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To cite this article: Richard Shipway, Holly Henderson, Rafaelle Nicholson & Vincent Marmion (10 May 2025): Creative Bricks, Endless Possibilities: Using Lego[®] Serious Play[®] (LSP) to Manage Player Transition in Women's Semi-Elite Association Football in England, Leisure Sciences, DOI: [10.1080/01490400.2025.2501213](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2025.2501213)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2025.2501213>



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Published online: 10 May 2025.



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Creative Bricks, Endless Possibilities: Using Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) to Manage Player Transition in Women’s Semi-Elite Association Football in England

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ABSTRACT

This study uses the Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) methodology to explore the lived experiences and inequalities facing women’s participation in semi-elite association football in England. The study uniqueness is using Lego® Serious Play® to provide nuanced, abstract insights into leisure. It investigates how women navigate the transition process, both into and out of semiprofessional sporting environments. By adopting a creative, experiential methodology, the focal point is the Lego® and not the footballer. Data was collected from fifteen women football players based at a semi-elite club in the South of England. Three key data themes emerged surrounding the transition process in the women’s game; (i) barriers facing women in male-dominated sports, (ii) governance and policies to support women’s football, and (iii) effective coaching to facilitate women’s progression in sport. This is the first study to use Lego® Serious Play® as a creative, experiential methodology in the context of managing sport organizations.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 July 2024

Accepted 19 March 2025

KEYWORDS

Lego® Serious Play® (LSP); Women’s Association Football; Career Transition; Play Based Learning; Inequality

Introduction

Women’s football is one of the world’s fastest growing sports (FIFA, 2023). Yet despite the growth in women’s football on the global stage, there is sparse research focusing on the voices of women players, especially outside of elite levels (Bramley et al., 2025). Research in this domain is timely and important, given the rapid growth of women’s football (Culvin & Bowes, 2023) and considering what Culvin (2023) describes as the precarious nature of football as work for women. According to Culvin, this problem is further emphasized in the UK (United Kingdom) due to the recent and rapid professionalization of women’s association football, hereinafter referred to as football.

This has led to a situation whereby many female players are “living hand to mouth *via* precarious contracts,” and where the existing organizational structures are not sufficiently developed to support the welfare of these players, either during or after their professional careers (Bowes & Culvin., 2021, p.9). Additionally, many semi-elite

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female footballers in the United Kingdom (UK) continue to fall short of Culvin and Bowes (2023, p.7) definition of professionalism, being as “purely deriving their income from football”, and thus generating additional challenges for this population due to the need to balance football as leisure, with work and/or study. We propose that exploring a population of semi-elite women footballers can foster a better understanding of the challenges associated with the transition process in sport and leisure.

This study will use the creative methodology of Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) to partially address the research gap by examining these lived experiences and inequalities within semi-elite women's sport. Through this novel approach, we sought to make a unique contribution to knowledge on how best to manage player anxiety and facilitate a better understanding of the transition process whereby semi-elite women footballers move between various stages, or levels of the game. The study explicitly investigates strategies to help support the transition process for women during their playing ‘careers.’ This transition could be either from grassroots leisure to the professional level of the sport, or vice versa, from the professional level into grassroots leisure participation.

To explore some of these issues, this study uses the power of play and play-based learning approaches (Henderson & Shipway, 2024), in this case, Lego® Serious Play®. The study incorporates playfulness into a sport and leisure environment, provides a podium for the authentic voices of semi-elite women footballers, and allows the players to express their lived experiences, as the focal point is on the Lego® models rather than the footballer. As ‘proof of concept,’ this approach provides an examination of women's participation in semi-elite football. In the present and first study of its type, the Lego® Serious Play® approach champions the increased use of new play-based learning pedagogies in women's leisure, and the outcomes demonstrate the potential for this approach to be trialed across a diverse range of women's sport and leisure spaces and places (Shipway & Henderson, 2023).

In a business and management context, Kristiansen and Rasmussen (2014) highlight that Lego® Serious Play® has been used by globally iconic organizations including NASA and Google to assist with resolving complex real-world problems. In this study, a prominent aspect of Lego® Serious Play® is using metaphors to allow the footballers to metaphorically explore their socially constructed leisure-based realities (Wengel et al., 2016) and provide more nuanced insights into participants' everyday social and leisure-based experiences. We also aimed to echo the calls of Bramley et al. (2025) to provide new insights into the challenges and complexities experienced in the under-researched population of semi-elite women footballers, and explore the perceived lack of support, focus and opportunities afforded to women's football.

An overview of the literature

The challenges of professionalization in a male-dominated sport

The challenges faced by women in traditionally male-dominated sports like football are well-documented. Football was historically constructed as a male sport and leisure space and women were actively excluded, most notably in the English FA's 1921 to 1971 ban on women's football (Williams, 2003). Educational experiences have also shaped gender disparity, with girls often denied access to football (and other

male-dominated sports) while at school, or else alienated by what Flintoff (2008, p.407) labels a “competitive sport discourse”. To be accepted within football, women have had to “define themselves... in opposition to femininity” (Sraton et al., 1999, p.105) and conceal aspects of their identity such as sexuality (Caudwell, 1999). Research suggests that challenging traditional gender roles may sometimes be easier within the US context (Kristiansen et al., 2014), connected to their shorter history of professional men’s football.

The ‘othering’ of women’s football in the UK has continued into the contemporary era. Despite its recent professionalization, women’s football has been described by scholars as the ‘little sister’ of English football (Woodhouse et al., 2019) and as ‘on the outside’ of existing professional structures (Dunn & Welford, 2014). This shapes the everyday lived experiences of female professional footballers, who face ongoing precarity, inconsistent access to facilities, and low pay (Culvin, 2023, Forbes et al., 2023). This was evident during the covid-19 pandemic whereby because of the cancellation of fixtures, elite women’s footballers were shown to be “particularly vulnerable to occupational fragility” (Clarkson et al., 2022, p.56).

