

Master's Thesis CCDCO1029E

# Gender Inequality in Finnish Football

Exploring the ways top-level female football players experience gender inequality in Finland

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# Abstract

Gender equality is a topic that has gained increasing importance in the business world during the past decades. However, when it comes to sports and more specifically football, there is relatively limited previous research on the topic. Even in countries such as Finland that are considered to be role models for gender equality, gender-based discrimination in sports has gained very little attention. Therefore, this master's thesis intends to explore how top-level female football players experience gender inequality in Finland. In order to collect rich data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven Finnish top-level female players. The findings suggest that Finnish top-level female football players experience gender inequality in five ways: norms in society, financial aspect and resources, conditions and opportunities, organizational structure, and media. While the first three aspects function as barriers to gender equality, the latter two were identified as two boosters for gender equality in the form of collaborative organizational structure and marketing and visibility that can help promote women's football. Furthermore, instead of focusing solely on the business case, a combination of moral and business case seems to be the most optimal approach to promote gender equality in Finnish football.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Gender Inequality, Equality, Equity, Sports, Football.

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# 1. Introduction

*The first chapter introduces the topic of gender inequality in sports and, more specifically, in Finnish football. Firstly, a background to the topic is provided. Secondly, the research question is presented, followed by the objectives of this master's thesis.*

## 1.1 Background

While the business world has slowly started to take action against unequal treatment of minorities based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and disability, just to mention a few, the discussions regarding discrimination and inequality are relatively current in the sports world. Private and public companies are adjusting their practices in response to increasing awareness and attention to problems relating to diversity (Mensi-Klarbach & Risberg, 2019). In the fear of losing their competitive advantage and reputation, companies are restructuring their operations and creating structures that promote diversity and inclusion. Compared to the increased diversity talk broader in society, these discussions have gone quite unnoticed in the sports world until now. Lately, there has been significantly more talk on diversity in sports, especially from the perspective of gender. For instance, in July 2021, the Norwegian women's beach handball team got fined 1,500 Euros for "improper clothing" while playing a bronze medal game in Euro 2021 tournament (Radnofsky, 2021). The team refused to play in bikini bottoms and wore thigh-length shorts instead, similar to those worn by the men's national beach handball team. The incident caught huge media attention discussing the different treatment of the players of the same sport solely due to their gender. All in all, while the business world is increasingly working on issues relating to diversity and inclusion, this is not entirely reflected in the sports world yet, leading to unequal treatment and lesser opportunities for minority groups such as women.



As Primecz and Romani (2019) argue, in European context gender is the diversity category that is considered and discussed the most. Even if the number of men and women is more or less equal in society, leadership positions in the companies are dominated by men (Primecz & Romani, 2019). The same seems to be true for sports organizations as well. As Cunningham (2008) puts it, “sport organizations are sites where men and men’s activities are privileged” (p. 136). Furthermore, as Kosofsky (1993) argues, the privilege of men in sports is traditionally justified by their physical superiority. Especially in the context of more physically requiring sports, such as football or basketball, the biological differences are highlighted as they have a fundamental impact on performance (Kosofsky, 1993). Despite the physical differences, several social factors, such as gender norms, put women in a discriminatory position in sports. For instance, women’s football was banned by national football associations in all Western countries for 50 years up until the 1970s (Archer & Prange, 2019). This ban was put in place as women’s football was seen as an ‘unsuitable’ game for women (Williams, 2006).

A lot has happened in women’s football since the ban was lifted in the 1970s. Still, women’s teams are far from being considered equals. The female players that play at the top-level face several obstacles that make it hard for them to play professionally (Burt, 2021). As Jonsson, Beielefeld, & Gouttebauge (2019) claim, “[t]he professional women’s game is subject to a range of adverse labour conditions which negatively impact the sporting performance of players or pose direct obstacles to the development of their potential.” (p. 27). The authors also believe that the poor labor conditions prevent the growth of the women’s side of the sport and are not only damaging for the players but also for the clubs and associations (Jonsson et al., 2019). Moreover, the strong systematic beliefs and norms in society impact women’s football as well. The International Federation of Association Football (FIFA, n.d.) argues that “[y]ears of institutional neglect and a lack of investment have prevented girls and women from playing the game” (p. 4). Accordingly, their Women’s Football Strategy encourages the organization to take action and address these long-existed issues while simultaneously promoting the important message of gender equality in football (FIFA, n.d.).

As one of the most gender-equal countries in the world (World Economic Forum, 2021), the second-ranked Finland has taken significant steps toward a more inclusive and equal environment for the female

football players playing at the top level. In 2020 the Football Association of Finland (FAF) decided to rebrand and rename the highest league for women to the National League instead of being called the Women's League (Kansallinen Liiga, 2022). With the renaming of the women's top league in Finland, the FAF aspired to promote gender equality and emphasize the fact that women's football is equivalent to professional football and deserves to be referred to accordingly. Traditionally, the women's leagues are treated as female versions of the top leagues for men (Naisten Liiga, n.d.). However, football has no gender, and therefore, everybody should have the right and opportunity to aim for the top (Kansallinen Liiga, 2022). In addition to the renaming initiative, starting from 2019, the FAF decided to compensate the women's and men's national teams according to the same terms (Sahlström, & Karttunen, 2019). Consequently, Finland became one of the first countries in the world to provide similar pay for both national teams, men and women. Despite the efforts and actions already taken by the FAF, there is a lot to be done to make sure that the female players are able to play professionally and focus on the sport without being discriminated against their gender. For instance, only 1-3 clubs out of 10 in the National League are able to provide a professional environment for their female players (Suomen Palloliitto, n.d.). Additionally, only two of the clubs have a goal-orientated strategy for developing women's football, and just a few players have the chance to play as fully (or even partly) professionals. On average, the female football players in the National League get paid 160,8€ per month.

## **1.2 Research question & objectives**

In order to effectively address gender inequality in Finnish football, it is crucial to investigate and understand how female players experience gender discrimination. Furthermore, as victims of the gender-based discrimination, it is also important to shed light on what can be done from their perspective to promote gender equality. Thus, this master's thesis aims to dig deeper and answer the following research question: *How do the top-level female football players experience gender inequality in Finland?*

As argued by Jonsson et al. (2019), the entertainment sector, including sports, has a unique opportunity to drive a change for positive values such as equality and inclusion in the face of the societal challenges. Moreover, as Kosofsky (1993) claims, “[s]ocially created inequalities in sports are a microcosm of gender inequality in society as a whole.” (p. 227). Therefore, any positive developments regarding gender equality in sports can improve gender equality wider in society (Kosofsky, 1993). Accordingly, sports and women’s football give a potential platform to push further the positive values of equality and inclusion at all levels of society. As a nation that is seen to be one of the role models for gender equality, Finland offers a highly relevant context to analyze the gender inequality in football from the perspective of the victims, namely the female players.

## **2. Literature Review**

*The second chapter presents the relevant literature and theories reviewed to set the topic of this master's thesis into an academic context and understand what has already been researched around the topic. Firstly, the definition of diversity and its various aspects are presented. Secondly, the concepts of equality and equity are introduced as approaches to diversity.*

### **2.1 Diversity**

#### ***2.1.1 Defining diversity***

When it comes to diversity, there is no universally accepted definition; therefore, the term is defined differently by different authors (Yadav & Lenka, 2020). As defined by Risberg, Mensi-Klarbach, and Hanappi-Egger (2019), diversity refers to “[...] difference in terms of social demography and social identity categories among the workforce.” (p. 4). Even if individual employees vary along with social demography and social identity characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and age, organizations are considered relatively homogenous (Weber, Sadri, & Gentry, 2018). Moreover, diversity is the recognition of differentiating personal attributes among individual members in a group (Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003). An important aspect of diversity is that it is always related to a social unit, and a single person cannot alone be considered diverse (Risberg et al., 2019). However, a unit is diverse, stemming from specific features and attributes of its members, such as age, gender, or educational background.

Diversity can be discussed from several perspectives. For a long time, the management and organizational studies relating to diversity have focused mostly on gender (Risberg et al., 2019). Even if gender remains an essential and widely discussed dimension of diversity, other diversity categories are emerging and gaining importance. The six most adopted diversity categories are age, ethnicity, beliefs or religion, disability,

sexual orientation, and gender identity (Risberg et al., 2019). These six dimensions are, for instance, applied by the European Union (EU) when talking about diversity. However, in the American context, the “Big 8” has been recognized as the main categories for diversity studies (Köllen, 2021). These eight categories include age, ethnicity/nationality, gender, mental/physical ability, organizational role/function, race, religion, and sexual orientation (Plummer in Köllen, 2021). Except the dimensions of organizational role and race, the diversity categories in the two continents are similar and include both visible and non-visible differences. Therefore, it is important to recognize the existence of these two aspects of diversity and how they interact in society. Currently, the research regarding diversity is focused on the visible dimensions the top three being age, gender, and race (Köllen, 2021). Simultaneously, dimensions of less visibility such as sexual orientation, religion, beliefs, and (mental) disability have been overlooked in diversity management research (Köllen, 2021).

### ***2.1.2 Diversity as a social construct***

An essential notion of diversity and the perceived differences is that they are socially constructed. Even if some argue that differences are based on biology, Primecz and Romani (2019) claim that “all categories understood as ‘differences’ are socially constructed and context dependent.” (p. 96). For example, gender is a social construct that is not a causal consequence of sex nor as ostensibly fixed as sex (Butler, 2002). Social categories are constructed in society through social interactions between individuals (Primecz & Romani, 2019). Therefore, social constructions are created collectively and sustained by individual members of society. Furthermore, Primecz and Romani (2019) argue that “social constructions do not prohibit certain behaviour or positions, but social processes influence individual actions and reactions by encouraging or discouraging certain choices.” (p. 97). When it comes to diversity dimensions, this leads to a preference for one category over another, and for instance, men are preferred over women for managerial positions. Consequently, these preferences result in power imbalances that are easily ignored in society and then sustained and reproduced through social and organizational practices (Primecz & Romani, 2019).

### ***2.1.3 Development of diversity management***

Diversity management can be seen as a tool to address and manage problems stemming from diversity, such as conflicts in the workplace due to a diverse workforce (Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Furthermore, as argued by Weber et al. (2018), “[m]anaging diversity is a fundamental aspect of leadership and is considered one of the main human resource management challenges facing organizations today” (p. 382). Diversity management is not a new concept, but it has gained much attention in organizational studies in the past decades. As defined by Thomas (1991), diversity management “[...] is a comprehensive managerial process for developing an environment that works for all employees.” (p. 10). In the USA, the roots of diversity management can be seen to lie in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Commission (Mensi-Klarbach, 2019; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). As an outcome, discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or ethnicity became illegal in organizations by employers (Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer, & Scott, 1993).

However, until the 1980s, the focus in the USA mainly was on promoting employment and career development of people of color and later women (Köllen, 2021). Decades later, in 1990, the term diversity management was invented by an early diversity consultant Roosevelt Thomas in the USA and from where it slowly spread across the world (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Mostly due to globalization, people’s mobility between countries has increased significantly in recent years and the importance of diversity management has become more evident (Yadav & Lenka, 2020). However, despite early efforts, discrimination and unequal treatment based on race and gender still continue today (Mensi-Klarbach, 2019). A great example of a recent incident is the police violence against black people in the USA that started the political and social movement of Black Lives Matter in 2013. The movement protests all around the world, highlighting racism, discrimination, and unequal treatment of black people.

#### ***2.1.4 Gender diversity***

Gender is arguably one of the most researched diversity dimensions. When it comes to discrimination based on sex, it is prohibited by EU law (Primecz & Romani, 2019). In societies with higher perceived gender equality, stereotypical gender roles are divided in a more neutral, equal way (Primecz & Romani, 2019). For instance, such societies have more women represented in managerial positions, and the childcare lies on both parents instead of solely on the mother (Primecz & Romani, 2019). Examples of such societies are the Nordic countries that all have a high score in gender equality according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 (World Economic Forum, 2021). Even if these countries are often considered role models when it comes to gender diversity, a closer look reveals that there is still a lot to do in these countries, and discrimination based on gender persists (Primecz & Romani, 2019). After all, as Ellemers (2018) puts it, being a man is considered as preferred and given a higher status compared to being a woman in many aspects of life. Although gender discrimination is attracting more attention and societies and organizations are taking steps to tackle the problem, there is still a lot to do even in countries that are seen as role models and forerunners for gender diversity.

