



Career development in Women Football Refereeing: an exploratory study in Portugal and Spain

Desarrollo profesional en el arbitraje de fútbol femenino: un estudio exploratorio en Portugal y España

Authors

Sandra Silva-Santos^{1,2,3}

Pedro Bezerra^{2,4}

Susana Rafaela Martins^{2,4}

Ricardo Lima^{2,4}

Bruno Silva^{2,4}

¹Center for Research, Development and Innovation - European Institute of Higher Studie, Fafe, Portugal.

²Sport Physical activity and health research & innovation center SPRINT, 4960-320 Melgaço, Portugal.

³CI-ISCE, ISCE Douro, Penafiel, Portugal

⁴School of Sport and Leisure, Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, Viana do Castelo, Portugal

Corresponding author:

Sandra Santos

Sandra.santos@iees.pt

How to cite in APA

Silva - Santos, S., Bezerra, P., Martins, S. R., Lima, R. L., & Silva, B. (2025). Career development in Women Football Refereeing: an exploratory study in Portugal and Spain. *Retos*, 63, 398-409. <https://doi.org/10.47197/retos.v63.109962>

Abstract

Introduction: The career of a female football referee is challenging, with only a few achieving excellence and international recognition due to the high demands and difficulties in maintaining sustainability.

Objective: to identify the most effective strategies in selection, recruitment and retaining of women football referees as well as determine the main barriers for a female as a football referee in a men-dominated sport in Portugal and Spain.

Methodology: 427 women referees aged between 11 and 50 yrs. (25.1±6.7) belonging to the regional and national Portuguese and Spanish Football Federations. The Referee Retention Scale was used to identify some variables that could influence the retaining of women refereeing, a focus group was conducted, and a semi-structured qualitative interview was performed to complement data.

Results: Mentoring was the most important dimension regarding the retention on women referee career followed by Intrinsic Motivation on both countries.

Discussion: Referee's career sustainability was also influenced by main barriers, which were related with three aspects: lack of institutional support throughout the career; lack of potential career; difficulty in reconciling personal and professional life, namely lack of support in motherhood.

Conclusions: This article opens a new perspective on women's referee career sustainability. Its content may constitute an important insight for the implementation of women referee career, namely from base to top.

Keywords

Career development; female referee; football; recruitment; retention.

Resumen

Introducción: La carrera de una árbitra de fútbol es desafiante, y solo unas pocas logran la excelencia y el reconocimiento internacional debido a las altas exigencias y las dificultades para mantener la sostenibilidad.

Objetivo: identificar las estrategias más eficaces en la selección, contratación y retención de árbitras de fútbol y determinar las principales barreras para una mujer como árbitra de fútbol en un deporte dominado por hombres en Portugal y España.

Metodología: Participaron 427 árbitras de edades comprendidas entre los 11 y los 50 años (25,1±6,7) pertenecientes a las federaciones de fútbol regional y nacional portuguesa y española. Se utilizó la Escala de Retención de Árbitros para identificar algunas variables que podrían influir en la retención de mujeres árbitras, se realizó un grupo de discusión y una entrevista cualitativa semiestructurada para complementar los datos.

Resultado: La tutoría fue la dimensión más importante para la retención de las mujeres árbitros, seguida de la motivación intrínseca en ambos países.

Discusión: La sostenibilidad de la carrera de las árbitras también se vio influida por las principales barreras, relacionadas con tres aspectos: la falta de apoyo institucional a lo largo de la carrera; la falta de carrera potencial; la dificultad para conciliar la vida personal y profesional, concretamente la falta de apoyo en la maternidad. **Conclusiones:** Este artículo abre una nueva perspectiva sobre la sostenibilidad de la carrera de las árbitras. Su contenido puede constituir una perspectiva importante para la aplicación de la carrera de las árbitras, desde la base hasta la cima.

Palabras clave

Contratación; desarrollo profesional; fútbol; mujer árbitro; retención.

Introduction

Referees are responsible for implementing the rules and regulations within the spirit of the game (The International Football Association Board, 2022), providing a crucial role to almost organized sport competitions, which is an important service to players, coaches, and sports representatives (Ridinger et al., 2017).

