

# Tackling the Gender Pay Gap in the Lebanese Football League amid Crisis

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## Abstract

This policy paper investigates the gender pay gap prevailing in Lebanese football during the current times of crisis. The primary focus of this study centers on the factors contributing to this gap and the strategies that can be employed to mitigate it and promote gender equality in Lebanese football. Existing literature has highlighted the persistence of the gender pay gap in sports globally, but specific insights into the Lebanese football context are limited. Given the importance of sports in Lebanon and the increase of female football players, addressing the gender pay gap is crucial for promoting inclusivity and gender equality. The paper conducts a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. The research shows that societal norms, lack of investment, sponsorship disparities, and media biases contribute to this gap, in addition to the economic instability that affects funding for female players, making the gap wider. The proposed solutions outlined in this paper include the implementation of equal pay policies, more investment in women's football, media representation, and awareness campaigns. These steps can make a big difference in creating a fairer and more inclusive environment in Lebanese football, leading to broader progress for gender equality in society overall.

## Introduction

The Lebanese Women's Football has been present for almost 19 years. The National Team was founded in 2005 and is considered one of the pioneers in the region, while the Lebanese Women's Football League did not start until 2008 (Lebanese Forces, 2008). Since then, women have been facing gender disparities in football, including the gender pay gap. Specifically, the gender pay gap encompasses the unequal compensation received by female athletes compared to their male counterparts for their participation in football-related activities, including matches, training sessions, endorsements, and other related engagements (Naqash, 2014). However, this gap may

manifest in various forms, such as lower salaries, fewer sponsorship opportunities, limited access to resources and facilities, and differences in prize money and bonuses.

Amid the crisis conditions in Lebanon, female football athletes encounter challenges in their pursuit of gender equality within the sport (Hallal, 2023). The economic instability and the widespread financial struggles are major factors in this issue. For instance, sports organizations, such as the Lebanese Football Association (LFA) and several Lebanese football clubs, reduce their investments in women's football programs as these are considered risky or uncertain, particularly if they perceive limited demand or interest from fans and stakeholders. This risk aversion may lead to prioritize safer investments in men's football, where the potential for returns is assumed to be higher and more predictable (Naqash, 2014). The reason for that is the small fan base and the limited commercial appeal that women's football has in Lebanon. Sports organizations thus rely on traditional revenue models that prioritize ticket sales, merchandise, and broadcasting rights, which are perceived to be more profitable in men's football. All this goes back to the historical bias in sports where men have received more attention, funding, and resources, compared to women. This bias is rooted in societal norms and perceptions of gender roles, where men's sports are often viewed as more lucrative and commercially viable than women's sports (King et al., 2021).

In *Women's Football Development Overcoming Challenges in South Lebanon*, Hallal (2023) illustrates the struggles that women's football teams go through by telling the story of Sahar Dbouk and Sarah Awally, two former Lebanese football players who established the first girl's academy in South Lebanon, dubbed Super Girls. Dbouk said: "The general view in our region is that football is not for girls. We have been changing perceptions little by little since the academy was founded" (Hallal, 2023, para. 4). Furthermore, Lebanon's former captain Hiba Jafail spoke on behalf of her colleagues in the National Team, expressing her pity in the security situation that negatively and clearly affects the game. Moreover, the fact that a large number of young players are still learning in schools prevents them from participating in all exercises, in addition to the difficulty of transportation in Lebanon and the lack of interest of parents at times (Naqash, 2014).

Overall, the complexity of the gender pay gap in Lebanese football arises from various factors. These include gender norms and biases, limited financial investment in women's sports, lack of sponsorship opportunities, and unequal media representation. Additionally, the economic instability and crisis conditions prevalent in Lebanon further complicate the efforts to address this issue.