When talking about gender, we traditionally tend to refer to the terms gender and sex interchangeably (Ellemers, 2018). However, it is becoming more common to distinguish these terms when discussing the differences between men and women (Köllen, 2021). As argued by Köllen (2021), this enables viewing gender as something socially and culturally constructed rather than solely focusing on the biological differences between a man and a woman. Furthermore, Ely and Padavic (2007) argue that to understand organizations and their structures better, future research should focus more on discovering the “historically situated contextual constraints” rather than analyzing the biological differences relating to gender. As Primecz and Romani (2019) put it:

These contextual constraints are, for example, socialization into a given gender and organizational practices that favor men. In sum, biological differences are not the explanations for fewer women in

higher positions, but rather societal or organizational practices, which prioritize men over women in certain job categories. (Primecz & Romani, 2019, p. 98)

Therefore, it is crucial to separate the two aspects regarding gender to understand the underlying issues, as many of them are socially constructed and embedded in the structures of the society.

### ***2.1.5 Doing gender & gendered organization***

In the world that we live in, it is impossible to avoid being affected by the gendered roles and expectations in society. As Nentwich and Tienari (2019) describe:

Throughout our lives, we are socialized into holding specific beliefs about what it means to be a woman or a man. When interacting with others, we constantly encounter situations where gender plays a role, whether we like it or not. We are members of families, schools, friendship groups and organizations, which expose us to particular practices that differentiate between men and women, ascribing particular traits and qualities to these gender categories. (Nentwich & Tienari, 2019, p. 127)

These social processes of ‘doing gender’ tend to lead to differentiation between men and women where men and masculinity are considered as superior and women and femininity of lesser value (Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). Gendered roles and expectations are a product of a long process and are eventually taken for granted and considered ‘normal’ (Nentwich & Tienari, 2019). For example, activities and professions that are characterized by masculine traits such as physical strength (sports) and leadership (managerial positions) are associated with men. As these gendered practices become institutionalized, they rarely get questioned, and therefore breaking these patterns becomes challenging (Nentwich & Tienari, 2019). Interestingly, the ‘doing gender’ perspective reveals that both women and men participate in maintaining and reproducing the gender roles and expectations (Nentwich & Tienari, 2019). Hence, the beliefs and practices that reinforce inequalities between men and women persist in society and are reflected in organizational practices and structures.



As Nentwich and Kelan (2014) argue, gendered structures are part of society in ways that enable shaping gender identity and roles between men and women, for instance, through jobs. Furthermore, we reproduce and allow these gendered structures to persist without questioning as we follow these socially constructed practices and structures in our daily lives (Nentwich & Tienari, 2019). For example, Acker (2012) claims that “inequalities are built into job design, wage determination, distribution of decision-making and supervisory power, the physical design of the workplace, and rules, both explicit and implicit, for behaviour at work” (p. 215). Therefore, ‘doing gender’ leads to practices and structures that, without intervention, keep reproducing the inequalities between men and women. In addition, structures are an essential aspect to consider when discussing gender inequality. Structures play a crucial part in reproducing and maintaining gendered practices, but simultaneously they offer a chance to make a difference and change how gender roles are perceived.

### ***2.1.6 Diversity legitimacy***

In his article, Köllen (2021) discusses legitimacy and notes that the traditional reason for implementing diversity management is to comply with laws and regulations. However, he further argues that these laws tend to be broad and therefore leave it up to companies to decide how to comply with them. How do the diversity management practices establish legitimacy in organizations then? Köllen (2021) presents two perspectives to legitimize diversity management: the economic value of diversity management and the moral value of diversity management. The first perspective focuses on the economic value of diversity management and considers that diversity management is the right thing to do as it generates financial benefits. Therefore, following these practices will eventually pay off in monetary terms and the legitimacy for diversity management is established this way (Robinson & Dechant, 1997). The second perspective emphasizes the moral aspect of legitimacy regarding diversity management. According to the moral perspective, individuals and organizations are responsible for the overall well-being in society. Therefore, individuals and organizations should follow the societal values to ensure the well-being of people, and thus diversity management is considered the right thing

to do (Gilbert, Stead, & Ivancevich, 1999). However, these two perspectives, the business and moral case, can coexist and being morally good but simultaneously financially profitable are not mutually exclusive (Mensi-Klarbach, 2019).

As Mensi-Klarbach (2019) puts it, “[t]he moral case argues that discrimination should be combated in order to achieve equality of opportunity.” (p. 82). Simultaneously, the business case looks at diversity through economic goals that will help the company to, for instance, create profit and lower costs (Mensi-Klarbach, 2019). Even if it might seem like the two cases are in conflict with each other, they are highly intertwined and can coexist. In its report, the Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services (CSES, 2003) identifies two ways to benefit from diversity management: long-term focusing on “value drivers” and short-term aiming to enhance business performance. On the one hand the former considers the tangible and intangible “value drivers” such as human capital that can create a competitive advantage and stable cash flows for a company (Mensi-Klarbach, 2019). On the other hand, the latter puts importance on generating profits in the short-term, and that way enabling long-term focus on “value drivers” (CSES, 2003). Therefore, solely focusing on business or moral case might not be the most beneficial option as these two often go hand in hand. To conclude, a strong business performance creates more opportunities for companies to go beyond the legal requirements regarding diversity management. Simultaneously, enhanced diversity measurements can create profits due to higher motivation among employees but also higher moral acceptance from external viewers.

## **2.2 From equality to equity**

Equality is one way to approach diversity and its challenges, such as discrimination and prejudices. In many modern organizations and societies, equality is treated as a core value, and it is used as a fundamental approach to decision-making (Romani & Binswanger, 2019). Romani and Binswanger (2019) define equality as equal treatment for everyone, for instance, when it comes to rights, status, or opportunities. This means that every individual should be granted the same rights and opportunities, despite their gender, nationality, religion or beliefs, or sexual orientation. Furthermore, equality is treated as a moral compass to recognize differential

treatment in organizations and societies (Takeuchi, Dearing, Bartholomew, & McRoy, 2018). As Takeuchi et al. (2018) further argue, “[o]ver time, equality has changed in meaning to refer to the similarity of treatment of individuals and groups.” (p. 13). However, the concept of equality assumes that everybody has the same starting point and similar resources in their hands. Therefore, equality has been criticized for not taking into consideration and overlooking the fact that in reality, not everyone is in the same position or situation from the start (Takeuchi et al., 2018).

In comparison to equality, the concept of equity emerged as an alternative that takes into consideration the fact that not all people have the same starting point (Takeuchi et al., 2018). Equity means that people are treated impartially, recognizing that people have different needs, and these needs should be considered (Romani & Binswanger, 2019). Therefore, equal opportunities are enabled by considering that the starting point can be very different for different individuals. Moreover, equity encourages understanding and studying further the social, economic, and political reasons behind inequalities (Takeuchi et al., 2018). Understanding the reasons behind inequalities enables the recognition of individual needs. Finally, equal outcomes can be reached by considering these differentiating needs and creating environments where equal opportunities are enabled by highlighting these needs.

### **3. Analytical Framework**

*The third chapter presents the analytical framework that is later used to analyze the findings of this master's thesis in a more theoretical matter. Firstly, it is demonstrated that gender inequality in sports is socially constructed. Secondly, the three enforcing mechanisms that mirror the social construct of gender inequality in sports are presented. These three mechanisms are lack of opportunities for women, business vs. moral case, and media coverage.*

#### **3.1 Gender inequality as a social construct in sports**

In the world of sports, female athletes are constantly battling against gender-based discrimination and stereotyping. The discrimination relating to gender is often justified by arguing for the difference in physical ability that then again affects the interest and demand of consumers (Kosofsky, 1993). However, while physical ability is quite a distinct difference, there are other considerable explanations for the discrimination female athletes face. As argued by Kosofsky (1993), “[t]here are many social factors which steer women out of sports or into unpopular sports and relegate lower pay and fewer opportunities to professional women athletes.” (p. 209). Furthermore, due to social gender norms, parents tend to treat their male and female children differently from a young age:

Girls and boys are provided with different toys. Girls are discouraged from playing sports with boys, and encouraged to play in exclusively female groups. [...] Females are taught that their proper role in sports is that of cheerleader or sideline supporter of males, who are the athletes. Young boys can dream of becoming star athletes and are given male sports figures as heroes; young girls have few such role models. (Kosofsky, 1993, p. 222)

Accordingly, women athletes grow up with and surrounded by social constructs that discriminate against them. Moreover, these social constructs of gender unconsciously affect the attitudes and mindsets of people toward women in sports.

As a popular societal activity, sports are a significant part of society and reflect pretty accurately the prevailing gender inequalities (Kosofsky, 1993). Kosofsky (1993) explains further that the social norms dictate the gender roles that are also clearly present in sports. Even if Kosofsky's article dates back to 1993, it seems like not so much has changed in 30 years and similar ideologies persist. For instance, due to historical perceptions of gender roles, women's football in England is facing considerable image problems, gender discrimination, and stereotyping despite its rapidly growing popularity (Clarkson, Cox, & Thelwell, 2019). However, while the socially constructed gender inequalities in sports reflect the society, any improvements in the sports world can potentially enhance the status of women wider in society. When female athletes are seen in society as equals to men, the masculine qualities such as leadership and strength that are associated with sports also become accepted qualities for women (Kosofsky, 1993). This normalization of women as equals in sports will not only open more professional opportunities for women in sports but also enable them to expand their limited social roles wider in society.

The following sections will present the three enforcing mechanisms that can be seen to mirror the social construct of gender inequality in sports. These three mechanisms are the foundation of the analytical framework and stem from previous research on gender inequality in sports.

### **3.2 Lack of opportunities for women in sports**

The first mechanism that reinforces gender inequality is the lack of opportunities for women in sports. Traditionally, the sports world and the job opportunities in sports have been dominated by men. As Kosofsky (1993) argues, it is considerably more challenging for women to become professional athletes thanks to a limited number of spots for professional opportunities. Even as professionals, the pay women get is not enough

to make a living out of it (Kosofsky, 1993). The unequal pay is one of the most notable aspects that characterize the inequality between men and women in sports (Kosofsky, 1993). Out of the most popular sports, the pay gap in football is particularly wide (Sporting Intelligence, 2017). Even if the popularity of women's football is growing, the pay that female football players get is minimal compared to that received by the male players (Archer & Prange, 2019). Moreover, as presented by Archer and Prange (2019), "[w]omen footballers earn as little as one-hundredth the sums of their male counterparts, even amongst elite players in nations where women's football is relatively advanced." (p. 417). Thus, the pay gap is one of the most significant ways gender inequality presents itself in professional sports.

The lower pay and lack of opportunities for female athletes are frequently justified by arguing for biological and physical differences (Kosofsky, 1993). Furthermore, even if the participation of women in professional sports is increasing and the performance gap between genders is decreasing, women athletes rarely have similar opportunities to those offered to men:

However, without more opportunities and better financial benefits in athletic careers, women's athletic performance will continue to be constricted. Athletes improve with proper training. Proper training requires good coaching and equipment, as well as encouragement and support, which women athletes rarely receive. [...] most female athletes must support themselves through non-sports jobs, limiting their time to train and travel. Since there is no significant financial reward available from sports, women must plan for other careers instead of devoting that time and energy to improving their athletic talents. (Kosofsky, 1993, p. 226)

Therefore, the lack of financial support pushes female athletes to pursue careers or studies outside their sport. Again, this leads to a reality where professional female athletes must juggle between their sport and professional careers. Compared to their men counterparts that can put all their time and effort into the sport, it is way challenging, if not impossible, for the female athletes to reach their full potential. In conclusion, the different opportunities which are most of the time justified by factors such as physical differences, sustain

gender inequality in sports. Thus, resulting from a lesser position and lack of opportunities, women athletes have a hard time closing the performance gap compared to men.

