

# South African women's soccer

## Nubile cheerleaders or players of substance?

National Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi provoked a storm by proposing the legalisation of prostitution during the 2010 World Cup. **Prishani Naidoo** argues that this speaks volumes about the world of football – a male preserve where women are welcome only as ‘football babes’.

**A**s South Africa prepares to host the 2010 Soccer World Cup, the issue of women's bodies has been thrown into the spotlight.

National Commissioner of Police Jackie Selebi has told MPs to consider “legalising prostitution” so that he and the South African Police Service do not have the “embarrassing” task of having to arrest foreign visitors who might want to buy sexual favours from South African sex workers.

While the decriminalisation of prostitution has been a longstanding demand of sex workers and their support organisations, their concerns are very different. They want to ensure the protection and safety of people working in the sex trade.

Selebi's plea is geared towards meeting the needs of rich tourists (for the most part, northern white men) whose behaviour is likely to reinforce racial inequalities and exploitation, class and gender differences, and stereotypes and norms upheld by capitalist society.

Selebi seems mainly preoccupied with ensuring an environment in which visitors to the World Cup can spend their money as they wish. The limitations normally placed on the

behaviour of South Africans, and the protections they normally enjoy, are to be removed to cater for foreign consumers.

### WOMEN AS SOCCER BABES

In making foreigners' desires his priority, Selebi has exposed his willingness to sacrifice women's bodies on the altar of the market. Underpinning his statement was an assumption of women's roles in the world of football – those of sexual suggestion and subservience. Their sole purpose is to sell pleasure and lifestyles, which in turn sell profitable commodities. The effect is to perpetuate the gender divisions which sustain unequal relations and values in our society.

Selebi's plea crudely embodies women's main role in the Football World Cup as that of the ‘soccer babe’. “Samba, Sex and Soccer”, screamed the June 2006 edition of the men's magazine, *GQ*, which included a ‘Brazilian babe’ pin-up calendar of 2006 World Cup fixtures. Women's bodies featured prominently in that tournament, with match schedules in magazines and newspapers festooned with women in bikinis, or less. Most mainstream football publications carry a page or column with

photographs of semi-clad pin-ups, often the girlfriends of famous players.

In South Africa, the ‘soccer babe’ has been entrenched by the introduction of nubile women cheerleaders at soccer matches involving the most popular national teams. Jessica Motaung, marketing manager of Kaizer Chiefs, however explains that cheerleading offers “a different way for women to play a role in the game”.

### WOMEN PLAYERS SUFFER SEX HARASSMENT

Reports of women who play football are relegated to fillers on the sports' pages of newspapers and magazines. However talented, these women have to struggle against systematic exclusion from a sport which is a male preserve. To break into it, they must negotiate a host of prejudices that define male and female roles in society and in the football world. Women players have to subscribe to social norms to be accepted, in a way that male players do not.

Young girls wanting to explore their talent on the football field quickly learn what is expected of them physically. Many young girls begin playing football quite freely in



BanyanaBanyana

boys' teams, but with adolescence comes the enforcement of male and female roles, marking them as 'outsiders'.

As girls grow into women, they are taught and expected to make their bodies comply with the ideals of a world in which football does not feature prominently in the list of suitable female occupations or sports. As schools channel girls into 'feminine' sports such as netball, and boys' teams begin excluding girls, there are fewer opportunities and little support for them to nurture their football talents.

At puberty, girls generally have to accept that they cannot continue playing in boys' teams, and often suffer ridicule and criticism if they continue playing football in girls' teams, as many men and women regard participation in the sport as 'unwomanly' or 'unladylike'.

Where space has been created for the development of women's football, girls who choose to play

still confront many hurdles. In the 1990s, after South Africa's readmission into a world football community which had started to support the women's game, opportunities opened up for women who wanted to play competitively.

But it was men in search of lucrative business prospects and a foothold in the football industry who seized control, setting up most of the first women's teams. Interviewed in February 2006, Fran Hilton-Smith, former manager and coach of the South African national team Banyana Banyana, and now administrator of women's football at the South African Football Association (Safa), recalled the enormous opportunities for business which opened up by the growth of football in the 1990s. She also highlighted that many men who had failed in men's football turned to the women's game "to try their luck".