Professionalization is a gendered process which affects female athletes differently to male ones (Bowes & Culvin, 2021). For example, media coverage of women’s sport continues to be disproportionately low (Parry et al., 2023; Pope et al., 2024), meaning that it is more difficult for women to attract sponsorship even after they become professionals (Morgan, 2019). There are also fewer post-sport career opportunities available to women players, underlining the precarity of often short-lived playing careers (Bowes et al., 2021).

Within England, the professionalization of women’s football is still very much in its infancy (Bowes & Culvin, 2021). Culvin and Bowes (2023, p.7) define a professional as “a woman whose financial income from her involvement in football enables her to commit full time, without the need to pursue a second occupation”. By this definition, only women who play in the top tier of women’s football, the Women’s Super League (WSL), are fully professional; those who play in the second tier, the Championship, are semiprofessional, defined by Culvin and Bowes as earning enough to cover expenses, but not enough to be a full-time athlete (BBC Sport, 2023). Beneath that level, much depends on the discretion of individual clubs, however there are clearly numerous women playing at a semi-elite level who are forced to balance the competing demands of football and work/study (Forbes et al., 2023).

Governance and policymaking for women’s sport

The above issues are exacerbated by governance structures which remain heavily male-dominated (Velija & Pigott, 2022). Football clubs have been shown to be “extremely gendered” organizations which preserve and naturalize male dominance (Bryan et al., 2021, p.940). Interviews by Welford (2011, p.378) with twelve women working within football organizations in the UK demonstrated that their work was “frequently devalued”, while Nicholson (2022) has shown that the FA’s takeover of women’s football in 1993 was catastrophic for female representation at the top levels of football administration.

The same is true of football coaching, a profession in which women continue to be underrepresented and to suffer structural discrimination (Norman, 2008, Norman

& Simpson, 2023). Norman (2016) has shown that male coaches can perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes about women athletes, which may enhance some of the gendered challenges of professionalization outlined above. Additionally, the current literature indicates a correlation between unsupportive coaches and poor athlete mental health (Bramley et al., 2025) and stresses the importance of coaches in establishing team cultures that normalize and de-stigmatize mental health issues (Bissett et al., 2020), although more research is needed in this area. Our study specifically aims to develop understanding of the role coaches play in supporting player transitions into and out of footballing careers, be they professional or more leisure or recreation based.

Future research agendas for women's sport

In their review of existing research into women's football, Valenti et al. (2018, p.522) call for future studies to focus on “experiences of women (semi-) professional footballers with regards to their employment work–life issues as well the impact that welfare policies can have on their careers”. The recent professionalization of women's sport, including football, is an area ripe for further research in leisure, as are the experiences of those situated at the blurred edges of semiprofessionalism and professionalism (Kryger et al., 2022). We still lack detailed knowledge of the crucial transition phases female players experience as they move into and out of elite football (Culvin, 2023, McGreary et al., 2021). This research aims to partially address this gap.

From a methodology perspective, Culvin (2023, p.685) argues that “the voices of women athletes articulating their experiences of professionalism and related employment are largely missing from the extant literature”. A recent systematic review concluded that qualitative studies of women's sport would benefit from moving beyond interviews to incorporate more diverse methodological approaches (Thomson et al., 2023). Our research sought to progress these agendas further *via* the creative and experiential methodology of Lego® Serious Play® (LSP).

Lego® Serious play® (LSP)

McCusker (2014, p.27) indicate that Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) is a creative methodology where “participants use Lego blocks as mediating artefacts to build symbolic or metaphorical representations of abstract concepts”. According to Kristiansen and Rasmussen (2014), individuals can quickly build metaphoric structures with Lego® responding to questions and then develop a narrative to corroborate them. These individual ideas and thoughts can be shared through a physical portrayal to help stimulate rich discussion with other participants. A vital component of the process is the free-thinking, nonjudgmental and playful interactions between participants (Jensen et al., 2018). This can also help improve both creativity and communication through a liberated and unfiltered expressive lens (Shipway & Henderson, 2023).

The Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) methodology is based on four pillars (i) using metaphors; (ii) the concept of play, (iii) theory of flow; and (iv) constructivism (Shipway & Henderson, 2023). An LSP workshop can create an atmosphere of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), denoted as an effortless engaged state obtained by balancing both skill and challenge. The intertwining feelings of challenge, creativity, and fantasy,

through playfulness, can reinvent environments essential for generating immersive playful environments (McCusker & Swan, 2018), that also reflects the effortless engagement associated with flow.

Enhancing participants' flow experiences using LSP, highlights that teams can maximize their creative potential through a balanced structured approach that incorporates sharing and individual reflection time, which can enhance the effectiveness of their teamwork (Zenk et al., 2022). There is convergence between LSP and qualitative research methods, due the significance role of storytelling, narrations, and visual communication (Thrift, 2008). Despite this, Kriszan and Nienaber (2024) note that the full potential of LSP as a tool for qualitative data collection has not yet been thoroughly explored. Similarly, Henderson and Shipway (2024) highlight that LSP is fertile ground for research studies in leisure that underpin interventions and strategy in the management of women's sport and leisure organizations, communities, federations, teams, and individuals.

Material and methods

Using lego® creativity as a research approach

This study adopts a creative methodology, Lego® Serious Play® (LSP), to enable women footballers to describe their thoughts, feelings and lived experiences, and to generate new knowledge on challenges associated with managing the transition process for women in football, and holistically within sport and leisure. In the context of research on women's sport, this study responds to the call from Thomson et al. (2023) for qualitative studies of women's sport that move beyond interviews to incorporate more diverse methodological approaches. Henderson and Shipway (2024) highlight the need for mechanisms to facilitate co-created knowledge. As a mechanism, Lego® Serious Play® allows the participants to be equal partners with an equal voice in the research process (Shipway & Henderson, 2023) and supports a constructionist perspective that knowledge is co-created. Similarly, Wengel et al. (2021) suggest traditional qualitative methodologies do not always express the co-constructed realities of participants and their social dynamics. As previously highlighted, the utilization of LSP for qualitative research is underdeveloped (Kriszan & Nienaber, 2024), and this study provides a vehicle to further understand its impact, reach and value in the management of sport and leisure.