### **3.3 Business vs. moral case in sports and particularly in football**

The second mechanism enforcing the social construct of gender inequality in sports is the exchange between business and moral case. One common way to justify gender-based inequalities in sports is from a financial perspective. The public opinion tends to be that while men create higher revenues and attract more viewers in sports, their higher salaries and prize money is also justified (Archer & Prange, 2019). Therefore, solely arguing for the business case, different treatment is perceived as rightful in most cases. However, for example, there is no support indicating that the quality of women's football is related to economic development (Lago, Lago-Peñas, & Lago-Peñas, 2021). Instead, the performance of women's football seems to be more affected by the social and political climate. According to Lago et al. (2021), “[i]n countries where women are more empowered and where women's football is actively promoted (independently of the characteristics of the governing bodies for women's football), women's national football teams do better.” (p. 16). Furthermore, as argued by Hoffmann, Chew Ging, Matheson, & Ramasamy (2006), the performance in women's football is affected by the prevailing political system and gender inequality measures in place wider in society. Therefore, focusing entirely on the financial aspect will not help improve the quality of women's football. Instead, to eliminate gender inequalities, more effort should be made to create environments for empowering and promoting women in general but specifically in sports (Lago et al., 2021).

To focus on this moral perspective and the responsibility for overall well-being in society, Archer and Prange (2019) present three arguments why it is morally feasible that women get equal pay in a football context. Even if the article focuses on the salary aspect, I believe the three arguments can be applied to other forms of gender-based discrimination as well because the pay gap is a significant but just one form of unequal treatment in sports. Firstly, male and female professional athletes can be seen to put an equal amount of time and effort into their sport and play at similar levels (Archer & Prange, 2019). Therefore, according to the

‘labour rights’ argument, women should be paid the same salary for the same work. However, as the financial aspect and commercial value play a significant role in the contemporary sporting world, this moral aspect of addressing gender-based inequalities is rarely considered. Secondly, Archer and Prange (2019) present the ‘expressive power’ argument to justify equal treatment and similar pay for women. According to the ‘expressive power’ argument, it is morally rightful to provide female athletes with the same opportunities, while failing to do so would send a message that women are valued less (Archer & Prange, 2019). Therefore, treating female and male athletes similarly would signal that, in fact, the genders are considered equals. Furthermore, on financial terms, it seems feasible that female and male athletes are provided with different opportunities as, in most cases, men’s sports generate higher revenues. However, sending a message that considers women less valuable can be harmful to organizations (Archer & Prange, 2019). Thus, paying equal salaries and providing similar opportunities would signal equality that would also benefit organizations.

While the two first arguments focus on equality and providing equal opportunities for both genders, the third argument, ‘historical injustice’, approaches the issue from an equity perspective. As described by Archer and Prange (2019), the ‘historical injustice’ argument says there is a moral obligation to repair and compensate for women’s sports due to wrongdoing in the past. For instance, women’s football was forbidden in Western countries for 50 years until the 1970s as it was not perceived appropriate for women (Archer & Prange, 2019). Therefore, women’s football was taken the chance to develop and grow in the past. In addition to the wrongdoing in the past, the ‘historical injustice’ keeps affecting women’s football still today (Archer & Prange, 2019). From the ‘historical injustice’ perspective, it is rightful not only to provide women with the same opportunities but also to compensate for the development and commercial value lost during the 50-year ban. Even if the ‘historical injustice’ argument does not obligate any organization to repair any acts of discrimination that have happened in the past, “they may be expected to show leadership and take up the political responsibility for social change, with the aim of repairing structural injustices in women’s football.” (Archer & Prange, 2019, p. 432). To conclude, the business case, the financial aspect seems to currently dominate the decision-making in sports. However, it appears that the business case that is recreating the gender inequality in sports can be challenged with the moral case. Accordingly, even if, from the financial point of



view, paying equally and providing similar opportunities for women does not seem justified, from the moral point of view, it is the right thing to do and promotes gender equality in sports.

### **3.4 The role of media coverage in sports**

Finally, the third mechanism that reinforces gender inequality as a social construct is media coverage. As sports is a widely discussed topic in society, media coverage also plays a crucial role in creating public opinion. As argued by Harrison & Secarea (2010), public judgment is greatly affected by how female athletes are portrayed in the media. Furthermore, Kosofsky (1993) recognizes media as a mean to maintain the existing gender roles and to condition the audience to watch and prefer male athletes:

The media conditions the public to prefer watching male athletes. When the media covers women playing professional sports, the contrasts between male and female play are highlighted and the women's version is trivialized and devalued. Some people involved in sports have proposed changes in the women's version of a sport in order to make female athletes look like male athletes, predicting that these changes may increase the popularity [*sic*] and excitement for spectators. (Kosofsky, 1993, p. 225)

What is more, women's sports are currently not as present in media and are less accessible to the audience, leading to fewer viewers and lower pay for the athletes (Burt, 2021). As also stated by Cooky, Messner, & Musto (2015), the lack of visibility and a rather negative way of portraying women's sports in media impact the interest and judgment of the public. Therefore, media coverage plays a crucial role in the way women's sports are seen and treated (Speer, 2001). Even if the accomplishments and skills of female athletes can be as impressive as male athletes, the recognition is rarely given accordingly (Harrison & Secarea, 2010). Thus, media is an influential tool to market women's sports and paint a more positive picture for the public by highlighting the entertaining aspects such as skills and accomplishments. To sum up, media coverage works as a mechanism to reinforce gender inequality by reproducing the existing gender norms in the way women are presented in the media. However, media coverage has also the ability to change the public

perception of women as athletes. When women are provided with the same respect and media coverage as men, the socialization process would promote men and women as equals and justify equal treatment and opportunities (Kosofsky, 1993).

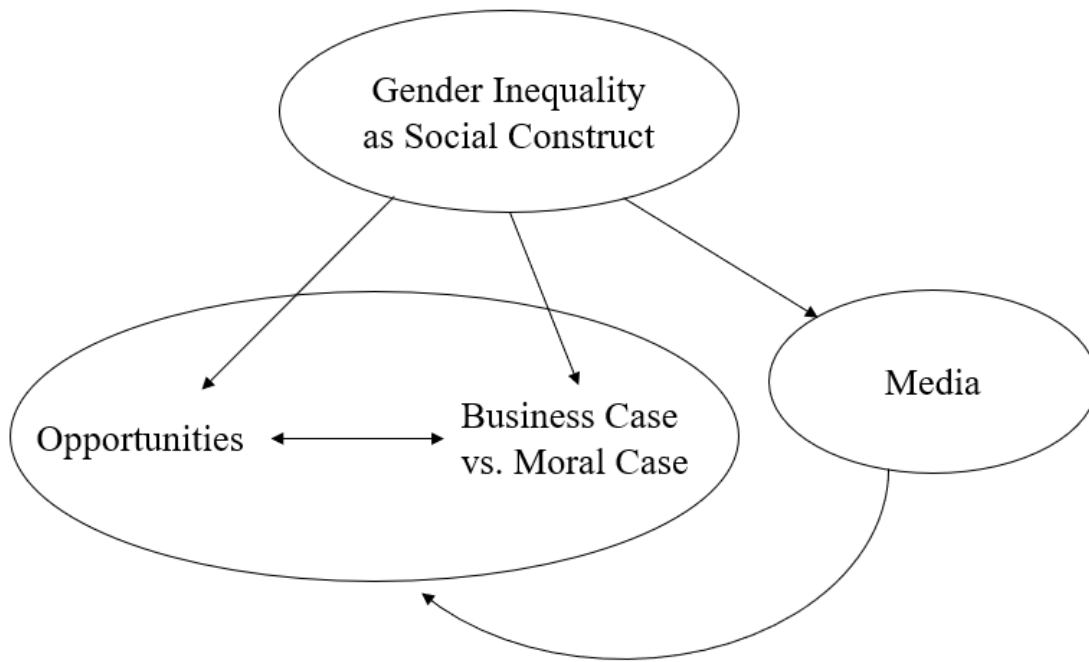


Figure 1. Analytical framework. Source: Author's compilation.

## 4. Methodology

*The fourth chapter introduces the methodological principles applied in this master's thesis and explains the reasoning behind the methodological choices made. Firstly, the research philosophy applied is presented, followed by the introduction to methodological choice and strategy. Secondly, the process of data collection and analysis is described in detail. Thirdly, the ethical considerations regarding this master's thesis are addressed. Lastly, the chapter is concluded with the (de)limitations of this master's thesis.*

### 4.1 Research philosophy

The purpose of this master's thesis is to study and analyze the experiences relating to gender-based discrimination of professional female football players in Finland. Thus, the phenomenon consists of different perspectives, namely, how the players experience reality. Therefore, the reality is created by the people embedded in the context, in this case, the female football players. According to this notion of the nature of reality, this master's thesis follows an interpretivist research philosophy (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). From the ontological point of view, reality is seen as socially constructed through culture and language. The focus is on making sense and understanding the experiences of the participants (Saunders et al., 2016). Hence, there is no one single reality, but rather, the reality depends on the viewpoint and is constructed by different experiences of multiple observers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, & Jaspersen, 2012). Taking this into account, this master's thesis focuses on understanding the perspective of the players. This is also reflected in the methodological choices made for data collection, as presented in detail in the data collection and analysis section below. To address the assumptions of what is considered legitimate knowledge, epistemology, this master's thesis focuses on the participants' stories, narratives, and opinions and listening to the meaning they give for the reality. The subjectivist approach to knowledge will help the researcher uncover the rich and complex reality that stems from individual context and experiences (Saunders et al., 2016). This viewpoint is

valuable to shed light on how female players experience the discrimination in the football world and to understand what can be done from their point of view to provide equal opportunities for them to play professionally.

Moreover, interpretivists recognize that the researcher's values and those participating in the research play a considerable role. As argued by Saunders et al. (2016), "the role that your own values play in all stages of the research process is of great importance if research results are to be credible." (p. 128). Therefore, from the point of axiology, it is important to acknowledge how I, as a researcher, will deal with my own values and those of the research participants. Saunders et al. (2016) proposes that creating a statement of personal values can help the researcher recognize the values that might affect the credibility of the research results. Therefore, my statement of personal values goes accordingly:

*Every individual has the right to equal treatment regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, or sexual orientation. Through personal experiences but also through experiences of close friends, I have firsthand experienced and seen that inequalities exist in the football world between genders, and I believe it is an overall responsibility in society to help decrease the inequalities that are solely based on one's gender.*

As the statement of personal values indicates, values are present in this master's thesis. However, to ensure that my values will not have a significant effect on the result of the research, firstly, I am informed and aware of the extent to which my values can affect the research process. Secondly, I aim to keep an open mind throughout the thesis writing process to avoid self-bias and presumptions based on prior personal experiences. Thus, I acknowledge my bias relating to values but will make extraordinary efforts to minimize any bias and take an objective standpoint to the thesis writing process as possible.

## **4.2 Methodological choice and strategy**

In line with the chosen research philosophy, this master's thesis aims to gather data from multiple perspectives with the help of data triangulation. As Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) argue, this helps the researcher ensure that different perspectives and diverse experiences are captured. Furthermore, data triangulation acknowledges that a combination of research methods will lead to a more holistic understanding of social phenomena (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). This master's thesis can be seen to apply two forms of research methods. Firstly, the single case study method is applied to study the National League in Finland as one case of a top league for women in the world. Focusing on one case enables in-depth analysis of one exemplary instance (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). As stated by Yin (2013), case studies are criticized for not being generalizable and generating a lot of data that the researchers can interpret as they want. However, for example, Siggelkow (2007) defends case studies by arguing that they inspire new ideas and enable the emergence of abstract concepts. Therefore, single cases can be uniquely interesting and help discover new insights (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

Secondly, the grounded theory method is applied, meaning an approach to analysis “where there is no a priori definitional codes but where the structure is derived from the data and the constructs and categories derived emerge from the respondents under study” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p. 116). For this master's thesis, a combination of inductive and deductive approaches to research was applied. At first, a more deductive approach was chosen. However, starting from the existing literature and theories was not helpful and rather created confusion. Thus, I, as a researcher, decided to take an inductive approach instead, which helped me unfold the process in a new and more meaningful way. After the grounded theory model was generated purely inductively from the data, I went back to a more deductive way of conducting research to see what literature there is on the concepts that emerged from the data. Therefore, the analytical framework has been informed by the data, and the existing literature and theories have been used as a help to theorize the concepts present in the grounded theory model. This notion of methodological choice as part of the natural course of the thesis writing process is further developed in the discussion section later on.

