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Exploring 'race', ethnicity and gender: the experiences of Black and South Asian women footballers

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years women's participation in football has grown world-wide with the number of teams entering the FIFA Women's World Cup competition rising from 45 in 1991 to well over a hundred today (http://www.fifa.com). In England, the trend over the past ten years has been steadily upwards. This means that football now surpasses the traditional games of field hockey and netball as the most popular sport for women and girls. The increasing significance of football for women is also apparent in the number of popular cultural representations that are appearing on film, in television and in magazines. This is epitomised by the highly successful film *Bend it like Beckham (2002),* which tells the story of two girls, one white British and one Indian British, playing for a team in West London. This film especially provides a relevant backdrop for my own particular interest in understanding how diverse women particularly from minority ethnic backgrounds in England experience the game.

Much of the critical research that has been conducted on women's football has focused on gender, sexuality and football (Caudwell, 1999, 2002, 2003; Cox & Thompson, 2001; Scraton et al, 1999; Mennesson & Clement, 2003).

Football, has been shown to have a long tradition of being defined as male and viewed as a sport that upholds and confirms an hegemonic masculinity that is white and heterosexual. Football is therefore seen to mirror many of the assumed attributes of masculinity such as aggression, physical skill and muscular power and to be in direct opposition to an idealised femininity that is passive, acquiescent and generally seen to be physically weak. Such accounts as these, referenced here, document women's experiences of the game and identify, to greater and lesser extents, women's footballing bodies as gendered and sexualised, the gendered stereotyping of the game and the patriarchal structure of football as a male institution.

Although I, too, have a lot of empirical data in this area I want to explore today some of the more limited data I have on the experiences of Black and South Asian women as there is still very little work in the area of race, ethnicity and football and what has been developed has tended to concentrate on black male footballers. There is now literature that identifies and documents racism in the professional men's game with an attempt to theoretically connect 'race', ethnicity and class in an understanding of black male players experiences and the lack of men from minority ethnic groups in coaching, management and positions of power in the structure of the men's game (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001; Bains and Johal, 1998; Dimeo and Finn, 2001; Johal, 2001).

Feminist Theory

My own work is located within a feminist approach that recognises the 'multivocality of feminist thinking' (Birrell, 2000). This multivocality allows us to develop our understanding of women's football drawing on liberal notions of equal opportunity (particularly relevant in gender analyses of the structural barriers women have faced to their participation); radical explanations based on male power and compulsory heterosexuality (eg. how women's footballing bodies are often read and understood as manly, masculine and male through muscle, playing attire and gesture and the complex relationships between lesbian sexuality & football, notions of 'butch', 'tomboy' etc); socialist analyses of consumerism and the power of large corporations such as *Nike* (eg. the impact of the media in the portrayal of women footballers, issues of sponsorship, ownership and control); and poststructuralist understandings of difference, bodies and discourse (that help our understandings of gender as performance, differences across women, empowerment and self- determination). This is by no means a straightforward process as there are tensions in trying to work within sometimes conflicting positions. However, it is important to recognise and theorise difference if we are not to homogenise all women's experiences. Drawing on the work of Avta Brah (1996), I explore experiential diversity in relation to the everyday experiences of playing football but argue that this then needs to be mapped onto the broader structural power relations of class, 'race', gender and sexuality.

Researching Black and South Asian Footballers

The data I will discuss now is part of our wider investigation of gender and football but has specifically focused on the experiences of Black and South Asian players. This includes an initial questionnaire survey to all women's clubs in a northern region of England (35 in total). The aim of this questionnaire was to establish the representation of 'race' and ethnicity at club level. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 7 players and 7 officials. Of the 7 officials, 6 identified as 'White British' and 1 as 'Black British'. The players provided their own self identification in the interviews:

- Alex (31yrs): Black, Catholic & British
- Collette (32yrs): Black British
- Kersha (35yrs): Black British
- Faith (27yrs): Black West Indian British
- Nadia (26yrs): Indian Hindu
- Josie (22yrs): Black
- Joyce (20yrs): Black British

Of the 769 registered female players in the survey, 97% identified as white with 1.3% (10 players) African or African Caribbean, 1.2% (9 players) Asian and 0.5% mixed race. Team management, coaching and administration were all White and highly gendered with 69% of managers and 61% of coaches male and 67% of club secretaries female. As these figures show the data suggests that women's football remains predominantly white. The overall population figures for the region show that 6.5% are from minority ethnic groups. However, some of the clubs we surveyed are situated in areas where there are far higher populations of African Caribbean, Pakistani, Indian or Bangladeshi people yet there remain low numbers of players, managers, administrators or coaches who are black or Asian. These research findings would seem to concur with Glenn's (1999) point that 'race' and gender are produced via the distribution of power within social structures. In England, White women are the dominant representations of the 'player' and White men dominate decision making positions in women's clubs and in the development of the game.

The research on gender and football suggests that girls get into football through playing in informal spaces primarily with fathers and brothers. Although informal space is highly gendered and dominated by boys and men, the women's physical abilities, their cultural location in the working class and the support of significant males in their lives, allowed some of the women to transgress the boundaries of this gendered space. However, the experiences of the women in our research highlight how social space is also racialised space. Kersha's comments recognise the complexities of this when she discusses how the footballing space that she played in as a girl was a space free from racism.