Shipway et al. (2022) proposed that Lego® can be regarded as an everyday leisure activity. However, its playful, child-like nature may present challenges for some participants, particularly those unfamiliar with or reluctant to engage in creative, hands-on methods (Wengel et al., 2016). Observations from the sessions with women football players revealed varying initial responses to the activity. While some participants embraced the process with enthusiasm, others appeared more reserved, likely due to the unconventional nature or departure from traditional forms of engagement. Over time, most participants came to appreciate the tactile and metaphorical aspects of Lego®, which proved effective in enabling the expression of complex and nuanced experiences (McCusker, 2020).

For practitioners and researchers considering the adoption of this method, it is essential to anticipate and address potential hesitations among participants (McCusker & Swan, 2018). Providing a clear explanation of the purpose of this method and emphasizing that the focus is on the articulation of ideas rather than showing artistic skill is critical. Creating a supportive, non-judgmental environment is also key to encouraging participation and fostering comfort (Shipway & Henderson, 2023). Additionally, incorporating additional contextualized introductory exercises or warm-up activities can help familiarize participants with the process and help reduce initial apprehension (Wengel et al., 2016). The implementation of Lego® Serious Play® can be optimized to elicit meaningful insights and promote inclusivity across diverse and hard to reach participant groups within sport and leisure contexts.

The LSP approach enables participants to engage in cooperative learning throughout the process. The interactions among individuals, conversations with peers, and internal reflections are all captured, enriching the learning experience for all (Erbil & Kocabaş, 2018). Shipway and Henderson (2023) indicate the scope for scalable research to be replicated through Lego® Serious Play® which can subsequently allow tacit ‘hidden’ experiences to be communicated in leisure-based environments. They champion ‘real-world’ opportunities for building capability through experiential methodological innovation within the domain of managing sport and leisure organizations, teams, communities, federations, and individuals.

Research sample, data collection, and analysis

A Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) workshop generates a collaborative environment where the participants can interact playfully, building models in response to questions set by the session facilitator (Henderson & Shipway, 2024). It can also change the nature of group interactions, and holistic outcomes by acquiring meaningful participant reflections (McCusker, 2020). Shipway et al. (2022) propose that the creativity emerges from using an everyday leisure activity, Lego®, as a tool to provide bottom-up, participant-led outcomes, and not from the Lego® per se.

Through using an experiential play-based methodology like LSP, this study addresses the calls from both Perry et al. (2021) and Bramley et al. (2025) for methodologically diverse research that examines specific competitive levels for women athletes. This understanding is vital for the development of effective support mechanisms, and for better understanding the complex interplay of balancing demands facing women in sport who are not yet fully professional, or who have transitioned out of full professionalism.

Data was collected in March 2024 at a semi-elite women’s football club in the South of England, UK. During the 60-minute session, participants were asked to complete a series of tasks aligned with the Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) methodology. Fifteen women footballers took part, addressing playing transition issues linked to their participation in football, and they sat on three equally distributed tables of five players. To protect their anonymity, the footballers were all given pseudonyms. Table 1 details the FA (Football Association) women’s football development pyramid in England, which included 186 teams as of the beginning of the 2023/24 season (some teams have disbanded since this date). The shaded area highlights our sample of participants.

Table 1. The participant Pool for semi elite women’s football.

#		League(s)/division(s)	
1	12	Super League	
2	12	Championship	
3	24	FA National League Northern Prem	
4	48	FA National League North	FA National League Midlands
5	90	Northwest Regional Prem	West Midlands Regional Prem
		Northeast Regional Prem	East Midlands Regional Prem
			Southern Region Prem
			FA National League Southwest
			FA National League Southeast
			London & Southeast Region Prem

One of the research team, with close connections within women's football, was responsible for recruiting participants. The appropriate documentation including information sheets and participant agreement forms were circulated and signed and the workshops took place within social spaces at a familiar setting, the football club, which allowed for informal interactions with the Lego® (Shipway & Henderson, 2023). The workshop was designed and delivered by one of the authors who is an accredited Lego® Serious Play® methods and materials facilitator. The requirement for an underlying experience and understanding of the LSP approach is discussed extensively within leisure contexts in the findings of Henderson and Shipway (2024).

The workshop was divided into two main parts, incorporating both Skills Build (SkB) and Session Builds (SB) questions and activities (storytelling and core outcome builds). The Skills Build (SkB) was allocated approximately thirty minutes for three tasks (SkB1 - SkB3), and then fifteen minutes for each of the two primary Session Build (SkB) questions and activities (SB1 and SB2). The Lego® builds were all individual tasks, and after each build, the participants wrote the meaning of the construction on the cue card before progressing to the 'share' stage of the cycle (McCusker, 2020). This approach allows the participant to provide a physical, written and verbal response to the challenge.

The development of the workshop questions was based on the flipping and framing process (Stavros et al., 2021). For example, a negative issue and negative impact, such as 'build a model of the barriers that women face participating in a male dominated sport,' was then flipped into the opposite direction and more positively framed as 'build a model that shows the challenges you have overcome in participating in male-dominated sport.' The initial Skills Build (SkB) questions, emerging from the literature on women's football were: SkB1: Build a model of a duck with a sporting superpower (a warmup build); SkB2: Metaphor challenge (a one brick warmup metaphor challenge, with feedback); and finally, SkB3: 'Build a model that shows the challenges you have overcome in participating in male-dominated sport'.

Following the Skills Builds (SkB), the footballers progressed to two more targeted and focused questions, the Session Builds (SB), which were SB1: 'Build a model to show what policies can support women's players when commencing and then transitioning between different phases of sport'; and SB2: 'Build a model to show what coaching strategies can support women transitioning within their sporting careers (either moving from grassroots to professional or from professional to grassroots sport)'.

McCusker (2014) proposes basic guidelines for participants, which were adopted in this study. They are (i) trust your hands; (ii) trust the process; (iii) everybody builds; and (iv) everybody takes part. The football players were each given an identical Windows Explorer Lego® pack (see Figure 1). Despite alternative options, it was decided that prepackaged bags were the most hygienic choice (Shipway et al., 2022). Importantly, the standardized packs highlighted the diversity of the 'builds' created by the footballers.