Following Charmaz's (2014) constructionist stance on grounded theory creation, this thesis started with formulating a research question followed by the recruitment and sampling of the participants. From the data collected, several coding rounds were conducted to reach the saturation of categories (Charmaz, 2014). As presented by Charmaz (2014), this focused coding and categorizing was then the foundation for the theory building. To make sense of the data, different analysis tools were considered. As a result of the inductive approach to the data, themes and concepts started to emerge during the interviews and coding process. Therefore, at first, applying thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006) was considered. However, the Gioia Methodology (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) was finally chosen due to its systematic and analytical approach to inductive data analysis. As presented in Corley and Gioia (2004), I found the creation of a data structure a helpful way to make sense of and structure the data. While the data structure captures the experiences of the informants in theoretical terms, a grounded theory model is created to explain the phenomenon and illustrate the dynamic relationship between concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). Thus, this master's thesis relies on the Gioia Methodology as an inductive approach to grounded theory building.

## **4.3 Data collection and analysis**

### ***4.3.1 Primary data***

In order to answer the research question and explore the topic in-depth, this master's thesis relies on two main forms of primary data. Firstly, the most important primary data consist of semi-structured interviews that were conducted with eleven female players of the National League (see *Table 1* below). Secondly, to get a better and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon at hand, three unstructured discussions were held with representatives of the FAF and the FPA (Football Players Association in Finland). Due to the local nature of the research and geographical distance, all the primary data collection has occurred in the Finnish language and via Microsoft Teams. For the unstructured discussions, field notes have been taken that have been then utilized to support the findings stemming from the interviews.

Player #	Age	Number of clubs represented in NL	Number of seasons played in NL	Date	Interview Length	Page count
1	24	2	7	16.02.2022	00:45:48	11
2	21	3	6	17.02.2022	00:37:42	9
3	24	2	8	17.02.2022	00:58:47	13
4	23	2	7	18.02.2022	01:02:20	16
5	26	3	11	18.02.2022	01:10:43	13
6	22	1	7	18.02.2022	00:47:19	10
7	23	2	7	22.02.2022	01:29:18	23
8	22	2	6	24.02.2022	01:23:38	20
9	28	4	11	24.02.2022	01:36:20	23
10	22	2	5	25.02.2022	00:38:58	10
11	25	4	6	31.03.2022	01:38:25	20
					<b>Total:</b> 12:09:18	<b>Total:</b> 168

*Table 1.* Overview of the interviews.

As argued by Easterby-Smith et al. (2012), language data is a meaningful way to gain an understanding of social and organizational realities enabling the discovery of new insights and perceptions. One of the main methods to capture these views communicated through language is qualitative interviews (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Therefore, this master's thesis employs qualitative interviews as the main primary data collection method to develop an understanding of the reality of the female football players. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are conducted to provide overall direction but to give room for the emergence of new insights and encourage open discussion. In order to answer the research question, the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of the players play a crucial role, and therefore having the flexibility and space for elaboration has a key importance. All the interviews have been recorded and then transcribed to ensure the credibility of the findings and that no data is lost. The primary data stemming from the interviews consists of over 12 hours of video

recording that has been converted into audio format for transcription purposes and equals 168 pages of transcribed text (see *Appendix B*). Eleven interviews were carried out between the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 and the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2022, with the interview length ranging from 38 minutes to 1 hour 38 minutes.

As this master's thesis is a qualitative study, a non-probabilistic sampling strategy has been chosen. Qualitative sampling strategies focus on analyzing a larger phenomenon from the perspective of single instances. To identify those instances, purposeful sample selection is applied (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). More specifically, the samples were selected through an ad-hoc sampling strategy through personal contacts and referrals from the representative of the FAF. While time constraint is one of the challenges facing this master's thesis, speed of data collection through accessibility and availability were prioritized. Additionally, the purposeful sampling strategy enabled covering different clubs in size and geographical location. Knowing some of the players personally offered a comfortable setting for them to openly talk about their experiences and issues relating to gender inequality in football. As a former football player, I was able to step in the shoes of the players and approach the topic with a higher level of awareness. The sample selection criteria were: a former or current player in the National League that has played several seasons and went through the transformation from the Women's League to the National League. These criteria were chosen to cover experience over a longer period of time to reveal any developments and capture experiences from players who have played in several clubs. Furthermore, the top league in Finland went through the transformation from the Women's League to the National League to take steps towards a more professional environment for top female players. One interesting aspect was to see if this change had any impact on players' experiences regarding gender inequality in the football world.

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was communicated to the participants to allow them to prepare beforehand. The interview guide (see *Appendix C*) was created to give some overall direction for the interviews. Following the technique of semi-structured interviews, the question set was treated rather as a loose help that aimed to promote open discussion and elaboration. The interview guide covered questions in four main categories: background questions, experienced differences, the role of the Football Association of Finland, and concluding questions. Following the method of semi-structured interviews, the interview guide



consisted of open-ended questions. In addition, follow-up questions were asked when deemed appropriate and necessary.

When it comes to data analysis, the data was analyzed in its native language Finnish. This choice to analyze in the original language was made to capture the richness of the data and ensure that no meaning was lost in translation at this point of the data analysis process. Starting from the interviews, the transcription occurred via the transcription tool provided in Microsoft Word. The transcribed text was then looked over and corrected when necessary. While the quality of the transcription was relatively high, the first round of coding was conducted simultaneously with the proof reading on Microsoft Word. Thereafter, the second round of coding was conducted on NVivo.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, the direct quotations from the coding presented in this master's thesis were finally translated directly from Finnish to English.

Translating from one language to another is a challenging task. As Venuti (2018) argues, “[a] translation that seeks to register linguistic and cultural differences – a translation, in other words, that is “foreignizing” – does not escape the inevitable domestication.” (p. xiii). Therefore, the great challenge of translation is to capture the linguistic and cultural traits of one language in the context and in the terms of another language, especially when it comes to spoken language. A foreignizing approach to translation has been applied to the player quotes in this master's thesis to address this challenge. While any translation is unavoidably domesticating, the foreignizing approach aims to respect the linguistic and cultural differences in the original text by adapting to the target language but indirectly signaling the differences (Venuti, 2018). Because this master's thesis focuses on capturing the experiences of female football players in Finland through language, the linguistic and cultural nuances play a significant role. Thus, in order to communicate these nuances and understand them in a local context, the foreignizing approach aims to “send the reader abroad” instead of “bringing the author back home” (Venuti, 2018). Most importantly, the foreignizing approach will help ensure that as little original meaning is lost in translation as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> NVivo is software for qualitative data analysis and enables examination of the different codes side by side.

The data analysis was carried out using the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). The Gioia Methodology was chosen to ensure the credibility of the findings and address the lack of rigor that can be said to characterize qualitative research (Gioia et al., 2013). The aim of the Gioia Methodology is a systematic and analytical approach to data analysis by creating a data structure (see *Figure 2* below) to demonstrate the process of data analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). As Gioia et al. (2013) present, the data structure consists of 1<sup>st</sup> order concepts, that are then categorized under 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes, and finally through “theoretical saturation” distilled into aggregate dimensions. Furthermore, the Gioia Methodology promotes the discovery of new concepts by making “extraordinary efforts to give voice to the informants in the early stages of data gathering and analysis and also to represent their voices prominently in the reporting of the research” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 17). Thus, the data analysis has been conducted fully inductively to enable the emergence of new ideas and insights and avoid any bias resulting from previous knowledge. However, as the Gioia Methodology suggests, the researcher is not unaware of prior research on the field but purposefully keeps her distance from it, also referred to as “willing suspension of belief”, in order to have an open mind for new insights and ideas to emerge (Gioia et al., 2013).

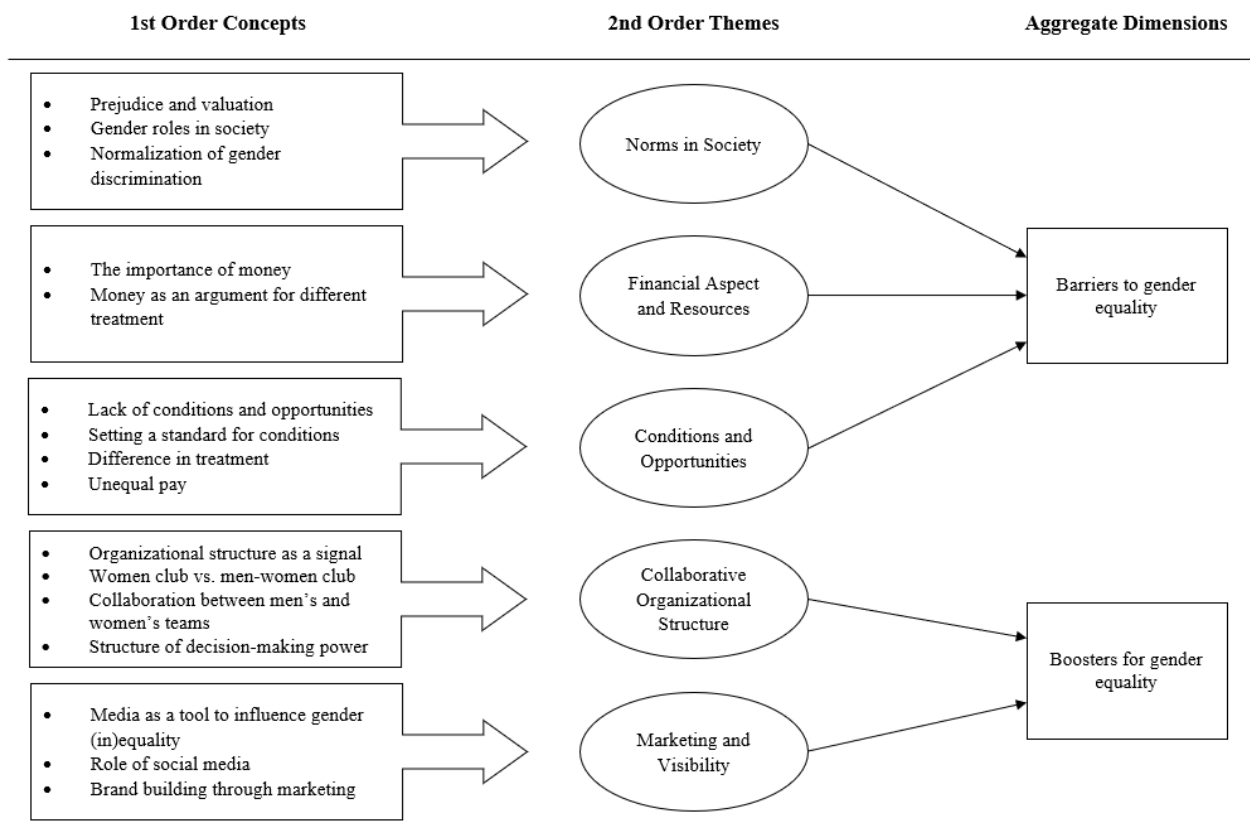


Figure 2. Data structure. Source: Author's compilation.

#### 4.3.2 Secondary data

For the purpose of data triangulation and to support the primary data, secondary data sources were also included in the writing process of this master's thesis. These secondary data sources consist of, for instance, internal documentation received directly from the representative of the FAF, such as reports and presentations on the association, the National League, and other women's leagues abroad. Additionally, different external secondary data sources were inquired to get a broader perspective and not rely solely on internally produced data. This set of data sources consisted of, for example, news articles found online and websites of the FAF, the FPA, the National League, and the different clubs.

## **4.4 Ethical considerations**

There are several ethical aspects involved in conducting research that should be considered. Especially, when involving participants, for example, through interviews, an ethical approach to research should be a top priority. Bryman and Bell (2011) present ethical principles that cover four main areas of concern: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception. To ensure that this master's thesis is done in an ethical matter, these four areas of ethical principles are followed throughout the research process. Firstly, I, as a researcher, have put extraordinary efforts to ensure that no physical or psychical harm or stress has been caused to any participant involved by creating a secure and comfortable environment. Secondly, all the participants were informed prior to their interviews about the purpose and content of the research as accurately as possible. Based on this information, they were given the chance to freely decide if they want to participate or not. The participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without providing an explanation. Thirdly, for the purpose of this master's thesis, all the information that can lead to the identification of any of the participants, such as names or names of their clubs, has been anonymized. This is done to protect the participants' privacy and prevent any possible reputational harm. In addition, to comply with GDPR, all the data, including any personal information, has been handled and stored securely and with care. Lastly, to ensure that no deception of the participants occurs, all the communication with them has been carried out with full transparency and honesty. Additionally, the participants have been offered the chance to review their input in the final work to ensure that they have a full understanding of their contribution.