### Significance

The gender pay gap in Lebanese football has garnered attention and emerged onto the national agenda and public sphere due to several key factors. There is a global conversation surrounding gender equality, particularly in sports. Movements like #MeToo and #EqualPay have amplified voices advocating for fair treatment and compensation for female athletes (Calfas, 2018). Nevertheless, there is an increased football participation among women and girls who are striving for recognition and equal opportunities in Lebanon. This has led to the increased media coverage of women's football, both locally and internationally, shedding light on the challenges

faced by female players, including the pay gap (Toufaily, 2023b), whose significance lies in its implications on gender equality, fairness, and social justice within the sporting domain –reflecting societal norms and values regarding gender roles and human rights.

### Stakeholders

Female football players have a strong voice in advocating for fairness in football by using their visibility to push for equal pay and opportunities and raising awareness of the gender pay gap. In addition, their dedication and performance on the field contribute directly to the growth and success of football. Talent and commitment drive fan engagement, sponsorship deals, and revenue generation. As mentioned before, the lack of investment in women's football can be attributed to its perceived smaller fan base and lower popularity, which hinder organizations from allocating resources. This means that it is a cyclical relationship: the better the players, the larger the audience, thus the greater the support and the investment.

The Lebanese Women's Football League runs on a tight budget and does not allocate money for player salaries (Naqash, 2014), which raises a critical question: How can additional funding be sourced? Here comes the role of the LFA, which is another key stakeholder in this matter, since it serves as the governing body for football in Lebanon. It is responsible for overseeing leagues, competitions, and the development of the sport at all levels. As such, it plays a central role in shaping policies, regulations, and initiatives related to player compensation and gender equality. In the context of this policy paper, the LFA is responsible for identifying means of generating funds for the women's league and clubs, with the ultimate goal of allocating a part of the profit to the salaries of the players.

Clubs, similar to businesses, may differ in their approaches to addressing the gender pay gap. Some align with corporate social responsibility values, recognizing the benefits of fostering gender equality. These clubs understand that closing the gap can enhance team morale, productivity, and overall reputation. Conversely, other clubs may prioritize profit maximization, viewing efforts to address the gap as financially burdensome. They may prioritize short-term financial gains over long-term societal benefits, potentially delaying or resisting initiatives aimed at narrowing the gender pay gap within their organizations (Naqash, 2014).

### Method and Analysis

The methodology employed is a thorough SWOT analysis (Strength, weakness, opportunities and threats) of the Lebanese Women's League with the objective of narrowing the gender pay gap in Lebanese football amid crisis. The analysis has the following key inputs:

1. Financial support from the LFA and sponsors: The LFA provides modest financial assistance to each participating team in the league, supplemented by sponsorships from local companies. Notably, top teams such as Stars Association for Sports (SAS), Beirut Football Academy (BFA), and Eleven Football Pro (EFP) secure sponsorships, while other teams already have strong community backgrounds like Salam Zgharta, Akhaa Ahli Aley, and Montada Sour: "We did not despair. We got support from the municipality

and UNIFIL as they donated a special team bus to transport all the players to training in order to motivate them to continue playing,” said Sahar Dbouk (Hallal, 2023, para. 7).

2. **Media coverage and public interest:** Public interest in women’s football is becoming bigger and more noticeable due to the recent results of clubs abroad. For example, Safa Women Football Club (SWFC) won the West Asian Football Federation (WAFF) Club Championship in 2022 (Asian Football Confederation [AFC], 2022) and the National Team secured several WAFF Youth championships in addition to the Women’s International Friendly Tournament hosted by Saudi Arabia in September 2023 (Toufaily, 2023b). As a result, media outlets are more interested in covering league games and highlighting those achievements.
3. **Technical expertise and coaching:** All clubs are mandated to have coaches holding at least an AFC Level C coaching license. However, not all clubs possess private infrastructure. This limits training sessions to a maximum of three times per week, which is relatively low. As one player said, “Our next goal will be to have a special training ground. We share a pitch with the men’s clubs in the area, which is why we are currently only able to train at an early time twice a week” (Hallal, 2023, para. 7).
4. **Player pool and participation levels:** Presently, there are around 600 registered female athletes actively engaged in football in Lebanon, with a predominant concentration in Greater Beirut and Maten. However, economic challenges and the ongoing economic and political crisis in Lebanon have led to a decline in participation rates in the north and south, while the Bekaa region is yet to establish a women’s team. For example, Super Girls, the team mentioned earlier, has unfortunately withdrawn from the seniors league this year due to financial struggles leaving the players without a team after believing that they could actually make a change (Lebanese Football Association, 2024).