The workshop focused upon the Lego® model rather than the individual footballer, which, no pun intended, created a level playing field. Each footballer was given an equal voice and took ownership of the meaning of their Lego® build. Time for reflection was supported by using an incremental design. The two earlier 'builds,' SkB1 and SkB2, were 'warm up exercises,' to ensure the players were both comfortable and confident with the tasks required (Shipway et al., 2022). Each build was followed by



Figure 1. A Lego® window explorer pack .

a period of peer group discussion. As the workshop progressed, emphasis then moved toward final two questions (SB1 and SB2) aligned to the primary study research question which was exploring issues surrounding the transition process during their sporting careers. As highlighted by Shipway and Henderson (2023), the priority was following the LSP processes of (i) frame, (ii) challenge, (iii) build, (iv) share, and (v) reflect.

The Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) session enabled the players to construct models that represented their experiences and to enhance flow experiences by promoting deep engagement and creativity, where interactions and intrinsic motivation are central (Zenk et al., 2022). Anecdotally, the reflection phases enabled deep understanding and empathy to be articulated. LSP noticeably changed the nature of group interaction by creating a safe, egalitarian space that encouraged open dialogue and collaboration (Wheeler et al., 2020). The football players felt safe enough to convey issues about the coaching communications, even though one of the researchers was part of the formal coaching team. Moreover, the tactile and metaphorical nature of LSP enabled participants to communicate tacit or hidden experiences, surfacing nuanced barriers, such as subtle gender biases or feelings of exclusion (McCusker, 2020), which are often overlooked within more traditional qualitative workshop or focus group formats (Henderson & Shipway, 2024). This was evident when emotive subjects were raised such as funding, injury, gender, and stereotypes. The Lego® Serious Play® process

created awareness and empowered players to co-create solutions, express their authentic voices and address barriers across interconnected layers.

Following the norms of recent Lego® studies in the leisure context, qualitative data analysis techniques and procedures were applied (Henderson & Shipway, 2023; 2024; Shipway & Henderson, 2023). Thematic analysis has been described as appropriate for qualitative research in health and wellbeing (Gennings et al., 2023). However, according to Wengel et al. (2021), this experiential method encounters similar limitations and critiques of constructivist paradigms, including replicability of data and lack of generalizability. The codes emerging from this study were directed by the data and obtained from the comments written on the blank cue cards and the Lego® models built by the footballers. The cue cards allowed the players to detail their values, meanings, perceptions and thoughts which helped add new detail to the nuanced meanings behind the models constructed (Henderson & Shipway, 2024). After the workshop, the cards were collected and several rounds of comments, revisions, and discussions between all the authors helped to finalize a set of codes, key themes, and sub themes (Jones, 2022).

Results and discussion

Barriers faced by women in male-dominated sports

The players were asked to ‘build a model that shows the challenges you have overcome in participating in male-dominated sport.’ The emerging themes highlighted the multifaceted nature of challenges women encounter in sport, including gender bias, limited opportunities, societal pressures and the ongoing struggle for equality and recognition. Selected examples of Lego® builds and reflections on barriers faced by women in male-dominated sports are detailed in Figure 2.

One barrier identified was **gender bias and stereotypes**, centered on prejudice against women’s abilities in sports. The players cited reasons such as being perceived as too feminine or sensitive; societal perceptions of women playing male-dominated sports, leading to constant scrutiny and judgment, and broader male perceptions of women in sports, with some men being closed-minded about the contributions of women. Jo commented “there’s a prejudice that women cannot achieve as much as males in sports, and that we are not as strong, too feminine, too sensitive and not physically able.” Jen reflected “people look down at women playing male dominated sports and we are subjected to constant scrutinization.”

Players in this Lego® build expressed frustration with being perceived as ‘too feminine’ or ‘sensitive,’ reflecting deeply ingrained stereotypes. Jo’s comment about prejudice against women’s abilities in sports and Jen’s experience of constant scrutiny underline this issue. These experiences align with the foundational works of Scraton et al. (1999), who noted that women in sports often must define themselves in opposition to traditional femininity to gain acceptance. In another foundational study Caudwell (1999) also discussed how women might conceal aspects of their identity, such as sexuality, to fit into these male-dominated spaces, a finding which has been echoed in more recent research (Grice et al., 2023). Given the frustrations expressed by our research participants in relation to continued stereotypes based on gender, we would concur with the finding of Grice et al. (2023, p.17) that insufficient progress has been made

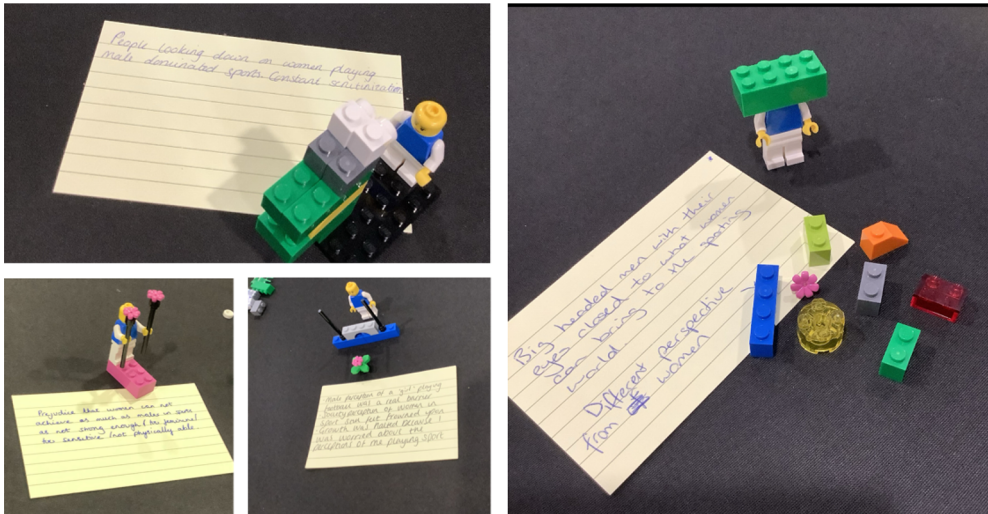


Figure 2. Lego® builds and reflections on barriers faced by women in male-dominated sports.