## **4.5 (De)limitations**

The writing process of this master's thesis included two kinds of constraints, limitations, and delimitations. To start with, there are some aspects to the thesis writing process that I, as a researcher, cannot control. Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge that this thesis writing has been restricted with time. This time constraint has

impacted, for instance, the sample size and the scope of the research project. Secondly, all the primary data collection has occurred online over Microsoft Teams due to physical distance. This inability to interact with the interviewees might have affected the interpretation of their expressions as, for example, body language could not be used as a cue. Moreover, the online format of conducting interviews was subject to connectivity issues that were experienced in certain parts of the data collection process. Lastly, because the native language of the interviews and the data is Finnish, some of the original meaning and cultural and linguistic nuances might have been lost in the translation process. Despite the best efforts to try to maintain the original words and expressions as communicated in interviews, translating text from one language to another will dilute these nuances.

When it comes to aspects that are outside the methodological choices made by the researcher, validity and credibility are aspects to consider. Firstly, one main critique against qualitative research is that it lacks scholarly rigor (Gioia et al., 2013). As this master's thesis applies qualitative research methods and takes an inductive approach to data analysis, the critique relating to the lack of rigor should be considered. In order to ensure the reliability of the findings, this master's thesis follows the Gioia Methodology as a systematic approach to data analysis. On the one hand the Gioia Methodology enables creative imagination but, on the other hand, demonstrates a systematic approach to qualitative research through the construction of a data structure. Secondly, case studies, especially single case studies, are often criticized for not being generalizable (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). As case studies examine closer one or a small number of instances, it is argued that this is rarely generalizable on a broader level or to other settings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). However, the purpose of this master's thesis was to study and understand a single phenomenon, namely, how female football players experience inequality in Finnish football. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings was not the main focus. Instead, the single case study approach enabled the researcher to obtain a rich picture of the phenomenon at hand and shed more light on the aspects that emerged as a result.

## **5. Findings**

*The fifth chapter presents the findings of this master's thesis. Firstly, the three identified barriers to gender equality in Finnish football are introduced. Secondly, the two boosters for gender equality that can help promote women's football in Finland are presented. Finally, both sections are followed by sub-conclusions that summarize the key findings, respectively.*

### **5.1 Barriers to gender equality**

Stemming from the data collected, three barriers to gender equality in Finnish football were identified. These barriers are norms in society, financial aspect and resources, and conditions and opportunities. The three barriers are presented in the following section, together with a sub-conclusion at the end.

#### **5.1.1 Norms in society**

As found in the interviews, the existing norms in society greatly affect the everyday life of top female football players in Finland. One of the most significant ways the norms in society present themselves is through prejudice and valuation of women as professional athletes in football. Many players experience that they are not considered equals and are not taken seriously as professional football players because they are women. One player described the forms of discrimination she experiences as a female football player: "Overall, it is the valuation given towards women's football and sports, that I sometimes feel that we are not taken seriously" (Player 6, 18-02-2022, 00:02:34). Another player talked about the attitudes she faces by saying: "I have faced a lot of attitudes like women's football is not as entertaining or who wants even to watch it?" (Player 2, 17-02-2022, 00:02:32). As an example of prejudice and negative attitude towards women's football, Player 4 told that a coach for a junior team had jokingly said to her that women's football should be put into the same

category as paralympic football. Other players also talked about their experiences with a lot of downplaying from people outside:

Somehow people consider that what we are doing is not as valuable [...]. The way we play is not as beautiful, or we are not as skilled or as athletes as men [...]. We are not considered equals. I do not think it should be like that, though. Even if our game does not look the same, it is still football, and even if most of us do not get paid and men do, we are still doing the same work. (Player 3, 17-02-2022, 00:38:52)

I have experienced a lot of downplaying that I have to somehow prove to people that we deserve more recognition, that I am a good player, that this is a good team, or that women's football is good, and you can make it. You have to do so much to prove yourself to get any recognition at all. Even if you are a professional, you are not automatically given the same recognition. (Player 7, 22-02-2022, 00:04:55)

The belief that women's football is less valuable seems to be quite widespread, and some players brought up that this is also reflected in the people close to them, such as family and friends:

There is a prejudice against women in football, you know that women are not good. [...] That they cannot play, or similar comments relating to the fact that originally men's football is the right form. You can hear it also among your friends who play football, especially from men. That it is so stuck with them even if they say it jokingly. (Player 7, 22-02-2022, 00:03:12)

The comments are not just from random people. Also, my own parents ask me when I will quit playing football and enter the working life. In some cases, not even your closest circle supports you. (Player 4, 18-02-2022, 00:23:33)

Not only is women's football considered less worthy, but also an improper career choice for women. For instance, Player 4 said that she feels that being a female football professional is not considered "something meaningful enough to do". Many of the players also agreed that it is expected of them to study or work or do "something proper" instead of playing professionally. Moreover, Player 7 explained that she was put into a difficult position as she was asked to join a team abroad to play professionally. However, her parents pressured

her to stay and focus on her studies instead. She described this as a conflict in trying to balance what she wanted to do (play football) and what she was expected to do (study or work), also indicating that football was not considered a proper job by her parents.

Another aspect that several players brought up was the perceived gender roles and sports being traditionally something that men do. These experiences seem to start from a young age as one player explains: “My interest towards football started when I was never chosen to play with the boys, because [...] the boys were like “you cannot play because you are a girl” so you are not supposed to play” (Player 7, 22-02-2022, 00:00:16). Moreover, another player describes the attitudes she has faced by saying that “it is a norm, that how it has been, that men do sports and women do something else” (Player 6, 18-02-2022, 00:24:32). It appears that the players believe that traditional beliefs still affect our lives today and the way women are seen in sports or rather seen as not belonging to sports. As stated by yet another player:

Maybe the norm is just generally that men can earn a living, that men are like an example or something, and then women have to, or the thinking is that a woman is at home, or a woman is the one who gives birth to a child or always has to consider those kinds of things more deeply. Until when can you play football if you want a family, or you want a relationship or anything? I somehow feel like there is huge pressure on women because the thinking is that men can do whatever since they do not have to give birth or take care of a family. (Player 7, 22-02-2022, 00:44:23)

Arguably, due to these assigned gender roles, male and female athletes are put into unequal positions from the start. Yet, as Player 5 states, she has not even thought about the reasons for the different treatment based on gender in sports. She explains that she has always considered it a norm that men are in a completely different position, and it has been something taken for granted that the things are as they are.

The last aspect of societal norms characterizing the way the female football players experience the discrimination is by accepting or considering the current situation as normal. Many players report being used to different treatment because it has always been like that. As one player describes: “Somehow I am just so used to this situation that this is how it is, and you cannot do anything about it and at this moment you cannot.”



(Player 1, 16-02-2022, 00:10:06). Another player also acknowledges that the way female football players are seen in the society also affects how she perceives herself as a female athlete and how she accepts this by complying with the norm:

I am even thinking myself that I cannot play football longer than a certain time. That at some point, I have to make the decision that okay, I will stop playing even if it is fun and I like it, but I have to start doing other things. The time is just not enough. And maybe this thought has affected my perception of football and how seriously I take it myself, and what are my aspirations for football. (Player 4, 18-02-2022, 00:10:44)

While being used to being treated differently, some players also see improvements in how women are treated as professional football players and appreciate what they already have. As one player states: “We also accept [the treatment] as we are probably all thankful for being in such a good situation or that it has improved significantly” (Player 5, 18-02-2022, 00:12:20). However, while some clubs do better than others, players appreciate what they have but at the same time see the difference as compared to men. As stated by one player: “Everything is fine for us in a way, but at the same time, we know that it could be better” (Player 1, 16-02-2022, 00:16:36). This arrangement seems to put female players in a difficult position because they do not feel like they are treated as equals but simultaneously, they accept it by looking at things that have already improved for them.

### ***5.1.2 Financial aspect and resources***

Money seems to play a significant role in how the top female football players in Finland experience gender-based discrimination. As one player explains: “Quite often money plays a big role. It enables something for men that we do not have because there is just not any money. [...] in the end everything, like field bookings, are related to money issues” (Player 6, 18-02-2022, 00:21:26). Player 9 agrees and goes further by stating that money is an important aspect in order to provide proper training conditions and opportunities for female players to develop. More or less, all the players agree that money and resources enable better conditions for

them to play and develop the game further. The players also believe that improved conditions and equal opportunities play a crucial role in attracting the audience and creating revenues. For example, as told by Player 5, one of the top league clubs invested in the women's team and provided them with similar training conditions and facilities as the men's team. As a result, just in a few years, the team has developed from a team that moved down to Division 1 (the league below the National League) to a team that fights for the championship title year after year.

Based on the interviews with the players, money and resources are the most commonly used arguments to justify the different treatment between men and women in the football world. As Player 5 sees it, money is the aspect that makes a difference in basically everything. She also sees that in her club, money is the reason why the men's team is treated as a priority, and she also argues that to her, this is justified as they also create a lot more revenue than the women's team. Other players see a similar pattern. However, quite a few of them question the money argument in some situations:

I feel that sometimes [the different treatment] is justified by [money] even if it has nothing to do with it.

And they are just like, men bring in more money and bring a lot more to the club than women, but this is not necessarily always the case. (Player 10, 25-02-2022, 00:02:45)

One concrete example that was brought up in the interviews was that one club has a gym with prioritized access for only the men's team. While the club owns the gym, it is already available for use. However, this considerable priority for men is justified by the men's team making higher revenues. Basically, what is happening, is that between 9 am and 4 pm only the men's team is allowed to enter the gym. This means that the women's team cannot enter the gym even if it is empty, and they can only access the gym early in the morning or late in the evening. In contrast, the men's team can enter the gym whenever, also outside their assigned hours. According to the players, the only argument for this differential treatment is money and the men's team creating more revenues. However, it seems like the players do not believe money is the only actual reason behind the discriminative treatment. As concluded by one player:

They always argue that you cannot because you are not creating as much money. I do not know what the other argument could be. Is it only because we are women? [...] with money you can argue, but you cannot argue by saying that you are women or something like this, that you are not as good” (Player 7, 22-02-2022, 00:14:14)

In other words, it appears that money is a convenient argument to justify gender inequalities because, in a way, everything depends on it, and so the financial argument functions as a self-reinforcing mechanism. Additionally, the financial argument is believed to be more objective and acceptable, while justifying the differences with gender alone seems politically incorrect.

### ***5.1.3 Conditions and opportunities***

As demonstrated in the data, one of the most notable ways gender-based discrimination presents itself in Finnish football is through conditions and opportunities. More specifically, the players talk about aspects such as unequal pay, training conditions and opportunities, and different treatment as female football players. The first aspect that was widely discussed in connection to money and resources is unequal pay and, in a lot of cases, no pay at all. As one player put it:

If I were a male player, I would have a lot more opportunities to be more easily secure in the future. Now it is like, I do get paid, but I would get better pay if I were a male player. I could also save and would not have to think so much about the future. And just play. What is going to happen to me when this ends one day? (Player 5, 18-02-2022, 00:19:59)

This lack of financial security has led several players to consider their careers as female football players:

I play football, but at the same time, I have to earn something as well. And then I have to all the time balance or like contemplate after every season the decision of what am I going to do next year. That will I start to work and, in a way, join the so-called adult life or if I still keep playing football and live with

scarce income. I feel like that is a big thing that I have to weigh every year. (Player 4, 18-02-2022, 00:08:41)

This season was the first one where I was really considering if I am still going to keep playing. Last season was so tough financially and otherwise as well. [...] I was considering for a long time if I even want to play anymore because I am already 24 years old and soon I will have to start to earn properly, or like I cannot just live hand to mouth and be like I am just playing around. (Player 3, 17-02-2022, 00:12:08)

Additionally, while most of the players interviewed are not getting paid enough to make a living, they are forced to combine playing professionally with studying or working. Player 1 acknowledges that one of the biggest forms of discrimination she has experienced is the pay gap and that it has affected her life and career as a female football player a lot. She goes further and explains: “I have had to study and then I also worked. [...] Of course, it affects what I can do as a football player as studying and working takes a lot of energy out of the playing and recovery. There is just not enough time.” (Player 1, 16-02-2022, 00:02:53). Another player also emphasizes that: “In a way, we do train as much, and we train as professionally as men, but on top of that, we have to spend half of our days for something else as well.” (Player 6, 18-02-2022, 00:06:32). According to the players, the lack of time and, most importantly, the lack of recovery time affects the quality of what they are able to do on the field:

