

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

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Executive Summary

The female football sector in Spain has experienced significant changes and growth over the past decades, gaining popularity and seeing an increase in females reaching top decision-making roles.

Despite all the advancements, achieving and pursuing full gender equality in leadership roles remains an ongoing challenge, which is obstructed by established organisational and societal barriers. In addition, women continue to be underrepresented in roles including coaching, management and governance. This not only obstructs and impedes their career growth, but it also affects, influences and impacts how society perceives gender equality in leadership positions.

The implementation plan designed in the following pages aims to identify the barriers that are preventing women from advancing into leadership roles in football and propose strategies aligned with contemporary management and leadership theories. It also explores factors including education, perception and organisational structures that can create obstacles and challenges. This plan also emphasises the importance of promoting self-awareness and communication skills, creating a diverse and accepting culture in football organisations and addressing gender bias.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
Rationale	3
Aim	4
Objectives	4
Timescale	5
Table 1. Timescale of the time and objectives plan for each year	5
Action Plan	6
Finding and nurturing female talent - the role of education	6
Media and public perception	8
Increase proportion of female leaders in football by implementing quotas	9
Risk Management and Strategies	10
Recommendations	11
Conclusion	13
Bibliography	14

Introduction

Through the last few decades, the football sector in Spain has experienced notable progress and changes towards growth and popularity. In the last few years, it has seen an increase in the representation of women reaching top management positions (Solanas et al., 2022; Poppelwell-Scevak, 2022), although, achieving gender equality in leadership roles within sport is still a challenge for Spanish society (Vaquero-Cristobal et al., 2024; Martinez-Corcuera et al., 2024).

In Spain, after winning the female world cup in 2023, measurements were implemented to promote female leadership and enhance diversity and equal opportunities to everyone (Tronchoni, 2023). Since then, out of the five coaching positions in the national female team, three of these jobs have gone to women and there is now more equality between women's and men's football, such as increased benefits and recognition for the women's team (RFEF, 2023).

Rationale

Despite all the initiatives taken and the advancements made, there is still underrepresentation in leadership positions including coaching, management and governance roles (Rider et al., 2023; Bradbury, 2013; Khatibi et al., 2023). As a result, there is a lack of representation which could impact the sport's future growth and influence society's view of gender equality when accessing management positions (Calapez and Ribero, 2022; European Parliament, 2022). Many football organisations, including clubs and federations are still largely male-dominated, especially at senior leadership level (Schill, 2022). Women are often assigned to support roles, such as event planning and assisting rather than decision making positions (Murray, 2022; Valenti, Scelles and Morrow, 2018). It is therefore essential to create an action plan to address these issues.

Aim

The aim of this project is to critically analyse and address current issues in female leadership and management in female football in Spain, by using strategic leadership and management approaches to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. This project will increase the understanding of the issues involved and create an action plan to bring equal opportunities for women in Spanish football.

Objectives

Examine the obstacles women face in accessing football leadership roles and propose strategies based on modern management and leadership theories.

Make recommendations which increase female representation in leadership roles in women's football by 2030.

Create leadership scholarship programs for women to break systemic barriers.

Increase media coverage of female leaders and positive role models.

Design education programmes aimed at recruiting more females into the football management sector.

Timescale

The timescale of this plan is five years, with a deadline of 2030, when Spain is one of the three host countries holding the FIFA World Cup (RTVE, 2024). (See Table 1.)

Year	Objective
2025	Get the main clubs in Liga F to invest on female leadership
2026	Create programs and scholarships to promote female leaders
2027	Increase media coverage to ensure women receive 30% of the interviews, helping population get to know them better
2028	Promote women into leadership roles, ensure equal salary raise and make them brand ambassadors for sponsors
2029	Apply a quota that 45% of leaders in female football are female
2030	Review and update the plan; establish how to improve it and what problems have they faced

Table 1. Timescale of the time and objectives plan for each year

Action Plan

Research is essential to understand the barriers and issues that women face when leading or getting to top positions. Based on research, the three main actions needed are finding and nurturing female talent, changing public perceptions by increasing media participation and increasing female representation by applying quotas.