“in pioneering new safe spaces for women and girls football that are truly empowering and emancipatory, not... reliant on constructs of heteronormative norms of behaviour”.

There were perceptions of barriers associated with a **lack of opportunities** including girls being outnumbered in school football teams and having to join boys’ teams, limited access to facilities with resources being prioritized for the boys’ or men’s teams, and balancing sport with other responsibilities such as work which led to additional challenges in training and pursuing a career in sport. Hannah noted:

My Lego® build shows a football pitch with the person playing. It also displays the barriers which are the lack of opportunities we have. For me, football was for boys at school, and we were outnumbered, and, in the minority. The build also shows me having to join a boys’ team.

Grace explained that “my model represents a bridge. I feel that as women we have so many more bridges to build and to climb over and to conquer than the men.” Ava felt that “all the facilities are taken by the men and boy’s teams. Also, we must work and juggle our day jobs whilst heavily training.” Similarly, Emily said her Lego® build reflected “climbing a ladder to get where you want to be, before getting there and then finding other obstacles to overcome. Plus, trying to balance time and money versus my playing career.” Sam talked about the social pressures of women’s football whereby “men had priority with training and access to facilities. I also felt judged by people. There were also obstacles linked to injury, lack of provision of support services like physios, and the hassle of traveling to games.” These observations by participants highlight ongoing inequitable access to football for girls at school (BBC Sport, 2022), and throughout their footballing lives (Culvin, 2023). Ava, Emily, and Sam’s comments speak to the difficulties faced by elite women’s footballers in the UK who are currently unable to consider themselves professionals, reinforcing the findings of Culvin and Bowes (2023).

Aligned with these observations, **social pressures and perceptions** were highlighted. There were concerns about societal perceptions hindering growth in sports participation,

challenges in overcoming various societal barriers and stereotypes (depicted metaphorically through building bridges or climbing ladders), and the impact of judgements, injury, and a lack of support upon women's participation and advancements through sport. Emma observed:

When growing up, male perceptions of a girl playing football was a real barrier. At that time, society perception of women in sports still felt frowned upon. My development was halted because I was worried about the perceptions of me playing sport.

Olivia commented on her Lego® build as illustrating “big headed men with their eyes closed to what women can bring to the sporting world. You get a distinct perspective from women.” Olivia had used a large Lego® brick, placed on the minifigure to symbolize the big head of a man. Emma's observation about societal perceptions hindering her growth in sports and Olivia's depiction of closed-minded male attitudes suggest that the historical exclusion of women from football (Williams, 2003, Woodhouse et al., 2019) continues to impact on women's participation and advancements.

One area frequently cited was the lack of **equality and recognition**, with players advocating for equal pay and opportunities in sports, and the recognition of the differing levels of pay and respect accorded to women when compared with men in the world of sport. Megan suggested that “there should be equal pay for female professional players.” This is a reference to the U.S. (United States) women's national team players who in February 2022 filed an equal employment opportunity commission complaint against the U.S. soccer federation over inequality in both pay and treatment (Das, 2022). Ava argued that “equal pay and opportunities for girls” is a barrier, whilst Lauren noted there were “different levels of respect, different levels of pay, different views on ability, and different levels of critique.” The call for equal pay and opportunities by Ava and Lauren highlights the ongoing disparities in pay and working conditions between men and women within professional sport (Bowes & Culvin, 2021) and more pertinently suggests that these issues are recognized by and impact on women footballers at all levels of the football development pyramid in the UK.

Player responses were underpinned by the need for persistence and resilience. These related to persistence in overcoming barriers and stereotypes, once again symbolized by climbing metaphorical ladders or building bridges, and the need for display resilience when facing challenges like lack of support, injuries, and societal judgment. The historical context provided by Williams (2003) regarding the FA's ban on women's football and the ongoing ‘othering’ of women's football (Dunn & Welford, 2014), provides a backdrop for understanding the current struggles. The players' lived experiences of gender bias, limited opportunities, societal pressures, and inequality mirror the documented challenges and underline the need for continued efforts toward equality in football (Pope et al., 2024). Overall, both the players' accounts and the existing literature show that while there have been strides toward professionalization and increased visibility for women in sports, significant barriers remain. Addressing these issues will require systemic changes, increased support, and a cultural shift toward greater acceptance and recognition of women's contributions to sports.

Governance and policies to better support women in football

The players were then asked to ‘build a model to show what policies can support women’s players when commencing and then transitioning between different phases of sport.’ Emerging themes highlighted the need for addressing financial barriers, improving infrastructure and resources, promoting equality and representation, facilitating pathways and progression, and enhancing education, awareness, and development of women’s football. Selected examples of Lego® builds and reflections on policies to better support women in football are detailed in [Figure 3](#).

Several players spoke about the need for policies that address the **Funding and Financial Barriers** in women’s football. They mentioned escalating costs associated with rising to higher league divisions in football, including travel and other expenses; frustrations with finding ways to overcome financial barriers through IT support, funding, and sponsorship; and underpinned advocating better funding support for women’s football to tackle the current disparities and to improve facilities and resources. Jen felt funding was a barrier “as you climb divisions the costs for travel, kit, petrol, and expenses rise. There is a need to find ways around it all over and more funding and sponsorship.” Lauren called for “more support for women faced with both emotional and financial adversities to facilitate progression through our football careers.” These calls for support echo Forbes et al. (2023, p.142) whose study of the FA Women’s Championship’s transition from amateur to professional status highlighted the dilemmas such transitions provide for players who were provided with only limited financial remuneration while being required to make increasing sacrifices to remain as players in the second level of football. Our research suggests