If my training level is that we train in the morning from 8 to 9, meaning very early, when men train after us from 10 to 12. And then between I go to work, and then I go to another practice in the evening. Every sensible human being realizes that I have never as much energy as I would have if I had one practice in a day so that my body has had the time to wake up, and after that, I would get 24 hours for recovery before the next practice. (Player 9, 24-02-2022, 00:37:55)

Multiple players also talked about how the lack of energy and too little rest have affected their careers as female football players. As explained by one player, she believes that the lack of time and stress caused by financial insecurity has played a significant role in her injury:

When you have to do something else all the time, like study or work, I believe that it affects how you are coping and how much you have energy. It is a fact that if you are at work or school the whole day, the training readiness is completely different from when rested. [...] Maybe the biggest factor is that I have never played for a club where I got paid and could solely focus on football. I think a big concern is that you have to train very often while being tired and stressed about school or work, or to constantly think about how you will support yourself and play simultaneously. [...] The overall load is a lot bigger, so the risk of getting injured is also bigger. [...] I have had several bigger injuries essentially due to training while being tired. Thinking deeper, it might as well be that if I had not had to study at the same time while doing heavy training during the preseason, I would not have injured my knee back then. (Player 8, 24-02-2022, 00:20:15)

While unequal pay is an important contributor to conditions and opportunities that discriminate against female football players, another notable way the female players experience discrimination is through the training environment provided. When discussing the differences compared to men, the players mention things like training times, field conditions, facilities, access to services like physiologist and masseur, insurances, and meals. For example, player 6 said that she had heard from a friend that plays in a different club that they train in the evenings between 8 pm and 10 pm. Other players also shared their experiences:

It is hard to believe that any male player would have to fight to get an insurance from the club. In my club, which is relatively small, some players still have to pay the insurance themselves. I have negotiated that for me it is included, but you would think it is a basic thing to have at the top level. (Player 3, 17-02-2022, 00:02:45)

All the field bookings, locker room access, and men's and women's teams would play on the same field would be significant improvements. In many clubs, men play on much better fields than women. And the fields where women play would not even be legal in the men's league. You would not be allowed to play on them. And all the equipment and coaching would be on the same level. The quality should be the same. And most of the time, men have a physiologist and mental coach and everything. And women do not necessarily have that. (Player 10, 25-02-2022, 00:23:53)

A box of white training shirts had appeared in our locker room. When we looked closer at them, they were A) super big and B) they were all yellow here [points at arm pit], and we realized that the shirts were old shirts of the men's team, and they were machine washed there where they wash men's gear. But when you wear it once, it smells completely like A) Axe and B) sweat. Like we are some house elves to whom the big wizards gave donations. This is probably the biggest disgrace I have experienced as a female football player. (Player 9, 24-02-2022, 01:04:00).

Based on the interviews, the players agree that some of the differences result from women not creating as much revenue as men and the differences in opportunity are closely related to the financial aspect. However, players also stress that one key aspect to make women's football more competitive and attractive is to provide similar conditions and opportunities. As one player states: "If we ever want to develop our league further and this even to be a possibility, the first priority is to create a professional environment for the players, conditions, and training" (Player 5, 18-02-2022, 00:33:43). Another player also adds: "It would be easier if [the conditions] were taken care of because then there would also be better opportunities for the club to be successful in the league and that way also get money for the club" (Player 10, 25-02-2022, 00:25:01). Player 9 also talks about believing that she would have made it further as an athlete if more effort had been put into women's football for as long as she has been playing.

The players also talk about setting minimum requirements for conditions that the clubs have to provide to play in the National League. This would help develop the game further as, firstly, the players would have better means to reach their full potential. Secondly, the professional conditions would provide credibility that can attract more audience. One player talks about setting requirements for providing more professional conditions accordingly:

The license should be granted only to those clubs that can pay some kind of compensation or at least provide some kind of support for the day-to-day life. It cannot be that you are granted a license for top-level while telling players to train four times a week without even having a locker room or any equipment or asking the players to pay for their own food on away games. It cannot be like this because what is the difference between playing professionally and as a hobby then? (Player 9, 24-02-2022, 00:43:53)

Another player also talked about the importance of players setting requirements and having the courage to demand better conditions and treatment. As one player puts it: “If we want things to be better for us, it would be good to start talking about it and then also set demands” (Player 3, 17-02-2022, 00:36:26). As described by the players, providing professional conditions and opportunities for female football players seem to play a crucial role in gender-based discrimination. Furthermore, setting requirements and daring to demand more seems to be a way for the players to gain more equal positions in their sport.

#### ***5.1.4 Sub-conclusion***

Based on the data, top-level female football players experience gender inequality in three forms that also work as barriers to gender equality. These three forms are norms in society, financial aspect and resources, and conditions and opportunities. As it appears, the societal norms seem to affect the other two aspects and steer how women are seen in sports. The prejudgment and negative attitude towards women’s football are apparent when financial terms and lack of revenue are used as arguments to justify discriminating treatment, even in situations where money has no direct impact. Additionally, female football players constantly face lesser opportunities and worse conditions. Mainly, while facilities are available for the men’s team, women experience systematic discrimination and are denied access to facilities, equipment, and services. Moreover, an important aspect is that the finances and resources are in a constant interplay with conditions and opportunities. The two aspects create a vicious circle, where money and better resources are required to provide improved conditions and equal opportunities. However, to create revenue and attract more audience, the game also needs to develop further. To take women’s football to the next level and draw public interest, better conditions and opportunities are needed for the players. Therefore, to break the circle, two boosters for gender equality have been identified in the data and will be presented in the next section.

## 5.2 Boosters for gender equality

Based on the data collected, top female football players in Finland experience gender inequality through organizational structures and media. However, compared to the three barriers to gender equality as presented above, the collaborative organizational structure and marketing and visibility are identified as potential boosters for gender equality. These two aspects can be seen to help break the vicious circle of conditions and financial resources and will be introduced in depth in the following section.

### 5.2.1 Collaborative organizational structure

Several players brought up the organizational structure as an important means to discriminate against female football players. As background, in Finland, sports organizations are traditionally labeled as *Osakeyhtiö (Oy)*<sup>2</sup>, and *Reskisteröity yhdistys (Ry)*<sup>3</sup>. In Finland, most of the top-level men's teams are registered under *Oy*, whereas most of the top-level women's teams, together with junior teams, are organized under *Ry*. One player talks about this way of organizing the clubs accordingly: "Many clubs are so that women are organized under *Ry* and men under *Oy*, which automatically signals that the teams are not considered equals at all" (Player 7, 22-02-2022, 00:13:24). Another player expressed her frustration by saying that: "often the teams are divided into men, and then juniors and women as one, which is pretty annoying and always stands out" (Player 4, 18-02-2022, 00:02:59). Many players also talked about how the way clubs are organized affects their experiences of being treated unequally:

If [the teams] were under the same [organizational form], it would be a lot better if they were together because that way, the teams would also somehow be treated maybe more like equals. In my old club, at least, women were together with juniors, which leads to the fact that women are on the same level as boy juniors and are considered equals. Then again, I do not think it should be like that, or it would be

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<sup>2</sup> *Oy* stands for Finnish limited company, corresponding *Ltd* in English.

<sup>3</sup> *Ry* refers to a registered non-profit association.



better if [men and women] were under the same [organizational form], then they would be considered equals. (Player 10, 25-02-2022, 00:14:14)

In my old team, it was somehow like, it felt like we were actually treated as equals, and it felt like the men's team also valued the women's team. Partly, because we were under the same organization, the men's team and the coaches also believed that, in a way, it was a collaborative process. [...] the way I see it, it would improve a lot if women are not organized under Ry, but [the teams] would be under the same organization instead. I believe that would promote [gender equality]. (Player 2, 17-02-2022, 00:10:59)

Players also compare their experiences of playing for different clubs with different organizational forms. For example, when playing for clubs with only a women's team or if the team is separate from the men's team, the comparison and differences between the teams are not as apparent because the women's team is treated as a priority. However, these forms of organizing usually have fewer resources leading to worse conditions and opportunities for the women. As one player who used to play abroad for a club that only had a women's team phrases it: "I would guess that in Finland, there is probably no possibility for a budget that would be big enough to enable a women's team to stand alone. So, in a way, I believe it is better for them to be under the same organization, that you have men and women" (Player 2, 17-02-2022, 00:21:16). As another player puts it:

The way I see it, in Finland, all top-level teams, I mean women's teams, should be, [...] I think in all the clubs, the men's team should take the women's team under their wing in a way. Because I do not know any investment [...] if you do not put any money into it, it will not make any profit. You have to make an investment at some point. [...] And if we transitioned to Oy and they started to support us a little, the women's team could become more and more professional. And that is how the whole league could develop, and we could gain more audience as the game improves. The players would improve, and the game would become more interesting and bigger. Currently, it is very difficult to develop the game further because the time is very limited for the players to develop on their own. (Player 1, 16-02-2022, 00:21:47)

Even if the differences between men and women become more evident in a more collaborative organizational form, this form of organizing seems to signal equality and give women access to better resources, conditions, and opportunities through the men's team. One player shared her experiences when her old club with only women's team was merged into a club with men's team:

We are both women and men under Oy, which is very rare in Finland. Very few women's teams are also under Oy. [...] When my old team was merged into this club, the difference was huge. Now we have a very professional team, and many of the players get paid, and do nothing but just play football. In many aspects, [...] things are going very well for us as female football players. (Player 5, 18-02-2022, 00:08:06)

Together with the organizational form, several players believe that a collaboration between the teams of men and women would play a crucial role in order to boost gender equality in football:

I think [the collaboration] has a key importance. It should be the starting point for everything. It will not take us anywhere if we have to nag and ask and demand things but to be open-minded and try to find common ground and common goals that are in line with the club's goals and between the teams. I believe that collaboration is where it all starts, you cannot start to build anything out of nothing if you do not have that. (Player 7, 22-02-2022, 00:32:59)

In a way, it is important [...] that the collaboration works between both teams, and all the things the men's team has could also be provided for the women's team. Somehow that they would not be so much separate, like men's and women's teams, but rather the same or like they would be treated as equals. (Player 10, 25-02-2022, 00:15:14)

An important aspect of the collaboration seems to be the role of male football players having more influence in society. According to the players, this privilege of men is crucial in order to help promote gender equality not only in football but also further in society:

[The support] is super important because it does not help so much that only women fight for [gender equality in football] or bring it forward, as in a way, we are the minority. If men expressed their support

and brought these things into publicity and were vocal about it, the issue would move way faster. Because the opinions of men may be valued a lot more [...], it would be a lot easier to make a difference. (Player 10, 25-02-2022, 00:04:45)

I believe that it starts more from men being in that kind of position, where they can help, and it takes nothing away from them if they can do things that help. [...] They can promote our games on Instagram or if they have any commercial photo shoots or similar. I do not think they lose anything if they have it anyways, and then they ask a few female players to come there as well. [...] I think, at the moment, that [...] it requires something from that side, and it carries a lot more. (Player 11, 31-03-2022, 00:14:56)

I think one big thing is that if we always argue that women do not bring any money in for the club, why would not the men's team try to help the women to create revenue then. Or like, if they also promote games, would their fans also come and see our games if they only knew about them? (Player 1, 16-02-2022, 00:06:42)

Moreover, the players also discuss this influence of men from the point of decision-making power in the organizations. Currently, the majority of management positions in these organizations are occupied by men. Therefore, their collaboration with women and female players is of high importance in order to promote and develop women's football:

I feel like, unfortunately, in many clubs, the people in leadership positions see only their perspective, [...] they only have their eyes on the money aspect, and they justify things with that and are not ready to change that. (Player 7, 22-02-2022, 00:19:56)

In my old club, most of the members of management that were taking decisions were 50+ years old men who had never been to women's locker rooms or seen any women's games. I am not shocked that it is easy for them to make decisions that are not good for women as they have no concrete touching point for us. Or I think that maybe we would need more people who are interested in [...] developing the sport further. I feel like that would already take us far. (Player 4, 18-02-2022, 00:35:06)

### ***5.2.2 Marketing and visibility***

Based on the interviews, one way the female football players experience gender inequality is through less and more negatively toned media visibility in comparison to men. One player talked about how her club has marketed the men and women's teams in social media:

I probably have never seen the men's team of my club share any content relating to us. Maybe when we won the championship. [...] They always talk about being one and united, but it does not even look like that on the outside. And it does not really feel like that on the inside either, that the club is one and united but rather just the men of the club playing and doing things. If you compare, for example, with Italy, all the women teams, or there is no separate social media account but a joint one. There everything for men and women is under the same account. (Player 1, 16-02-2022, 00:05:21)

Another player also points out that professional men players are usually well known by the public. In contrast, female players are rarely known as women's games are harder to access. She goes on and says: "men's games are shown a lot more on public channels, and women's games you have to search yourself from somewhere, like YouTube live or somewhere further. Of course, you cannot see those games on Ruutu+<sup>4</sup> or Viaplay." (Player 8, 24-02-2022, 00:44:08).