Many lacked the skills and experience necessary to coach and manage women players, and were also prone to sexist practices. Most of those responsible for developing women's football had no intrinsic interest in doing so, and no commitment to the players' wellbeing.

Hilton-Smith recalled how the establishment of the early teams, led by men, resulted in the sexual harassment and abuse of players by many male coaches and managers. Hilton-Smith and a colleague tabled the issue for discussion at the Pickard Commission, set up by the Minister of Sport in 1996 to look into the problems facing the administration of football.

She described how coaches and managers were "collecting all these women as their property ... They were sleeping with them in order for them to play. And they were trading them with other coaches. It was like a slave market."

The Commission recommended structures to counter sexual harassment, in addition to interventions such as the training of female coaches, and the partnering of female coaches with male managers and vice versa. But many players who had personally encountered harassment and abuse received no counselling, advice or support.

Those who dared to speak out risked bringing their football careers to a swift end. In 1993, Gloria Hlalele and Phumla Masuku, two of the founding members of the famous Soweto Ladies side (and later Banyana Banyana), publicly accused their coach of sexual harassment. Both players had been close to signing contracts with an international team, but were prevented from signing and banned from Soweto Ladies.

#### LESBIANISM AN OBSTACLE

Their open lesbianism posed a further obstacle to the independent advancement of their careers. Hlalele has coached some of South Africa's best male footballers, but has been prevented from coaching professionally. She believes this is because of her sexual orientation.

For many women, choosing to play football involves a constant negotiation of their identities. The perception and treatment of them as 'women' is as important as keeping fit and healthy.

In March 2005, Ria Ledwaba, then chairperson of Safa's Women's Committee, publicly declared that the team needed to "act like ladies" to secure more sponsorship. In media interviews, Ledwaba proposed that the team should take part in workshops to teach them ladies' etiquette, as well as being given shapelier kit to wear.

Portia Modise, captain of Banyana Banyana, hit out at the impracticality of these ideas, saying

that the behaviour and dress of players off the field had no bearing on their success as players, and did not warrant the attention of Safa or sponsors. Claiming that 60% of Banyana Banyana players were lesbian, she added that veiled attacks on their sexual preferences were unacceptable, as these were also irrelevant to their football skills and abilities. The sexual orientation and appearance of the team had become a "scapegoat" for Safa's poor management and leadership of the team, and inability to secure sponsorships, she added.

While Safa has not implemented Ledwaba's proposals, it has done little to contest perceptions in society, and among sponsors, that women's football should not be supported unless players conform to heterosexual norms. Many women in the football world believe that if the Association took a more vocal stand against sexism and homophobia, and was more supportive of the advancement of women as players, attitudes towards women's football would be challenged and forced to change.

Indeed, Safa has reinforced stereotypes in its preferential treatment of the national men's team, Bafana Bafana, and by averting its gaze from the prejudice, inequality and discrimination women players face.

#### WOMEN'S SOCCER AN AFTERTHOUGHT

The 1990s saw the rapid development and profiling of men's football in South Africa, but women's football remained "an afterthought", complains Fran Hilton-Smith. There is no professional women's league, and the women's game continues to be under-resourced.

Since 2000, Banyana Banyana players have received a daily allowance of R300 per match,

adjusted to R500 for away matches. Players receive R2 000 each if they win a match, R1 000 if they draw, and nothing if they lose. Contrast this with the treatment of Bafana Bafana players, who receive R40 000 for a win and R20 000 for a draw.

In September 2006, returning victorious from the Cosafa Cup in Zambia, Banyana Banyana players voiced their unhappiness with their pay and inferior treatment at the hands of Safa and the media. The association agreed to increase the payment for wins to R5 000 and for draws to R2 500, and the daily allowance to R500.

Although an improvement, this fails to recognise that players must survive between matches. Because of the team's demands on their time, many are unable to hold down regular jobs. Many players are unemployed and, unlike their male counterparts, depend financially on family members and are unable to build football careers.

Despite the problems, talented women do excel at football, and the recent successes of Banyana Banyana highlight their commitment, as well as the informal networks that have emerged to support them. South African sports enthusiasts have largely missed the fact that Banyana Banyana won a bronze medal at the African Women's Football Championship last year and is well on its way to securing a place at the Olympics next year. The team has achieved these successes in the teeth of systematic under-resourcing and neglect.

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