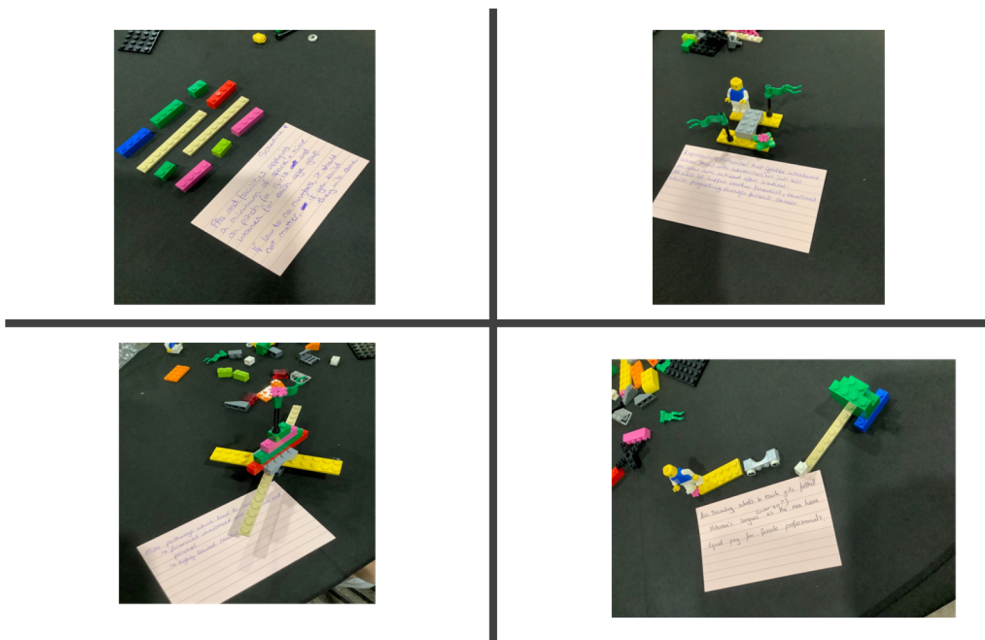


Figure 3. Lego® builds and reflections on governance and policies to better support women in football .

that these dilemmas are now equally being faced by players further down the women's football development pyramid.

One area where the players' felt policies were needed was linked to **Infrastructure and Resources**. This included recognition of the importance of nutrition, facilities, gym programmes, officials, and coaches in supporting women's football. There were suggestions for better funding and investment in facilities, personnel, and highly trained coaches to enhance opportunities and success in women's football. For several players, the emphasis should be on providing resources and support to help with progression and injury management and ensuring a clear pathway for young girls through to the higher echelons of women's football. Jess discussed her Lego® build stating:

The flower shows nutrition. The green brick shows facilities. The flag shows officials and coaches - we need more female coaches and officials. The green wall I built represent money - we need better funding support for women's football. An example could be the development of more academies to help develop talent. We also need more access to football at school. We also need research into injuries.

Ava also noted the need for "more resources and support to help with progression or injury" and Grace advocated "applying a minimum space and time on the pitch for girls and women for each age group. Even if we have small numbers, it should not matter. If you build it, they will come." Recent studies support this need, showing that football clubs often preserve male dominance and underfund women's sports (Forbes et al., 2023). Similarly, Musto et al. (2017) explores this in the context of gender-bland sexism, and how women can be marginalized in male-dominated, male-controlled environments. In the context of women's cricket, Parry et al. (2021) suggests that beliefs are often subtly conveyed about men's perceived athletic superiority. They argue that women's sport remains poorly understood at elite level and suggests the presence of gender-based sexism with noticeable differences in the presentation of women's sport when compared to their male equivalents.

On the theme of policies relating to **Equality and Representation**, there were calls for more women coaches, officials, and managers in women's football to provide better understanding and support for athletes. This was supported with advocacy for equal opportunities and treatment, including free coaching training for women and equal pay for professional players. Players highlighted the ongoing lack of women coaches working within women's football (Norman & Simpson, 2023). Chloe observed "we need more female coaches for our women's team. We also need more free coaching and training for women. Also, it can be expensive traveling with Jo called for a "better understanding of assistant referees, officials, and funding." Chloe and Jo emphasized the importance of female representation to better support athletes, echoing the work of Norman (2016, p.10), who suggests that "male coaches can sometimes perpetuate unhelpful gender stereotypes".

Pathways and Progression was a central concern regarding current policy gaps within football. The players expressed desires for more pathways leading to success in women's football, along with solutions and support to overcome adversities encountered during a football career. There were also suggestions for establishing clear communication and links between girls' football, clubs, facilities, and support staff to facilitate progression and development. Hannah called for "a clear pathway for girls

through to women's football where they communicate and build links with the clubs and facilities, and support staff." Sophia also requested "more pathways which lead to success, financial investment in facilities and personnel, and more highly trained coaches." Recent studies identify the need for research into the transitional phases of professional female players' careers and the structures required to support these transitions (Culvin, 2023, McGreary et al., 2021). However, our findings suggest that these concerns extend down the football development pyramid in women's football, and that it is equally important for policymakers and researchers to consider the state of the pathway for women looking to progress in football at semiprofessional and amateur elite levels.

A final sub theme relating to policy development was for greater **Education and Awareness** for the women's game. This included proposals for incorporating football into school curricula for girls and advocating better mental health support within the sport and recognizing the need for education and understanding regarding female emotions and management within football. This extended to advocating for a certain percentage of female managers within football leagues. Emily highlighted the need for "greater women in management, as some emotions are not understood by male managers. There should be a certain percentage of women managers within leagues." Megan suggested that "all schools should teach girls' football. We also need leagues for players over the age of forty, as the men have." Emily and Megan's comments highlight the need for greater understanding and support for women's specific needs within sport. Our study therefore adds a valuable lived-experience perspective to studies demonstrating the 'extremely gendered' nature of football organizations (Bryan et al., 2021), underlining the need for policies which increase the number of women working within senior levels in football, to improve the experiences of female players at all levels of the football development pyramid.

