imperatives, the English Women's Super League was ended prematurely with Chelsea Women declared champions while the men's Premier League has resumed with its ubiquitous wall-to-wall television coverage. Behind a familiar façade of economic imperatives, a *modus-operandi* which relentlessly and systematically privileges male hegemony provides the backdrop to Colombian women's struggles. In an interview with Fare Network, Colombian player and advocate for her fellow professionals Vanessa Córdoba expressed with eloquence the reality that in the Colombian context, the COVID-19 crisis is tagged onto the perpetual crisis of Colombian Women's Football. The extent to which Colombian women footballers are marginalized in 'normal' times means that an analysis of how they have been treated during the present crisis is timely.

In this study we focus on the measures football institutions have taken to ensure the social and economic well-being of the players during this crisis. It is worth noting that this crisis has coincided with the hypothetical economic commitments that the country's failed attempt to host the 2023 World Cup would have brought. FIFA opted for the Australia/New Zealand bid citing misinformation in the Colombian bid.⁵

Football offers a critical lens which dramatizes the stark social inequalities which characterize Colombia. It is a country structured within profound inequalities of race, gender and social class. The COVID pandemic has laid bare and intensified these inequities, within the world of sport and in civil society more generally. Colombia persistently figures among the countries with the highest inequality figures in the world.⁶ The decision to hold a COVID Black Friday (a tax-free shopping day) in the midst of the pandemic, in spite of continuing WHO advice, is symptomatic of the rootedness and fundamentalist application of market logic.⁷

Mirroring this, in a sporting context, as in various countries, debate around the return of football has largely been framed around the justification of clubs being unable to withstand indefinite losses to revenue streams. In the following section, the specificities of women's football in the country are discussed. In this context characterized by the hegemony of men's football, we focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected women footballers in the country.

The professional Colombian women's league (CPWL)

The history of professional women's football began recently in 2017. It is worth noting that Colombia has two entities which organize football tournaments. DIMAYOR organizes professional competition while DIFUTBOL has long presided over amateur football.⁸ Whilst still nominally amateurs, the Colombian women's national team debuted in 1998 at the South American championships held in Mar de Plata, Argentina. The gap of almost two decades between the debut of the women's national team and an attempt to recognize them as professional athletes evidences how women's club football has long operated below the radar of institutions in the country. Even the academic literature reflects a privileging of international football, perhaps influenced by a paradigm of sports research which looks to locate sport within its imagined national communities.⁹

As with numerous other countries, the discursive hegemony of men's football owes much to the historical marginalization of the women's game. Attempts to recover the hidden history of the women's game in Colombia are already underway with clear evidence of the amateur participation of women dating back to at least the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰ More recently the first organized championship came under the auspices of the amateur federation DIFUTBOL, coinciding with the first Women's World Championship.¹¹ In terms of visibility, advances began with the national team in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Colombia won its first honour when the under-17 team won the South American championship in Chile in 2008. In the 2010 Copa America in Ecuador, Colombia finished second securing its first appearance at a Women's

World Cup in 2011.¹² Following this they went unbeaten at the Ecuador 2014 Copa America and reached the last sixteen of the Women's World Cup in Canada 2015. These events were influential in pressuring intransigent institutions into making some kind of concessions to acknowledge the remarkable progress achieved in the absence of any concerted institutional support. These demands exist in a constant tension with the persistence of highly gendered understandings of the sport at regional and national level. In order to remain a member of FIFA and to receive funds from the FIFA Forward programme, federations need to show quantitative progress, however this is often frustrated by a lack of female representation at both club and federation level. Policy continues to be rooted in gender differentiation despite policy documents from FIFA and CONMEBOL stating a commitment to gender equality. Nonetheless, the Professional Women's League was duly launched by DIMAYOR in 2017.

Curiously, after the Colombian Professional Federation brought women's football under its control, the performance of the national team suffered markedly. They missed qualification for both the 2019 France Women's World Cup and for the Tokyo Olympics after a disappointing performance at the 2018 Chile Copa America.