Finding and nurturing female talent - the role of education

The well-established cultural norms of football, which is traditionally a male dominated sport, can discourage women from pursuing leadership roles. This includes limited networking opportunities and gendered expectations about leadership qualities, such as competitiveness and aggression, often seen as masculine traits (Durham University, 2022; Themen, 2024; Krech and Weiler, 2022; Alan et al., 2020). Navigating organisational politics is crucial for women leaders, who may face resistance from established male power structures (Poppelwell-Scevak, 2022; Metin and Eratli, 2022). Developing political skills, building strategic networks, and forming alliances are essential for women to influence decisions and progress in their careers (Akanke et al., 2024; Hobbins, Kristiansen and Carlstrom, 2023; Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, 2023; Poppelwell Scevak, 2022; Lavie, 2021; Pinheiro et al., 2023).

Education is essential for equipping women with skills and knowledge needed for leadership management roles (Shemahonge, Kyando and Malingumu, 2022; Cimene, Reilly and Elçi, 2024; Feraco, Resnati and Fregonese, 2023). Despite high academic achievements, women are underrepresented in sport leadership in Spain. 57% of undergraduates are female, whilst only 20% of sport management positions and 3% of the leadership roles in the Spanish Sport Association are held by women (Gallardo-Perez et al., 2021; Stadista, 2023; Spanish Sport Association, 2023). Additionally, only 20.8% of those enrolled in sport courses are females, which may contribute to the lack of women in sport management (Stadista, 2023).

Coaching education programs are essential for career advancements and accessing leadership roles (Avolio, Pardo & Prados-Peña, 2024; Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2023), however, many sport management programs are designed with a male focus, offering little content tailored for women. This can result in the exclusion or discouragement of women from participating (Elkhwesky, Salem & El Manzani, 2023; Kark and Buengeler, 2024). There are also a lack of female role models and mentors in sport education, leading to fewer women pursuing careers in sport management (Anderson et al., 2023; Murata et al., 2024)

Women with access to academic training and development programs are better prepared for leadership roles in football (UEFA Academy, 2023). These opportunities are essential for equipping women with the skills needed for roles like manager or coach (Singh, 2023; Preston and Velija, 2022). Leadership programs should include leadership theories such as transformational leadership (Hsu, Newman & Badura, 2022), social role and human capital theory (Main, Wang & Tan, 2022), training in negotiation, conflict management and assertiveness (Schaller and Gatesman Ammer, 2022; Baber, 2022). Women need to be empowered to express their ideas clearly and confidently in high pressure environments (Singh, 2023; UNESCO,2022). This plan proposes to introduce education into the initial stages of a football career, and create programs and scholarships tailored for elite athletes, so that at the end of their careers they can transfer their skills and train the future generations.

Media and public perception

Stereotypes and gender norms often portray leadership in football as male dominant, which undermines the perceived capabilities of women in leadership roles and restricts their ambitions (Mcguigan, 2011; De Caleyá Vazquez, Martín-Magdalena, and Garrido-Merchan, 2023; Tremmel and Wahl, 2023). Additionally, women's football and its leadership roles receive significantly less media attention compared to men's football, underrepresenting and hindering female role models from inspiring future leaders (University Durham, 2023; Rowe and Prates Silva, 2023; Grubb, Webb, and Rayner, 2023; Walker-Khan, 2022). Public perception, influenced by media coverage and society, further affects women's progression into leadership roles in football, shaping both self-perception and external views on their potential (Vinnicombe and Mavin, 2023; Tabassum and Rafiq, 2023; Arias, 2019; Arendt, 2023).

This plan proposes to invite female leaders to talk about their careers and experience on prime-time television and radio programmes and in the sports section of newspapers and magazines. The publicly funded television and radio channels will be encouraged to divide sports news items equally between male and female. A department to promote female sport will be created to increase the profile of females in Spanish football and all sports (Rowe & Prates Silva, 2023).

Increase proportion of female leaders in football by implementing quotas

While knowledge is fundamental for an advancement and promotion of anyone's career, business can have an influence on the opportunities given to women in football (UEFA, 2022; Yiapanas, Thrassou and Vrontis, 2023). Despite their commitment to gender equality, there are still many football clubs whose governing bodies exhibit systematic barriers to female progression (Poppelwell-Scevak, 2022; Harman, 2022). For example, leadership roles within football organisations are frequently still occupied by men, reflecting the wider societal gender imbalances in leadership roles. Jobs included are coaches, management and governance (Wolniak, Chen-Bendle and Tackett, 2023). In the Women's Spanish Football league (La Liga F), for the season 2024/2025, there is only one female coach in the first division and three female coaches in the second division (Liga Football, 2025). In Spain, Law requires that at least 40% of the members of constitutional and constitutionally relevant bodies must be women. This includes administrative council and senior management positions in both companies and public entities (State Agency Official State Gazette, 2024). This plan proposes that by 2030, Spanish football clubs and organisations to meet this requirement. In case entities do not comply with the law and regulations, it is recommended that fines be paid. If not, aid should be reduced until compliance and payments are achieved.