Coaching strategies supporting women's progression in sport

For the final Lego® task, SB2, players were asked to 'build a model to show what coaching strategies can support women transitioning within their sporting careers in football'. This transition was either moving from grassroots to professional or from professional to grassroots sport. The sub themes underscored the importance of effective communication, understanding gender differences, fostering a positive and supportive environment, and tailoring coaching approaches to meet the needs of women in football. Upon reflection, our findings on coaching strategies are not specific to women's sport but relate more to the need for holistic inclusive coaching, and the importance of developing awareness of societal contexts that some sport populations may perceive as being exclusionary in practice (Hayes & Killingley, 2015). Selected examples of Lego® builds and reflections on coaching strategies supporting women's progression in sport. are detailed in [Figure 4](#).

Two players, Sam, and Hannah suggested the women's game needed to recognize the importance of looking beyond conventional criteria for player selection, evaluation, and coaching more generally. Sam advocated the need "to look outside the box, as sometimes the best players are not always the correct ones." In the context of coaching, the players placed great emphasis on **Honesty and Positivity**, with a focus on

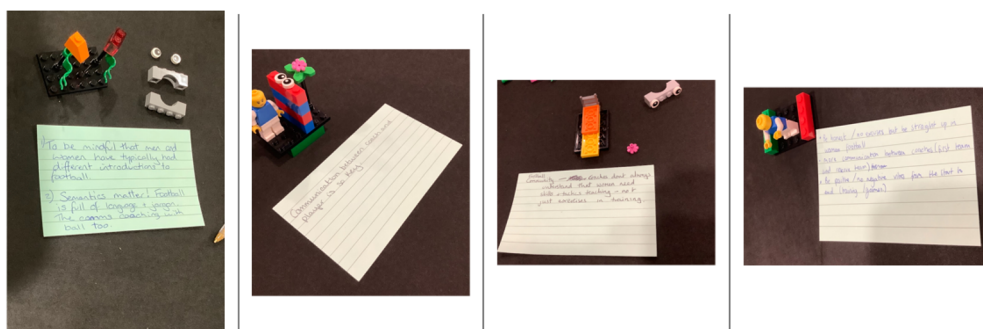


Figure 4. Lego® builds and reflections on coaching strategies supporting women's progression in sport .

transparency and constructive communication, and advocating maintaining positive attitudes and avoiding negativity during training and games. Olivia focused on:

Coaches need to be honest with no excuses - be straight up in women's football. We need more communication between the coaches, first team, and reserve teams. Coaching must be positive. There should be no negative vibes, from the start to the end of both training and games.

Multiple participants postulated that coaches understand issues surrounding **Gender Sensitivity and Inclusivity** and had awareness of the need for different approaches to introducing football to men and women. Several participants emphasized the importance of language and communication styles that were tailored to each gender and could recognize that women's football requires the teaching of skills and tactics teaching, and not just physical exercise. This may require coaches to adapt their methods accordingly. Emma commented "we must be mindful that men and women have had different introductions to football. Semantics matter." Football is full of language and jargon, much which permeates women's sport (Bruce, 2015). On this issue Sophia observed "Coaches don't always understand that women need better instruction and teaching on the skills and tactics of the game, and not just doing exercises in training."

These observations on gendered language reinforce the perspectives of Norman and Simpson (2023) that male-dominated attitudes remain prevalent in sports coaching even though their manifestations are often difficult to recognize and can often be dismissed by the perpetrators. Similarly, Magrath (2021) highlights the challenges of overcoming dominant masculinities and male ideology in football, which often permeates to the use of language. He indicates that hegemonic forms of masculinity continue to be reproduced, as football remains resistant to the broader social trends of inclusivity.

Team Dynamics and Support from coaches were identified as key themes for the players: They emphasized the importance of effective communication between coaches, players and within the teams. There was also the requirement for fostering a supportive and inclusive environment within every football community. In the context of Australian sport, O'Brien et al. (2023) noted the pivotal role of coaches in creating more inclusive, positive, and supportive cultures in women's team sport to improve both the support and playing experiences for women. There was also an acknowledgement of the

pressures facing players and the need for holistic support, including mental health, nutrition, injury management, and a clear understanding of non-football commitments. Ava commented on the symbolism in her Lego® model “I have built a model about communication and squad rotation. The bridge I built shows us working together, and the green brick highlights to remember we pay to play.” Chloe called for “more holistic support for our mental health, nutrition, and injury support, and a better understanding of our non-football commitments, and how these are important too.”

Closely aligned with the theme of Team Dynamics and Support was the need for coaching in women's football to adopt a **Player-Centric Approach**, which primarily involved better and clearer communication and acknowledging the player's perspectives. This should involve better understanding and support from coaches to help build strong relationships and to foster both individual and team development. Taylor et al. (2024) reinforced the perspective of Culvin (2023) when highlighting the unequal balance of power between the athlete and ‘management representatives’ such as coaches, which can leave players feeling unsure how to react, and often made to feel ‘grateful’ for their sporting opportunities. There were also multiple requests for clear and concise direction from coaches that are tailored to the female mentality and the individual needs of players which would help to better facilitate both optimal performance and team cohesion. Jen called for “understanding from coaches, positivity, and more support to build a strong base for a relationship with their team.” Lauren requested “better communication between the coach and the player is so key.” Grace summarized this in one word for her Lego® build, which was “communication.”

Finally, several players stressed the need for coaching strategies to provide a **Supportive Environment**. They placed great emphasis on providing support, guidance, knowledge, and understanding to players, and coaching that displayed competence in soft, inter-personal skills such as empathy (Nash & Mallett, 2019). This should recognize that these factors are essential for women football players to perform at their best level, and to feel valued within the football community. Megan placed emphasis upon “support, guidance, knowledge, and understanding which underpins your ability to do your best.” Likewise, Rachel called for “clear and concise direction, and do not make too many changes, if any. Coaches must understand the female mentality, of individual mentality, and then support that in an obvious way.” The players emphasized the importance of effective communication, gender sensitivity, team dynamics, and a player-centric approach in coaching.