For the purposes of context it is worth sketching out the conditions of professionalization upon which the current league is built. FIFA defines professionalism as 'having a written contract for an amount higher than the costs incurred in performing as a player'.¹³ The Colombian Women's League falls short of this: the statutes of DIMAYOR allow a maximum of 13 amateur (*aficionada*) players to complement the minimum of 12 contracted professional players. According to a December 2019 report by ACOFUTPRO, the Colombian sub-division of FIFPRO, a third of players had neither contract nor social security cover, and many clubs had more amateur players than professionally registered and contracted ones. There were even clubs that had only 5 contracted players.¹⁴ Allied to this, precarity in terms of contract length meant that players could be moving on after just three months (or even less if there teams were eliminated early).

Provincial Atlético Huila has stood out thus far participating in all three editions of the league (2017; 2018; 2019). In the first year they reached the final which was attended by 33,327 spectators at the El Campín stadium in Bogotá. At the second attempt Huila became champions and even won the continental championship the Copa Libertadores in Manaus, Brazil in 2018. After being eliminated in the quarter finals in 2019 a schism in the club's hierarchy occurred which provoked a decision to discontinue the Huila women 'project' and concentrate on the survival of Huila (men's team).¹⁵ The departure of long-term donor Diego Perdomo meant that the club's hierarchy was no longer prepared to cover the expenses of running a team.

The CPWL faces significant challenges, such as developing an innovative marketing strategy, increasing the number of fans and increasing media visibility. Allied to this there is a need to attract sponsorship, improve the salaries of players along with the conditions set out within contracts. Another fundamental necessity is increasing the length of the league.¹⁶ On a wider level the formation of players needs to begin earlier in order to improve its overall standards, as at present an overwhelming majority of players in the PWCL begin during pre-adolescence or even adolescence.¹⁷

In this context, it is clear that post-COVID a return to 'normal' is not desirable for women players or for those who would like to see gender equality as an organizing principle. Practices like scheduling matches at 10 am, non-promotion of the games and low commitment in terms of contracts allied to a lack of sponsorship and private sector interest mean that before the COVID-19 pandemic the future of Colombian women's football already appeared bleak.¹⁸

Institutional policy for women's football during the COVID-19 pandemic

When Colombia went into lockdown on 25 March 2020, DIMAYOR suspended all competitions indefinitely. Much of the economic help available to Colombian women players came from the

continental and global hierarchy. FIFA, for example, forwarded in full funds pertaining to the financial years 2019 and 2020. These funds were attached to the FIFA Forward 2.0 programme. The FIFA Forward programme is aimed at improving youth football, women's football, beach football and futsal among other concerns marginal to FIFA's central business – men's football. In normal circumstances, member federations receive these funds after proving certain criteria has been met. These mechanisms of accountability were temporarily suspended with the overriding determination to save football in each member country. In this way, the Colombian Federation received 500,000 USD alongside the pending amounts pertaining to 2019 and 2020.¹⁹ The explicit condition for this handout was mitigating the negative consequences of COVID-19 by meeting financial obligations to affected personnel (the players). Allied to this, through CONMEBOL, another 14,000,000 USD was released to member federations as part of the CONMEBOL Evolution initiative, with the same intention.²⁰

An announcement of the availability of these funds came from the president of the Colombian Federation (FCF) Ramón Jesurún who explained that the funds would be made available through the organizing league (DIMAYOR) from Friday 24th April (a month after competition was suspended) and that claiming these funds would be subject to meeting the conditions stipulated by DIMAYOR.²¹ At this point DIMAYOR explained that players who were registered for DIMAYOR leagues and that had a valid contract would be able to claim emergency funds.

At this point, gender differentiation in the duration of the respective Colombian Leagues for men and women comes into play. The men's league begins in January and continues until December, albeit with a month's break in the middle of the year. Given the special circumstance, the men's league was suspended before reaching the midway break with all its players under contract, registered and in theory eligible for emergency help if necessary. The women's league, on the other hand, was slated to begin in April (with no format agreed). This means that as of the beginning of the crisis, most players had not signed a contract, and those that had signed a contract were not officially registered with DIMAYOR owing to clubs delaying in confirming their participation in the women's league.