Despite the media recreating the differences between men and women, more or less all the players agree that the media are also a key tool to promote gender equality in football and normalize women playing the sport. One player talks about the importance of increased media visibility as women's football "as a concept and field or as a profession would be more familiar to people and thus create more interest in people" (Player 4, 18-02-2022, 00:49:04). Another player agrees that a similar level of visibility in comparison to men would benefit the women's side in the long run:

We should think about aspects that are not only related to money and what aspects we can improve without thinking about that. [...] if we would talk about women's football similarly to men's football in

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<sup>4</sup> A Finnish online streaming service.

the news, [...] and that women's football would also be shown on tv as much as men's football, different series and everything. A lot fewer games are broadcasted. That would increase the awareness and bring the [gender equality] topic further. And get more juniors excited about it, and more girls pursue playing and start to view it as a potential career. That would increase the number of players, which would continue to move everything forward. (Player 10, 25-02-2022, 00:12:04)

Not only do the players discuss the role of increased visibility, but they also talk about the importance of how women athletes are portrayed in the media. As one player puts it: "marketing could be, [...] that men and women teams in a way would be portrayed as equals, in principle, that would already signal to others that it should be like that" (Player 6, 18-02-2022, 00:15:35). Player 4 has a similar take on this and says that it is important to send a message that men and women are considered equally worthy in sports and, for instance, to emphasize that we are proud of both national teams, men and women. Additionally, one player acknowledges that the way they talk about themselves in the media affects the perception of the public: "If we start to talk about ourselves in a way that we value what we are doing, then other people start to recognize that as well" (Player 3, 17-02-2022, 00:51:36). Moreover, one crucial aspect seems also to be the positioning of women's teams in media:

In my club, both the teams are under the same website, they are together, and I think that sends a message that these are our flagship teams and not just two separate teams. They are like together, and there they post news about the teams jointly, and I think that raises awareness of women's football as well. (Player 10, 25-02-2022, 00:16:35)

In addition to media as a tool to promote and change the public perception of women's football, marketing and increased visibility are seen as important ways to help women's football gain more viewers and create increased revenues. The players talk about the connection between attracting more audience through marketing and creating increased revenues:

Men's football is perceived as interesting, so why is women's not, if you marketed it interestingly. [...] And then more people would show up to games when they read about it and see advertisements. [...]

And if you saw an advertisement somewhere, you were like “oh”, if you saw some funny news or nice, interesting article about someone. Then you would want to go and see them play. (Player 3, 17-02-2022, 00:28:36).

Very often, women’s football is talked about like, A) you are not interesting product enough to make any effort, because B) you do not have any watchers, and C) you will not get as much ticket revenues meaning you are not as valuable. Then these three aspects create a vicious circle, but if you can break one of these aspects, for example, they say that you are not an interesting product. But then if people go and watch horse polo, and football is one of the most popular sports in the world, so there are plenty enough viewers. So do something. Change the visibility, and wow, you have more audience, wow, you have more ticket revenues, wow, the product becomes more profitable. [...] How they made men’s football an interesting product is that they started to play it, people have gone and watched it, and then started to hype it up like come and watch. The same could be done for the other gender as well and not only argue that men are more interesting. Of course, they are more interesting because they have always been hyped up more, and if the same input was put on the women’s side, it would surely be similar. (Player 9, 24-02-2022, 01:23:36)

Another source of financial support that the players frequently mention is sponsorships. As one player argues: “To get big sponsorship support, you have to have the product in order and [...] market it well, and maybe gain general visibility [...], think about how much it is visible in media and so on” (Player 5, 18-02-2022, 00:38:32). The way the players see it, marketing and visibility play a significant role in building an interesting product and branding women’s football for potential investors and sponsors. Another player describes her point of view accordingly:

We should make [women’s football] more visible and bring it to people’s awareness. So that some bigger companies would possibly start to sponsor it and that marketing could be more profitable. And we could spotlight more female players and that we can be taken seriously, [...] the top players in Finland and their stories could be more well known. For real, Finland has very good players. Maybe that

way some [companies] would get interested in sponsoring our women's football and that way bring in more money and then again, the conditions could get better. (Player 8, 24-02-2022, 01:12:33).

### ***5.2.3 Sub-conclusion***

As revealed in the data, two aspects are identified that promote gender equality in Finnish football. These two aspects are collaborative organizational structure and marketing and visibility. When it comes to both aspects, the norms in society play a notable role. According to the players, the organizational structure and media help sustain the discriminative treatment they experience. However, simultaneously the two aspects can also be used as tools to help change the socially constructed gender norms in society. The first aspect, collaborative organizational structure, highlights the importance of structures as an intermediate to, on the one hand, reproduce the social norms but, on the other hand, change them. Organizational structures also possess the ability to signal and reflect gender equality or inequality in a way women are positioned in the organization. Additionally, the collaboration between men and women seems to be crucial as men currently hold more influence and decision-making power. Without the support from the privileged, in this case, men, the female football players will have a hard time fighting for equality. Moreover, a joint organizational structure and closer collaboration with the men's team would give the women's team access to the same facilities and equipment as the men. Regarding marketing and visibility, media is a significant way to influence the perception of the public and change existing social norms by promoting gender equality. As found in the data, firstly, increased visibility and appropriate style of communication will help normalize women in football and football as a career option also for women. Secondly, marketing and visibility appear to be great tools to reach more potential viewers, which then again could lead to increased profits and more resources for women's football to develop and improve.

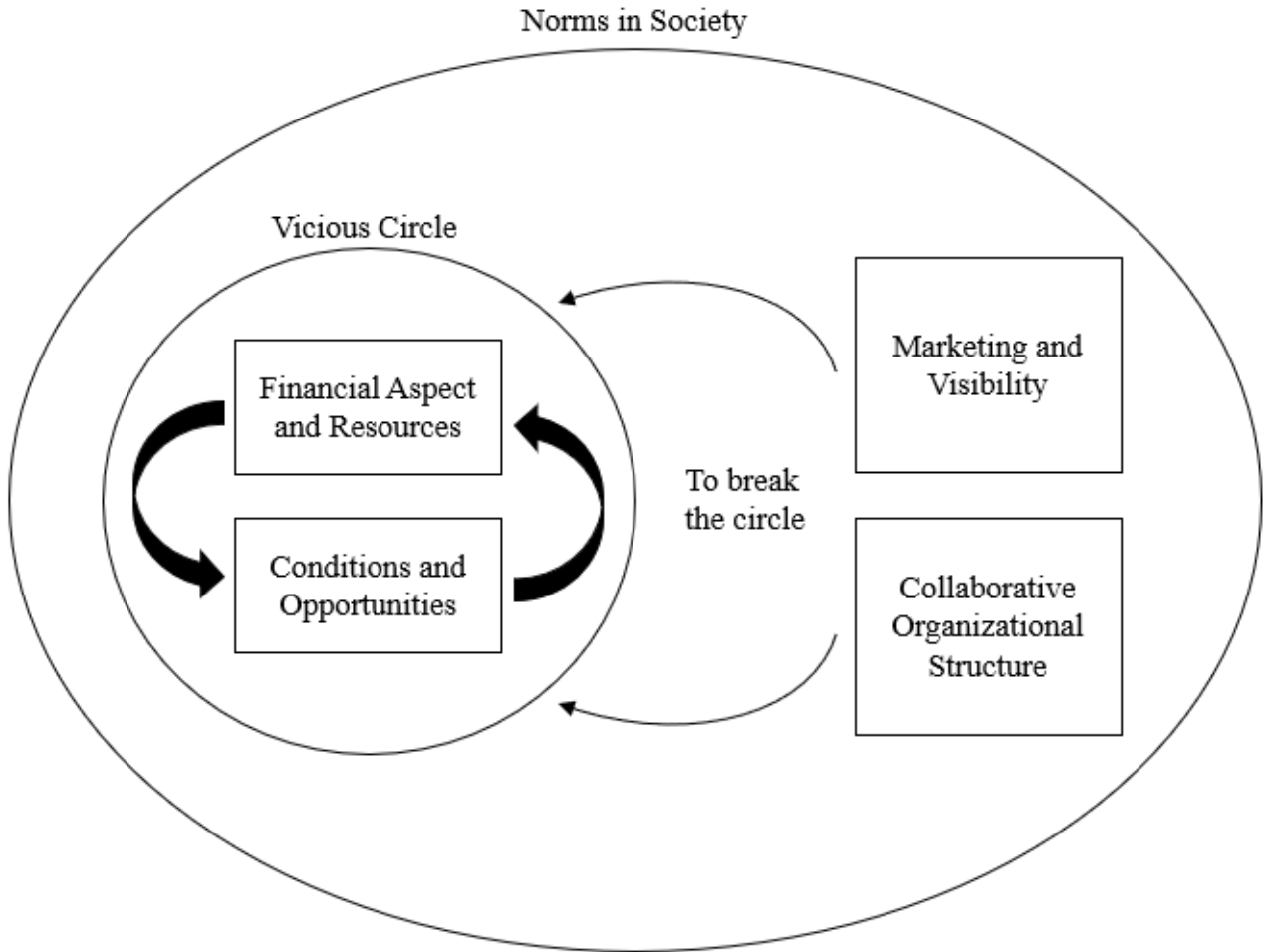


Figure 3. Grounded theory model. Source: Author's compilation.



## 6. Discussion

*The sixth chapter starts by discussing in detail the identified barriers and boosters for gender equality in Finnish football. Then, connections are drawn back and forth to the existing literature and theories. Finally, the methodological takeaways of this master's thesis are presented.*

### 6.1 Barriers and boosters for gender equality

As argued by Kosofsky (1993), in addition to physical ability, multiple social factors explain the discrimination against female athletes. The societal norms rule the gender roles and the beliefs about what is seen as an appropriate occupation for women (Kosofsky, 1993). When it comes to Finnish football, the experiences of the female players seem to align with these statements. Several players described situations where they faced prejudice and were not taken seriously as professional football players because they are women. Some players also told that they feel like women's football is not considered a "sensible enough" thing to do, and instead, they are expected to study or work in a job that is considered more suitable for women. The way some players experienced it, men are traditionally seen as the ones playing football and doing sports, whereas women are seen as the ones giving birth and taking care of the family. Gendered roles result from long social processes that overtime become the norms in society (Nentwich & Tienari, 2019). Therefore, it is no wonder that these societal norms affect several aspects of the daily lives of top-level female football players. According to the players, the prejudice and negative attitudes towards women in football are reflected in the funding and resources available, the lack of conditions and opportunities provided, the organizational structures that favor men, and media coverage that paints an image of men's football as preferred.

As found in the data, financial resources together with conditions and opportunities seem to work as barriers to gender equality in Finnish football. Additionally, these two aspects seem to be in a constant interplay

and create a vicious circle, where the lack of money and resources leads to worse conditions and fewer opportunities. Simultaneously, to create revenues and gain viewers, better conditions and opportunities are required to develop the players and the game. As argued by Archer and Prange (2019), the public view is that different pay and opportunities are justified because men bring in more revenue and attract more viewers. This belief is reflected in the data, and for instance, most of the players do not get paid at all. Even in the best-case scenario, they earn barely enough to make a living out of it. It seems that not much has changed since the article published by Kosofsky (1993) 30 years ago, and the pay gap still plays a notable role in how female players experience gender inequality in their everyday lives. Interestingly, in addition to the pay gap, players also bring up several other aspects of conditions and opportunities, such as field bookings, equipment, and services provided, as ways the differential treatment appears. While these aspects are not always directly connected with the financials (for instance, when the clubs restrict women's access to the same fields, training times, and gym hours as men), it seems like women are facing systematic discrimination that is justified with the financial argument. The financial argument functions as a self-reinforcing mechanism for gender inequality. Everything can be seen to depend on money and therefore money is a convenient argument to justify differential treatment. All in all, the societal norms greatly influence the vicious circle of financial resources and, conditions and opportunities and have a crucial role in maintaining the status quo.