Risk Management and Strategies

There is a risk that this plan is only implemented when there are notable events and competitions and that the focus on women's management does not last (Clarkson and Philippou, 2024). In addition, resistance to change and insufficient funding within football organisations can hinder the development and effectiveness of promoting female leadership (Axelsson, Jacobsson & Lagerlöf, 2022). Negative public perception, limited awareness, cultural stereotypes and insufficient representation can reinforce inequalities regarding the abilities of women leaders (Arendt, 2023).

Strategies to resolve these issues will be the following:

Stakeholder Engagement: Engage club, sponsors and government bodies to secure their commitment for gender equality initiatives (Farrell et al., 2021).

Resources Allocation: Secure funding and resources from private organisations, government bodies and sponsors to support initiatives promoting female leadership (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021).

Awareness Campaigns: Develop campaigns to highlight the success and capabilities of female leaders in football to increase awareness and change perception (UEFA, 2021).

Policy Implementation: Enforce policies such as gender quotas to ensure a high representation of women in leadership positions (Fernandez & Valiente, 2021).

Cultural Sensitivity Training, Network Opportunities and Evolution of Programs: Implementing cultural sensitivity programs can help to mitigate bias within football (Kwak et al., 2024). Additionally, evaluating the programs of gender initiatives can ensure effectiveness (Backman-Levy & Greene, 2024). Creating networking opportunities for female leaders will allow them to share experiences and support each other (Clark, Ellis & McKinnon, 2024).

Recommendations

Develop gender-specific educational programs that are designed by women for women, which focus on sport management, leadership and governance to address the specific challenges that they face (Sailofsky, Orr and Darvin, 2023; Barcelos et al.,2022).

Increase funding for scholarships and mentorship programs to help women pursue leadership education in football, supported by government, clubs and private organisations (Meschitti and Lawton Smith, 2017).

Encourage gender-sensitive curriculum development in university and sport academies to challenge traditional gender norms and put emphasis on the challenges that women face when leading (Deming, Ong & Summers, 2025; Kitchener, 2024; Kitchener & Hubert, 2022).

Introduce gender quotas or affirmative action policies to increase the number of women in top leadership positions (Okedele, 2020; Pande & Ford, 2011).

Implement Leadership development programs to prepare athletes for senior positions in leadership and coaching (UEFA Academy,2024). In addition, promote leadership programs to encourage women to take leadership position early in their career (Gardiner et al., 2023; Macalinao Violon & Itaas Prado, 2024).

Develop public awareness campaigns to highlight the success of female football leaders and change public perception towards women leaders (Women in Sport, 2017; Gubby & Martin, 2024).

Adopt gender-neutral criteria for talent identification and focus on potential and capabilities when identifying new talent (Holland, 2019; Parra-Martinez & Wai, 2023; Whysall, 2018).

Reframe Leadership qualities to emphasise communication, collaboration, empathy and emotional intelligence (Dickerson, 2023; Drigas, Papoutsi & Skianis, 2023; Gonzales, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing gender inequalities in football leadership requires a coordinated effort. Developing specific gender educational programs that are designed by women for women can empower them with the necessary skills for governance, leadership and sport management. In addition, increasing financial support for scholarships and mentorship programs is crucial in helping women pursue leadership roles in football.

Despite the progress in improving the inclusion and representation of women in Spanish football, achieving full gender equality in leadership roles remains a challenge. Challenges like cultural biases, inequalities in education and organisational resistance continue to hinder women's progression into permanent roles in coaching, management and governance. These barriers not only restrict women's capabilities to contribute to the sport industry but sustain societal norms that limit equal access to opportunities. Overcoming these barriers will necessitate collaboration among media, sports organisations, government and educational institutions to ensure that leadership roles are assigned based on talent rather than gender.

Implementing organisational gender quotas and affirmative action policies can ensure a higher representation of women in top leadership positions. Leadership training programs that are tailored for women in football, along with early encouragement will prepare and motivate them to pursue leadership careers. Additionally, public awareness campaigns can shift societal perceptions by highlighting the achievement of female football leaders.

This implementation plan highlights the need for a focused strategy that emphasizes education, organisational change and shifting public perceptions. By addressing gender bias in training programs, the underrepresentation of women in sports education and existing stereotypes, business and government can foster a more inclusive leadership framework.

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