At the beginning of 2020 there was uncertainty as to whether there would be a league or not owing to the boards of clubs being unwilling to commit to the league – eighteen expressed interest, but none officially registered with DIMAYOR. In this context only 3 out of 18 teams had signed contracts with their players. Those three were Atlético Nacional, América de Cali and Independiente Santa Fe respectively. The fifteen other clubs had yet to sign contracts with their players. The league was programmed to begin on 11th April. Most clubs stated that they had verbal (but not legally binding) agreements with players and that logically they had already begun training with the start of the season so close. In many cases, these training sessions were unpaid and owing to the lack of formalization they were not covered for social security, for cases of injury or becoming ill. When clubs suspended activities in mid-March (before the official suspension of activity on 25 March) players generally returned to their home cities, other than those housed in official club accommodation.²² In the case of returning home, players have received no assistance with travel costs. It is clear from the players' union report that many have been asked to train illegally during lockdown.²³ The official squad lists for the CPWL on the DIMAYOR website correspond to the previous season which finished on 30 September 2019.²⁴ When the country went into lockdown, teams had not confirmed official squad lists (or in some cases even participation) for a tournament due to commence in a month's time. This suggests that in many cases the squad lists would be composed of amateur players chosen at trials held in the days before the tournament began. This approach takes advantage of a loophole in CONMEBOL stipulations that teams must have a women's team in order to compete in the male Copa Libertadores. The CONMEBOL policy does not specify that these teams need to be professional. Along similar lines clubs have frequently failed to provide medical assistance at matches, putting the players' safety at risk. Information supplied anonymously to ACOFUTPRO by players explains that most clubs

only contract players for the length of the CPWL, meaning they are unemployed for 8 to 9 months each year. Added to this, it has been reported that as the tournament operates on a knockout basis, upon not advancing from the group stage players' employment has been terminated by 'mutual consent' after just one or two months of the three month 'professional season'. Finally, only 11% of players' contracts were longer than six months and the majority (58%) were for only three months.²⁵

This section has shown how the structural inequalities which characterize the CPWL are directly responsible for the players being unable to claim any auxiliary assistance during this crisis. If the season was of a reasonable length, players would have been under contract and would have been registered with DIMAYOR. Furthermore, clubs have shown themselves willing to engage in dubious and downright illegal employment practices such as requiring players to attend training without remuneration. The structurally weak position of women's football made these kind of problems during the COVID-19 pandemic almost inevitable.

Conclusion

In a country where football has an increasingly discernible symbolic role, the point to which women remain relegated to the margins cannot be emphasized enough. The current conjuncture provides a potential pretext to dismantle the hard-earned gains of recent years, or conversely an opportunity to recognize the acute structural inequalities and persistently discriminatory and disrespectful practices which have brought the women's game to this stage. It would appear that the intransigent institutional response is rooted in the characteristics which have marked the development of women's football in Colombia. The response shows an indifference to precarity and an absolute disrespect for the players as professionals.

Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly had significant economic effects, Professional football in Colombia is market-driven from the professional league DIMAYOR downwards.²⁶ An early and rather alarmist estimate from DIMAYOR president Jorge Enrique Vélez suggests potential revenue losses comparable to that of a small country's annual GDP. This gross overestimation of the financial value of men's football in Colombia owes much to male predominance at institutional level. Similarly, a cursory glance of the women's tournaments which have been carried out thus far reveals a high level of disinterest for marketing the game. The unwillingness to countenance a league longer than three months and the lack of commitment from clubs to compete even before COVID-19 suggest a troubled future. It has been argued that crisis is nothing new for women's football but that the current moment could be crucial in defining its future. The CPWL is more vulnerable as it is tied into a relationship of dependency with the men's league. The persistence of highly gendered, discriminatory and even misogynistic directors is deeply worrying.²⁷ DIMAYOR itself is a deeply gendered organization in which male hegemony appears not only to be a characteristic but even an organizing principle. Whilst female clubs exist at the margins of their male counterparts and whilst the directorships of clubs remain so clearly gendered, it is difficult to conceive of significant change. A starting point may be acknowledgement of the gendered organizational structures which are often taken for granted.²⁸ Economic imperatives often act as a pretext for the reproduction of gendered policies, an issue that will surely come to the fore in the coming months.