Our research findings therefore align with the existing evidence arguing for a need for ‘gender-responsive’ coaching which is tailored to the specific needs of female footballers (MacKinnon, 2011). We would also echo Norman's (2016, p.11) call for ‘relationship skills’ to be added to the agenda of coach education and would emphasize that this needs to extend to all levels of the football development pyramid. These strategies are essential for supporting women transitioning within their sporting careers. The need for honesty, positivity, and holistic support, including mental health and injury management, was highlighted. These insights align with recent studies on the critical role of coaches in establishing supportive team cultures and addressing mental health issues (Bramley et al., 2025, Bissett et al., 2020).

Summary of results and discussion

The findings from the Lego® builds provide insights into the barriers women face in male-dominated sports, particularly highlighting the persistence of gender bias, limited opportunities, societal pressures, and the ongoing struggle for equality and recognition. The players' narratives emphasize deeply ingrained stereotypes and prejudices, such as being perceived as too feminine or sensitive, which lead to constant scrutiny and judgment (Bruce, 2015). Additionally, the players brought attention to structural inequities, including fewer opportunities and limited access to facilities, mirroring the occupational fragility, noted by Clarkson et al. (2022).

The players also highlighted the impact of societal pressures and negative perceptions, which hinder women's participation and development in sports. This aligns with historical exclusions and the ongoing 'othering' of women's football documented by Williams (2003) and Dunn and Welford (2014). Calls for equal pay and opportunities underscore the disparity in respect and critique compared to men, reflecting the gendered process of professionalization and low media coverage of women's sports discussed by both Bowes and Culvin (2021) and Pope et al. (2024). The players' stories of persistence and resilience, symbolized through metaphors like climbing ladders or building bridges, highlighted the need for systemic changes in governance, policy, and coaching to create a more equitable and supportive environment for women athletes. These detailed, personal accounts enrich our understanding of the complexities women face and emphasize the importance of continued efforts toward equality in sports.

As a theoretical contribution to knowledge and advocating an ecological systems approach, through the playful lens of Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) this study proposes a framework for sports clubs, federations, teams, stakeholders, businesses, and organizations to better understanding the player transition process for women in semi-elite association football. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) offers a framework for understanding the complex, multi-layered influences on individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), making it suitable for analyzing barriers faced by women in sports. The nested structure of this theoretical approach, encompassing the (i) microsystem, (ii) mesosystem, (iii) exosystem, (iv) macrosystem, and (v) chronosystem, highlights the interconnectedness of personal relationships, institutional dynamics, and broader societal contexts. For example, the emphasis within a microsystem upon direct interactions aligns with studies that identify supportive coaching relationships as pivotal for female athletes' success (Brandão et al., 2024). Similarly, the mesosystem further illustrates how connections between contexts, such as family and sports teams, can facilitate or hinder participation (Krebs, 2009).

However, critics argue that the broad scope of this theoretical perspective can dilute its practical applicability, as it may overlook the unique interplay of factors within specific cultural or social contexts (Christensen, 2016). Furthermore, the exosystem and macrosystem, while insightful in addressing structural inequalities such as media representation and gender norms within sport and leisure, require integration with intersectionality frameworks to account for the compounded barriers faced by women of different races, classes, or sexualities (Dorsey, 2024). Despite these limitations, Bronfenbrenner's inclusion of the chronosystem highlights the evolving nature of these influences, enabling a dynamic understanding of how changes in leisure policy or



Figure 5. A framework for better understanding the player transition process for women in semi-elite football .

changing societal attitudes can transform opportunities for women in sport and leisure, over time. This ecological system approach has helped with scaffolding the development of a framework to better understand the player transition process, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Conclusion

This study used Lego® Serious Play® (LSP), as a creative experiential methodology, to better understand the player transition and progression process for women in football. Whilst this study was embedded in the context of women’s football as ‘proof of concept,’ the outcomes indicate that Lego® Serious Play® has applicability and scope for future development and scalability in women’s leisure more generally. It echoes the calls of Thomson et al. (2023) for qualitative studies of women’s sport and leisure that incorporate more diverse methodological approaches. Holistically, opportunities exist for sports clubs, federations, teams, stakeholders, businesses, and organizations to use this learning process as an effective pedagogy for additional studies across societal issues in women’s leisure. Using Lego® bricks creatively provides endless possibilities.

It is beyond the scope of this study, however future research would also benefit from using the Lego® Serious Play® methodology to examine issues associated with mental health, physical wellbeing, and anxiety surrounding the transition process in the women’s game. Upon reflection, the primary limitation of this study was the focus upon one cohort of players from the south of England, and there is much scope for studies across a wider spectrum of teams and age groups, to understand transitions more fully into and out of elite, professional and semiprofessional women’s football. Given the increased profile and expansion of women’s football, we would advocate future studies that employ closer probing within the women’s game to better understand how they negotiate and transition through various stages of their football pathways and careers (Culvin, 2023). Aligned with this avenue for inquiry, we would also advocate future scrutiny on the life choices and career paths for women in sport and leisure.

There are both managerial and policy implications linked to the outcomes of this study. Additional policy initiatives are required at semiprofessional level to overcome the pervasive nature of gender bias, stereotypes, judgmental attitudes and prejudices, societal perceptions, and systemic barriers that still impede women's growth and advancement in football (Culvin, 2023). From a methodological perspective, the results highlight how Lego® Serious Play® is a creative tool for adaptability and change that sports clubs, federations, teams, stakeholders, businesses, and organizations can use to (i) facilitate open communication and enable complex conversations, (ii) improve creative problem solving through unrivaled engagement, and (iii) uncover hidden insights amongst leisure participants from diverse backgrounds (Shipway & Henderson, 2023).

In the present and first study of its type, we demonstrate the power of Lego® Serious Play® as a creative, play-based approach to contrast and complement more traditional, conventional learning approaches used within the management of women's sport and to profile values, perspectives, thoughts, and feelings (Henderson & Shipway, 2024). This study highlights the importance of a bottom-up approach within women's sport and leisure, co-constructed with peers, and not imposed from above by existing male-dominated governance, policies, and managerial structures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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