Lebanon currently lacks specific policies or laws to address the gender pay gap and discrimination in sports. This gap in legal framework allows the persistence of inequality, such as disparities in funding, media coverage, infrastructure, and general support between men’s and women’s sports, without formal redress mechanisms. The SWOT analysis conducted has four primary roles, which in turn leads to narrowing the gender pay gap and increasing the visibility of women’s football in Lebanon.

1. Promote gender equality and women’s empowerment through sports.
2. Develop and expand the women’s football scene in Lebanon.
3. Raise the competitive level of the league.
4. Increase national team representation and international success.

### Strengths

The Lebanese Women's Football League possesses passionate stakeholders (Mahfoud, 2021). The dedication and talent of players and coaches, despite limited resources, is a strong foundation. In addition, there is an established league structure. This system, along with eager teams, provides a base for growth. Furthermore, the increasing public interest, driven by recent successes of both the national and club teams on the international stage mentioned before, presents an opportunity to raise the league's profile. This rising visibility creates a promising opportunity for increased sponsorships. These sponsorships play a crucial role, offering essential financial support for advancing the league's development and professional standards.

### Weaknesses

Unfortunately, the Lebanese Women's Football League encounters substantial challenges. The significant funding gap between this league and the men's league seriously impedes its progress and its ability to compete (Naqash, 2014). In addition, the league has a deficit in its infrastructure as well. The lack of proper training and match facilities creates a major hurdle for player development and professionalism. Media coverage is also disproportionately low, limiting public awareness on the league and potential sponsorship deals (Toufaily, 2023a). Further complicating matters, the concentration of players in certain regions and a smaller overall pool threaten the league's long-term sustainability. Unequal access to training and resources limits the participation of players in certain regions leading to unequal development affecting the overall quality (Hallal, 2023).

### Opportunities

There are several avenues for positive change. International collaborations with organizations like UEFA and ABAAD can bring valuable training programs, expertise exchange, and development opportunities to the Lebanese Women's Football League. Strategic partnerships with corporations can generate vital financial resources for league development and player support. Additionally, focused marketing initiatives and media engagement strategies boost the league's visibility, attracting more sponsors and challenging existing negative public perceptions and stereotypes. Investments in infrastructure, such as collaborations with local authorities, municipalities, and even men's football clubs can lead to improved facilities dedicated to women's football. Moreover, implementing programs in schools and universities can create pathways for girls to participate in the game and potentially join the league, expanding the player pool (Hallal, 2023).

### Threats

The League's advancement is threatened by several factors. There are potential funding cuts from the LFA or current sponsors; there is an increasing popularity of other sports, which poses a competitive threat, potentially diverting resources and media attention away from women's football (Naqash, 2014). One of the most significant threats facing the sport are the persistent social barriers and cultural norms. Conservative families and entrenched religious beliefs often discourage girls from engaging in football or attending gym sessions, fearing that such activities may affect their femininity or lead to the development of muscular physiques (Naqash, 2014). These perceptions reinforce gender stereotypes and contribute to the underrepresentation of women in sports.

Furthermore, the lack of clear policies and regulations for women's football development creates an unstable environment for long-term planning. These policies should cover funding allocations, gender equality policies including equal pay and equal opportunities, and partnership encouragement with football associations, government bodies, educational institutions and community organizations. Another threat stems from limited opportunities for female football players in Lebanon, both financially and in terms of competition level, which leads to talented and promising players migrating abroad.