As has been demonstrated, women players did not benefit from emergency funds from FIFA and CONMEBOL respectively. A combination of the structural conditions (the short league format, short flexibilised sometimes not even written contracts) and a manifest lack of will on the part of the federation and clubs has ensured that players have not benefitted. Owing to these unwillingness of football institutions to treat women with any respect it has fallen upon the Ministry for Sport (the state) to offer emergency assistance.²⁹ Can Colombia's football institutions adapt to a shifting gender order? From this episode we can only conclude, that unless there is further institutional intervention from global and continental bodies FIFA and CONMEBOL, 'we'll grow old waiting', to quote the country's most famous novelist.

Notes

1. Goldblatt, *The Age of Football*; and Watson, 'Colombia's Political Football.'
2. Though it is worth noting that as of July 2020 Paola Salazar is the president of Águila Doradas de Río Negro, a top flight Colombian club.
3. Elsey, 'Fútbol Feminista.'
4. Clarkson et al., 'Covid-19.'
5. The Colombian Federation cited an average attendance for women's club football in Colombia of 28,000.
6. Sánchez-Torres, 'Desigualdad del ingreso en Colombia'; Téllez Oliveros, 'Informe de las Naciones Unidas ubica al país en el primer lugar de inequidad urbana de América Latina.'
7. Pardo, 'Cómo fue el día sin IVA en Colombia que sacó a la gente a la calle tras la peor jornada de la pandemia'; Semana, 'Día sin IVA.'
8. DIMAYOR stands for División Mayor del Fútbol Colombiano and DIFUTBOL – División Aficionada de Fútbol Colombiano.
9. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
10. Elsey and Nadel, *Futbolera*.
11. Pedreros, 'Trayectoria Del Fútbol Femenino En Colombia.'
12. Mina and Goellner, 'Representaciones sociales de la Selección Femenina de Fútbol de Colombia en la Copa América 2014.'
13. FIFA, 'Reglamento-Sobre-El-Estatuto-y-La-Transferencia-de-Jugadores-Marzo-2020.Pdf,' 11.
14. ACOLFUTPRO, 'Informe Fútbol Profesional Femenino En Colombia 2019,' 11.
15. Castro, 'Atlético Huila le dijo no a la Liga Femenina 2020.'
16. Mina, Goellner, and Rodríguez, 'Fútbol y Mujeres.'
17. Mina, Martínez Mercado, and Roa Morantes, 'Fútbol y Mujeres En Colombia: Narrativas de Las Jugadoras Profesionales de Fútbol Sobre Su Inicio En La Práctica Deportiva.'
18. ACOLFUTPRO, 'Informe Fútbol Profesional Femenino En Colombia 2019.'
19. Federación Colombiana de Fútbol, 'La FIFA ofrece apoyo económico inmediato a las federaciones miembro como respuesta a la COVID-19 – Federación colombiana de fútbol.'
20. CONMEBOL, 'CONMEBOL Entrega 14 Millones de Dólares Del Programa Evolución a Las Asociaciones Miembro Para Afrontar El Impacto de Covid-19 | CONMEBOL'; Federación Colombiana de Fútbol, 'CONMEBOL entrega 14 millones de dólares del Programa Evolución a las Asociaciones Miembro para afrontar el impacto de Covid-19 – Federación colombiana de fútbol.'
21. El Tiempo, 'La ayuda de la Federación a los clubes del fútbol colombiano.'
22. ACOLFUTPRO, 'Informe ACOLFUTPRO Situación de las futbolistas de la liga femenina 2020.'
23. Ibid.
24. DIMAYOR, 'Liga Femenina – Dimayor.'
25. ACOLFUTPRO, 'Informe ACOLFUTPRO Situación de las futbolistas de la liga femenina 2020.'
26. Leoncini and Silva, 'Entendiendo o Futebol Como Um Negócio,' 16.
27. Semana, '"Las Mujeres Son Más "tomatrago" Que Los Hombres y Es Un Cultivo de Lesbianismo": Presidente Del Tolima Sobre El Fútbol Femenino.'
28. Acker, 'Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies.'
29. GOL Caracol, 'Ministro Del Deporte Confirmó Entrega de Mercados Para Las Futbolistas Colombianas.'

Disclosure statement

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