> "It was very multi-cultural, cos my area where I grew up was very multi-cultural. Although there was a lot of Black…there was also a lot of mixed couples as well so..there wasn't really any issues because you were Black or you were White. It was like everyone mixed together and that was it. If you went out of your area, because there were some areas that were, you know, just predominantly White - they didn't really like Black people. But we didn't really go out of our area too much so we didn't really worry about it". (Kersha)

It was not necessarily separate black space but significantly a community space that Kersha defines as multicultural. However she also recognises that this was a relatively 'safe' space and that if she moved out of this area her experiences may not have been the same. For Kersha, spatial boundaries governing participation are produced in relation to identity and geography but are not entirely fixed.

Most of the women both White or from minority ethnic backgrounds who we have interviewed, talk about getting a love for football from an early age from watching men's professional football. All the white women interviewed talked positively about these early experiences. Again it is only when speaking to the Black

and South Asian women that their more complex experiences highlight the intersectionality of gender and race.
Collette says:

> I had a friend at secondary school and she was really into football (…). We both supported Aston Villa so we used to go and watch the games. But that was a bit traumatic at the time as well (…) at that time two girls on their own didn't seem quite right. So it was hard work sometimes; we used to get unwarranted attention from the boys – men sometimes. And it was a bit fascist really. A bit, and there weren't many black, there were black players at the Villa. Yeah, we used to get, it wasn't overt because we were young you know. I'm thinking, how old were we? We must have been 13 or 14. It just became uncomfortable really, we just stopped going. Yeah, well just unbelievable. Yeah there would be people next to you or around you chanting , you know, fascist things, chucking bananas, crap like that.

Nadia does not talk about overt racism but describes her feelings of being an 'outsider' in a predominantly male and white situation.

> My Dad runs a sweet shop and one of our customers, a big Arsenal fan, had two boys at the time. They were big junior Gunners [junior supporters club] and he, Mr Beech, took me to Highbury. I stood on the terraces with lots and lots of men and boys. (Interviewer: What was it like?). Very scary because there was a lot of swearing. I was very aware of my colour at that age. Mr Beech was a big man and he, you know, didn't realise or didn't give a shit who I was. The fact that I supported Arsenal meant something to him. I was aware of the dominance of men…being surrounded by so many white men.

How girls become footballers is largely a story of negotiating access to a sporting world that has been traditionally defined in the UK as 'male', 'white' and 'working class' and for the black women in this research by being a 'black girl' in a predominantly 'white boys' game. Yet these women have negotiated their space in this world and identify how at times their working class identity over-rides their gender or race identities whilst at other times being, for example, a tomboy allows them to transgress normalised expectations of gender and develop physical skills that help them become footballers. Even though they have negotiated this space they all also articulate clearly the negative impacts that expectations of gender and racism have had on their experiences.

As adult women in the game certain themes emerge from their stories. First, examples of overt racism. Certainly some of the women recounted examples of overt racism being called 'nigga' from the sidelines or from opposing teams.

> "It wasn't the players, it was the opposition's supporters shouting out 'nigga'"

> "It was a girls' team and one of the players, juniors, called one of the other players 'paki'"

However, the culture of racism as explored by Les Back, Tim Crabbe and John Solomos (1999) in relation to the men's game, is more uneven and nuanced and goes beyond the direct racism of racist language and verbal abuse.

The women also talked about stereotypes still existing – eg Collette's experiences:

> "because I hadn't played before so I didn't know where I should play or wanted to play… someone assumed, that I should be up front. Automatically assumed that I was going to be super fast, which is an assumption, it is a stereotype, "black athlete"'- super fast, not good at stamina and stuff." (Collette)

Whiteness is often normalised as shown by Nadia's experiences. She describes:

> "I was going up for a corner, and I was up in the box and this girl from the team pointed at me and said "I've got the coloured one". I thought "have I got a number on my shirt?" You know what I mean, why point out my colour which made me really aware" (Nadia)

Nadia is marked as 'coloured' or 'non-white' and whiteness assumes a central unmarked position, becomes normalised and as such operates to create processes of inclusion and exclusion. Of course it is important to note that not all the black and minority ethnic players report racism but also that the denial of racism can demonstrate the intricate operation of 'race' and the emergence of everyday racism.

A further example of this is a white coach talking about her players says that

> "Kyash is … I mean she is 16 now and you know we call her 'little black girl' all the time. She doesn't care, its just being friendly … people get nicknames and stuff..."

One way of understanding this is to suggest that Kyash is being represented as 'other' to the dominant whiteness in the team. She is also in this instance being infantalised as 'little girl' thus reducing her to a more powerless or inferior position.

