“Women must benefit from equal opportunities to men, in sport and society”

As the FIFA Women’s World Cup 2019 comes to its climax, the former French international player Sandrine Dusang points out the evolution of women’s football and the potential of sport for gender equality.

sportanddev: What progress has been achieved for gender equality in professional football? What needs to be improved?

Sandrine Dusang: France has evolved significantly on gender equality. However, a lot needs to be done and some clubs must be restructured. Clubs such as Olympique Lyonnais, Paris Saint-Germain or Montpellier Hérault Sport Club have a really professional structure and they ensure that girls gain from it. Girls need infrastructures to progress. Efforts should also be continued to structure weaker clubs, to make girls more successful and the French championship more homogeneous. I personally won’t talk about wage equality but more about equity and allowing women to train under the same conditions as men. That is that women can access fields, changing rooms and medical staff, so the level of women’s football will continue to evolve.

How would you describe the evolution of media coverage in women’s football?

I think that we can’t complain, neither in France nor at football level. Football is rather well mediatised for a sport practised by women. The biggest matches are broadcast on TF1 and Canal+ shows all of the World Cup matches. This proves that there is an evolution. In my opinion, media realised that there is something to do in this sector, as sponsors and partners did, and especially because there is still plenty of room to grow. With men, all has already been in place for some time, it is now on a “classical pattern”. With women, media and sponsors can gain ground, so there is a resurgence of interest.
Do you think that the Women's World Cup 2019 represents a turning point in women’s football history, as highlighted by Brigitte Henriques⁠¹?

I tend to agree with that. We already noticed a little boom in 2011 when France advanced to the semi-finals for the first time. We saw a change in terms of media coverage and an increase in the number of club registrations. Of course, the fact that the WWC takes place in France will speed up the women’s football development and we have already noticed the craze that it provokes in the public. However, this enthusiasm remains quite surprising because we did not expect that 10 million viewers would watch the first match, or that stadiums would be full for each match of the French team and some other matches would almost be full. I agree with Brigitte Henriques and believe that this WWC could represent a turning point, especially since it allows to test organisational capacities and for now, feedback is quite positive.

What measures should be taken in order to sustain interest for women’s football beyond the Women's World Cup? And more broadly, the development of women’s sport practice?

I believe that the interest is there, and it won’t go back. Of course, when results are better, the event seems more followed and covered. The fact that the French players have been eliminated will certainly cause a little drop of interest from French audience and media. But people will continue to follow the World Cup all the way.

Regarding the “return from World Cup”, the challenge will be the capacity to receive girls wanting to sign up to play, which is crucial for development. The number of registered players grows in France, but we need clubs and infrastructures to welcome them. The French Football Federation has already anticipated this return and spread the word to leagues and clubs. However, things have already changed. When I was younger, I had to drive 45 minutes to find a women’s club. Today, clubs are generally more accessible for the young girls who want to play football. We must continue to ensure that girls can easily access football.

How sport and football can contribute to promote gender equality?

I have always said that sport is a “school of life”. Some things are present simultaneously in life, society and sport. I think that we try to spread messages through sport. For this reason, it’s not absolutely necessary to seek wage equality, but rather equal opportunities for everyone. With Equal Playing Fields⁠², we talk about opportunity, equality, respect. Sport must convey this message and make sure that girls, women and boys have exactly the same chances in their practice, regardless of their sport.

We must stop with stereotypes considering such sport as male or female. We have these ideas in mind since our childhood and it’s part of our education. Now, we must open our minds and keep moving in that way. If a small girl wants to play football, why would she not be free to do it? Why could a little boy not practice dance or gymnastics? We must continue to convey this message in order to give the same opportunity for everyone to do what they want.

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¹ Brigitte Henriques is a former French international player. She is currently Vice President of French Football Federation and in charge of women’s football development.

² Equal Playing Field is a NGO which aims to tackle gender inequality and promote sport activities of girls and women throughout the word.