Furthermore, stemming from the data, organizational structures and media were identified as aspects of how female football players experience gender inequality in Finland. However, in contrast to the three barriers to inequality presented above, the players talked about collaborative organizational structure and marketing and visibility as possible boosters for gender equality that can help break the vicious circle. Additionally, it appears that while the societal norms greatly influence these aspects, they also have the ability to affect and even change the norms in society and push them more toward gender equality. Firstly, several players raise media as a mean to reinforce the prevailing social norms in society. In the interviews, the players discussed aspects such as lack of visibility and how women's football is portrayed in the media. This is in line with Kosofsky (1993), arguing that media has the power to reproduce the existing gender norms but also condition the public to choose men's sports over women's sports. The players also recognized that increased

visibility and a more effective way of marketing has led to some improvements in women's football. Therefore, rather than media just being a barrier to gender equality, the players see marketing and visibility through media as aspects that have the ability to boost gender equality in sports but also wider in society. As also stated by Kosofsky (1993), if men and women are provided with similar media coverage and recognition, the socialization process will start to perceive men and women as equals and thus, justify similar conditions and opportunities for both genders. Interestingly though, the players see that putting more effort into marketing and visibility will also create interest and attract more audience, which will lead to increased ticket sales and higher revenues in the long run. Thus, the players see this financial outcome of marketing as a potential aspect that can interfere with and hopefully break the vicious circle of financial resources, and conditions and opportunities.

Secondly, the players talked a lot about the organizational structure of their clubs and how that affects their everyday lives as professional football players. As argued by Acker (2012), gender inequalities are embedded into the structures and how we organize work. Moreover, accepting and complying with these socially constructed structures keeps reproducing them and allows gender inequalities to persist (Nentwich & Tienari, 2019). While sports have always been a considerable part of society and operate in the same socially constructed reality, they seem not to be an exemption from the influence of organizational structures. Therefore, as brought up by the players, the organizational structure is an important aspect to look at when considering gender inequality in sports.

What is more, the players talk about the organizational structure as a mean to promote and signal gender equality. In the interviews, they bring up aspects such as common organizational form and collaboration between the teams of men and women as important ways to enhance gender equality and improve conditions and opportunities. This collaborative organizational structure would bring the two sides of the clubs closer to each other and foster collaboration and unity. Based on the data, two things seem to be true. Firstly, a common organizational structure and closer collaboration with the men's teams seem to enable better training conditions and opportunities for women when they get access to the same facilities and equipment as men. This again leads to improved performance for the women as enabling a professional environment is in a key role for the

development of female football players. Thus, as suggested by the players, a collaborative organizational structure could help intervene and break the vicious circle. Secondly, a collaborative organizational structure would send a message that men and women are considered equals. The players recognize the role of men as privileged to help fight gender inequality as they believe that men will have more influence and a better say in society. Therefore, a collaborative organizational structure between women and men seems to be an essential aspect to tackle gender inequality and influence how women are seen in sports and that way change the norms in society.

## **6.2 Combination of moral and business case as justification for equal treatment**

In addition to arguing for physical difference as justification for unequal treatment, differential treatment in sports is often justified with the financial argument of women not creating revenues (Archer & Prange, 2019). This is also showcased in the data, and as one player states, money more or less has an impact on everything. However, some players see that the money argument is not justified in all cases and can even be overlooked. Instead of focusing purely on the financial aspect, more moral aspects should be taken into account to create equal opportunities and conditions for female football players. The players recognize the importance of equal opportunities and talk a lot about equality in the interviews. Still, most of them understand the role of the financial argument and agree that it cannot be fully moved and that, in some situations, it is justified. Therefore, as Archer and Prange (2019) present, the ‘historical injustice’ approach does not seem appropriate argument for equal treatment from the players perspective. Rather than vouching for equity justified by historical gender discrimination, the players talk about equality and, to some extent, the notion of earning the same conditions and opportunities. Therefore, the other two arguments for why it is morally justified to provide equal opportunities for female football players seem more feasible.

When it comes to the ‘labour rights’ argument as introduced by Archer and Prange (2019), some players acknowledge the unfairness of putting in the same effort and working as much (or, according to some players, sometimes even more) as their male counterparts. Still, they will not get paid equally or will not be

provided with the same opportunities. However, even in this scenario, the players recognize the importance of the financial aspect. The way the players see it, in cases where the women's team actually generates considerable revenues, it is morally rightful to provide equal pay and opportunities. There is mutual agreement, though, that in cases where the women's team is not generating profits, equal pay is not justified as the money has to be earned and come from somewhere. Consequently, out of the three arguments by Archer and Prange (2019) that morally justify equal treatment for women in sports, 'expressive power' seems to be the most feasible option. The players seem to agree that the discriminative treatment they experience sends a message in society that women are valued less for what they do. Simultaneously, they agree that women's football is starting to get recognition and that gender equality has emerged as an important topic in society. Therefore, treating women as less valuable can be harmful to the reputation and image of the clubs, and thus, providing better conditions and opportunities for them seems morally justified.

Being morally good does not mean that you cannot simultaneously be financially profitable (Mensi-Klarbach, 2019). There seems to be a mutual agreement among the players that in the short-term, by investing in women's football and enabling better training conditions and opportunities, players get a better chance to develop and improve the game. In the long run, the improved conditions and opportunities will lead to financial profits in ticket revenues and more audience. Interestingly enough, this seems to be opposite to the proposition of Mensi-Klarbach (2019), stating that the short-term profits enable focusing on what is morally good long-term. Hence, first focusing on the moral perspective by providing equal conditions and opportunities through collaborative organizational structure and marketing and visibility can lead to long-term financial benefits in Finnish football. Therefore, the way I see it, the most beneficial option to promote gender equality in women's football in Finland seems to be to consider both business and moral cases intertwined, rather than focusing on just one aspect.

## 6.3 Methodological takeaways

From a more methodological point of view, the notion that reality is socially constructed played a major role in this master's thesis. This was reflected in all the aspects of experienced gender inequality as described by the players. The discussions evolved around different societal norms, existing gender roles, and historical reasons for the differential treatment that affects the everyday lives of female football players still today. Naturally, the players also experience gender inequality differently, and it was evident that the reality looked a bit different for every player. The notion that reality is socially constructed was highlighted when the players went outside their perspectives and talked about how, for example, the public or the management of the clubs see women's football and gender inequality. Arguably, while this master's thesis focused solely on the players' perspective, the results would most probably be significantly different if a similar study was conducted from the perspective of the public or members of management in the clubs.

Furthermore, the interplay between theory and data played a notable role in the writing process of this master's thesis. At first, to get more familiar with the topic, I started doing research more deductively by reviewing existing literature and theories. However, this approach led to more confusion as I was unsure which path to take and follow in the jungle of previous research. At this point of the thesis process, I decided to reorganize myself and start inductively from the data instead and let the data tell me where to look. In the end, as my aim was to study a particular phenomenon (experienced gender inequalities in Finnish football), instead of focusing on closing a gap in the literature, starting from the data should have been an obvious choice for me that I missed at the beginning (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Taking an inductive approach was a turning point for my thesis writing process and helped me get back on track again. From that moment on, I worked fully inductively with the data all the way up until the grounded theory model was created. I found this especially helpful in giving a voice to the players and encouraging the emergence of new concepts and insights (Gioia et al., 2013).

However, after the generation of the grounded theory model, I deemed it necessary to go back to the literature and theory and work more deductively. As proposed by Easterby-Smith et al. (2012), "the

relationship between theory and data needs to be an interactive process.” (p. 130). Therefore, based on the data, I went back to the literature to see if other researchers had already remarked on similar aspects. This combination of inductive and deductive approaches helped spot areas that had already been discussed in previous research and identify aspects that were new and interesting additions to what had already been studied. This relationship between data and theory can be seen in the analytical framework, as the process of developing it has been informed by the data. Lastly, the existing literature and theories in the form of the analytical framework helped me theorize the findings that were grounded inductively from the data.

In conclusion, the thesis writing process was a great learning experience from an academic but also a personal perspective. All the academic challenges along the way helped me develop as a researcher and truly stretch myself to my limit to give justice to the topic that it deserves. Learning about the struggles that top-level female football players experience in Finland was highly insightful and contributed to theory development on how the female football players experience gender inequality in their everyday lives. Despite the existing barriers, players believe that gender inequality in football can be tackled with the help of the boosters identified in this master’s thesis. Furthermore, as revealed in the data, a combination of moral and business case to justify equal opportunities for women seems to be the most optimal approach to promote gender equality in Finnish football.

## 7. Conclusion

*The seventh chapter summarizes the key findings of this master's thesis. The research question is presented, followed by the concluded findings.*

While gender inequality is a widely discussed topic that can be approached from numerous angles, this master's thesis looked closer at how gender inequality presents itself in Finnish football from the perspective of the female players. As a result of a research process that has included fruitful and interesting discussions with eleven top-level Finnish female players, five aspects have been identified to answer the research question: *How do the top-level female football players experience gender inequality in Finland?* These five aspects are norms in society, financial aspect and resources, conditions and opportunities, organizational structures, and media. Based on the data, the first three aspects seem to operate as barriers to gender inequality. However, as the latter two are identified as forms of discrimination against female players, they can also be converted into boosters, collaborative organizational structure, and marketing and visibility that can further promote gender inequality in Finnish football.

Firstly, it was revealed that norms in society are one main barrier to gender equality in Finnish football, and the societal norms greatly influence all the other aspects. Fuelled by the societal norms, the other two identified barriers, financial aspect and resources, and conditions and opportunities create a vicious circle. This entails that financial resources are required to provide better conditions and opportunities. Then again, to create higher revenues and attract more audience, better conditions and opportunities are required for the game and players to develop. However, as argued in this master's thesis, societal norms are socially constructed. While these norms are created and reproduced in social processes, these interactions can be intervened and changed. Therefore, secondly, collaborative organizational structure and marketing and visibility were identified as means not only to change the norms in society, but also to promote gender equality in Finnish football. While



both two aspects seem to be important channels to signal equality in the society, a collaborative organizational structure also has the ability to provide better conditions for female players. In contrast, marketing and visibility can help attract more audience leading to increased ticket revenues. Lastly, this master's thesis argues that instead of solely focusing on the business case and financials, from the players' perspective, a combination of moral and business case would seem the most optimal approach for promoting gender equality in Finnish football. While the players accept the importance of the financial aspect as money does not come freely, 'expressive power' seems to be the most efficient moral argument for why women should be provided with equal opportunities. Additionally, the players believe that first focusing on the moral aspect and providing equal opportunities for women will eventually lead to financial benefits in the long run.

## 8. Future research

*The eighth and final chapter discusses the contributions of this master's thesis to the current research on gender inequality in sports and potential directions the future research could take in order to explore the important topic further.*

Gender inequality is a topic that can be studied from various perspectives. Even if Finland is seen as one of the role model countries for gender inequality, there is relatively little research on gender inequality regarding sports. As football is one of the most popular sports in Finland, it gives an interesting context to study the topic further. For this reason, the relevance of this master's thesis lies in bringing the important issues relating to gender inequality in Finnish football to light and generating discussion and further research on the topic. While this master's thesis functions as an exploratory study, the first step for further research, I believe there is a lot more to discover regarding this topic. Firstly, as this master's thesis focuses on the players' perspective regarding gender inequality in Finnish football, the results might vary significantly if similar research is conducted, for example, from the perspective of male players, the public, or the leadership of the clubs. Another interesting approach would be to cover different sports to get an understanding of what kind of role gender inequality plays in these contexts. Secondly, applying different research methods would help open up the perspective. For example, a comparative study could help benchmark the National League with the men's top league in Finland or some of the women's top leagues abroad. This would help identify the most significant issues faced by the National League and discover new aspects that can potentially promote gender equality. In conclusion, as the topic of gender inequality in Finnish football is not widely researched, additional research from different perspectives would make a significant contribution and give the topic the attention it deserves.

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