The women are also very aware that since 1998 Hope Powell as England Coach and manager is an important role model. Hope Powell gives a rather nuanced response about experiencing racism herself;

> "When I was a player I experienced it when I was very young and fortunately it was dealt with there and then. I was more known in the game, I was quite

> dominant, seen to be a character. So, I never experienced it and I don't know if anything was behind my back, but my black friends who played, they never experienced it either. So is it there today, as it grows? Possibly"…

She goes on to say:

> "In terms of management, in my position, would I say there is racism? Possibly. But is it ever anything that was said publicly to me, or to my face? No. Does that answer the question?"

Her response is interesting and clearly she is being diplomatic in her answers due to her position as England coach. However, there does appear to be an underlying message pointing to more covert or cultures of racism that, in her words, 'possibly' may be present.

She has also become more firmly convinced that women need to be in positions of power within women's football. In answer to who she thinks should be the next England manager;

> "I think it could be a man. I don't think it should be though…. just my personal opinion. If you'd asked me 5 years ago, I would have said I think it should be the best person for the job. Today I would say I think it should be a female simply because of the profile of the game, it raises the profile. When I got the job the profile went through the ceiling, first female coach, blah, blah, and I think a woman would recognise more what women have gone through and understand the game more, far more than men".

The issue of women coaches is too detailed to address here but it is a crucial issue in relation to gender and women's football which is a topic on its own.

So this initial research does identify issues of racism in the game which have some parallels with racism in the men's game. However, it is the complex interplay of gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality that these women experience. We have to move beyond an additive model that simply adds race on to gender & on to sexuality. Lived experience suggests that it is far more nuanced. Nadia, one of our interviewees demonstrates this:

> "When I started playing football on Sundays, that's the only time really my family would ever have family gatherings or weddings, and when I started to miss a few of those when they [family] started, you know, getting a bit upset, and actually the most recent one is where they've let it go – the gay games and a big Indian wedding; which I missed because of the gay games. (Interviewer – They knew you were going to the gay games?) No, they knew I was going on a football

> tournament, they don't know I'm gay… they think Michelle is my best friend, who goes to my Mum's house for dinner once a week… Another example is it's our Christmas soon (Diwalli), and today my Mum told me that I have to be available on Sunday, which means I'll have to miss a match, whether I like it or not, because it is a huge family gathering".

Nadia experiences gender, ethnicity and sexuality in complex and interweaving ways. Religion, culture and family are social and discursive practices that at times regulate her participation. On a micro-social level she experiences the effects of power through family and religious discourse. As a lesbian, she enjoys playing for an 'out' team and she has competed at the gay games. However, she also talks about having to 'miss a match' to attend Diwalli. Games are not usually scheduled for Christmas therefore players who celebrate this Christian festival don't face the same dilemma. Thus, the impact of 'everyday cultural and political practices' on what we experience is highlighted in the above extract (Brah, 1996: 117). Nadia's experiences are not entirely determined by her gender and ethnicity and her identity is not 'fixed' by her sexuality. Her experiences are positioned in a particular location at a given moment. By focusing on experiences in everyday life we begin to gain a more dynamic and multifaceted picture of different, though interrelated, processes of gender, ethnicity, race and sexuality and individual responses of 'collusion and protest' (Acker, 1999).

Conclusion

Our broader research demonstrates how women playing football, a game that remains traditionally defined as a 'man's sport', dislocate heterosexual gender norms. Their presence on the football fields contributes to an eroding of the rigidity of the gender binary. The shifts in gender boundaries occur in different ways and tend to reflect the intricacies of sex-gender-desire on a local level, away from the critical lens of the media. The question that warrants further consideration is can women's experiences within a football context help rewrite femininities? As Markula (2003) questions 'are women doomed forever to cope with the discursive construction of femininity rather than transforming it?' We have some evidence that women footballers can and do trespass gender frontiers and create or recreate some alternative femininities. * However, our understandings of black femininities is extremely limited. Bev Skeggs (2004) work is useful here on working class femininity in which she argues that both black femininity and working-class femininity have been cast as abhorrent, tasteless and sexually deviant. These contemporary discourses continue to protect an hegemonic femininity, which is white and class inflected. It is interesting to consider how women's football seeks to both reproduce this dominant notion of white middle class femininity and also how and whether it provides a context for the resistance to such notions.

Clearly I only have time to touch on the many complex issues raised by exploring gender, race, and ethnicity in women footballers lives. I will close now simply by suggesting that there is much research still to be done.

- It will be important to have more in depth analysis of representations of black and South Asian femininities just as there is beginning to be some interesting work by Ben Carrington and others on black masculinities (Carrington, 1999; 2001).
- We still know very little about the functioning of whiteness. Reflecting on ourselves as researchers we were acutely aware that we tended to focus on race and ethnicity initially ONLY with the black and South Asian players.
- The lived experiences of gender, race, ethnicity must be contextually located. It has been important for us to situate our work in the social and political history of football in the UK and in the contemporary situation of multi-ethnic Britain with specific diaspora. If we are to theoretically interrogate the intersections of gender, race and ethnicity more fully it will be important to develop cross-national and cross-cultural research that begins to understand different migrant communities in different contextual locations. As we move more and more to a globalised, commercialised world of football & indeed sport more broadly, we need to ensure that we have critical analyses that centralise the significance of gender, race and ethnicity in these processes.

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