### **Important Considerations**

For sustainable growth, the League must consider not only immediate solutions but also long-term financial independence. It should explore potential commercialization opportunities, such as merchandise sales, to generate revenue. Community engagement plays a crucial role in challenging gender roles and stereotypes prevalent in society. By involving the community in women's football initiatives, we can raise awareness about the importance of breaking down traditional gender norms that limit female participation in sports. Similarly, by showcasing positive female role models in football and highlighting their achievements, we can challenge stereotypes that associate athleticism with masculinity. It is important to note that the lack of data can significantly hinder our understanding and development of effective strategies. Hence, implementing comprehensive data collection on player demographics and viewership could provide valuable insights for future strategic planning and marketing initiatives.

### **Policies and Proposed Solutions**

To effectively address the competing and complementary interests of different stakeholders, it is crucial to enact policies that not only support the growth of women's football but also promote broader gender equality in sports. Based on the analysis of the current situation in Lebanese women's football, a new comprehensive legislation should be introduced. This policy should mandate equal funding and resources between men's and women's sports, outline requirements for media coverage, and ensure equal access to facilities. It should also include provisions for regular monitoring and reporting to assess progress and compliance (Mahfoud, n.d.). This information could be used to form the basis of a comprehensive database for player demographics and performance metrics, which would provide valuable insights for future strategic planning and decision-making.

Moreover, partnerships with international organizations such as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) could facilitate the exchange of best practices, technical expertise, and funding opportunities to support the development of women's football in Lebanon. The solutions, opportunities and threats, derived from this paper's SWOT analysis, are tabulated below.

Table 1

	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
STRENGTHS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage growing interest in women's football to secure government grants and corporate sponsorships for league expansion and infrastructure development.</li> <li>• Partner with international organizations to provide training programs, exchange opportunities, and access to expertise for players and coaches.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement marketing campaigns and media outreach strategies to counter negative stereotypes and raise public awareness about the league and its players.</li> <li>• Advocate for clear policies and regulations from the LFA to ensure equal opportunities and resources for women's football compared to the men's league.</li> </ul>
WEAKNESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop talent identification and development programs to increase the player pool and prevent talent drain.</li> <li>• Collaborate with schools and universities to create pathways for young girls to participate in football and potentially join the league.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lobby for increased financial support from the LFA and seek alternative funding sources such as crowdfunding or merchandise sales.</li> <li>• Advocate for improved infrastructure and facilities for women's football by partnering with local communities and municipalities and men's football clubs.</li> </ul>
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As per the table above, the strengths of the league can be utilized to attract government grants and corporate sponsorships. Additionally, forming partnerships with international organizations could enhance training and development for players and coaches. The opportunities section suggests implementing marketing campaigns and media strategies to change public perceptions and increase awareness on women's sports, with help from the Lebanese Football Association (LFA).

In terms of weaknesses, the League should focus on developing talent identification programs and collaborating with educational institutions to bolster the player base and prevent talent drain. Finally, the threats address financial constraints, proposing increased advocacy for LFA support and exploring alternative funding methods like crowdfunding. The League also faces challenges in infrastructure, where partnering with local authorities and men's clubs could provide practical solutions. This SWOT analysis provides a roadmap for strengthening the League's position and promoting gender equality within the sport.

## Conclusion

Addressing the gender pay gap in Lebanese football and related gender discrimination issues requires joint efforts from policymakers, sports organizations, and society. We need new policies to ensure fairness in sports funding and resources, with regular monitoring to track progress. By working together and challenging stereotypes, Lebanon can create a more equal and inclusive sports environment where female athletes receive the support and recognition they deserve. Even though "Super Girls" withdrew from the Lebanese women's football league this year, the Lebanese Football player Sahar Dbouk is optimistic about the change this team has made:

We have broken many barriers. The team, for example, has many players who wear a hijab. More families are encouraging their girls to participate in football and schools have an important role in collaborating with us to develop existing talents too. Having a team for girls in the area is now considered very important (Hallal, 2023, para. 10)

What we know is that "Super Girls" will come back again stronger next year, and they will try again despite all the societal, financial, and structural obstacles they face. The resilience and determination displayed by the team are not only inspiring but also a call to action for everyone involved in sports and gender equality to ensure that women athletes receive the recognition and resources they deserve.

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