Given the multifaceted role, their work should be seen as equal as to the other sport participants. However, referees are often a forgotten component of the sport system (Cuskelly & Hoyer, 2013). Notwithstanding, the refereeing behaviour can have impact on players behaviours and consequently, game outcomes (Philippe et al., 2009).

These factors are the main concern for the stakeholders, which are working on the development of the refereeing across the sports, avoiding its discontinuation (Praschinger et al., 2011). Knowing that refereeing is a task that involves harmonious and obsessive passion (Philippe et al., 2009), a study by Livingston and Forbes (2016) identified what motivated the referees entering and remain active officiating, revealing that the resilience is the main factor from referees to continuing their role. Furthermore, these facts are more relevant when we talk about female refereeing, justified by sexual discrimination, marginalized status and undervalued positions in sports (Passero et al., 2019; Reid & Dallaire, 2019), where male-dominated career is prevalent (Forbes et al., 2015).

Women's football continues to build a solid platform on participation, professionalism and interest from fans, media and sponsors. However, greater gender equality in society has been associated with higher levels of female participation in sports (Livingston & Forbes, 2016). The popularity of women's football has been increasing substantially, having gained more impact through the UEFA #Time for action programme, which was launched with an approach and strategy in women's football in 2019 to 2024, clearly highlighting the need to "better understanding the women's football and make decisions". Football will achieve greater sustainability of values when valuing all the players in the game, including the referees, who play a crucial role in sporting competitions (Kittel et al., 2019).

Most of the research has been centred on referees physical and technical performance, including the burnout, well-being, professionalization and sexism sub-themes (Castagna et al., 2019; Castillo et al., 2019; Meckel et al., 2020; Samuel et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2019; Van Biemen et al., 2018).

Observing some of the available research (Aragão e Pina et al., 2018; Nordstrom et al., 2016; Valenti et al., 2018), it is evident that there is a limited research of female football refereeing, primarily centred around comparing basic physiological factors "Sex Differences in Aerobic Fitness in Top-Class Soccer Referees". Another bias is that data is analysed for general conclusions, (Aragão e Pina et al., 2018), not considering the differences, the proportion and sample size (Potrac et al., 2022).

It is important to be aware that female referees are still experiencing a discriminated experience, stereotypes and challenges due to gender, despite their resilience and vocation (Nordstrom et al., 2016). In this sense, a study that developed a scale to measure the main factors to referee retention (Ridinger et al., 2017), highlighted some variables that could influence the retain of refereeing, namely administrator consideration, intrinsic motives, mentoring, remuneration, sense of community, lack of stress, and continuing education.

Despite that, the research associated with refereeing in women's football is scarce, leading to a high need for research to better understand and establish strategies to improve the quality and quantity of women's football.

In this sense, this study aimed to identify the most effective strategies in selection, recruitment and retaining as well as determine the main barriers for a female as a football referee in Portugal and Spain.

Method

The cross-sectional design aimed to investigate the quantitative analysis on effective strategies in retaining on women's refereeing career in Portugal and Spain football organisations.



Data collection took place in two different moments of evaluation, throughout the season. Data collection team consisted of researchers duly trained in the specific tasks of research.

A short sociodemographic questionnaire covered questions to enable the characterisation of the sample: age; academic degree; experience in refereeing and training per week.

Participants

The sample size comprised 427 female referees (156 Portuguese and 271 Spanish), represents the total number of active referees in both countries.

The Portuguese women referees were aged between 15 and 48 yrs. Spanish women referees were between 11 and 50 yrs. The years of refereeing in Portugal ranged between six months until 26 years and in Spain ranged between three months until 28 years. Both countries have done 3-4 training session per week (Table 1).

Table 1. Women referees' sociodemographic characteristics

	Total (n=427)	Spain (n=271)	Portugal (n=156)
Age (yrs.)	25.1±6.7	23.9±6.6	27.1±6.6
Refereeing Experience (yrs.)	6.2±5.3	5.71 ±5. 1	7.16±5. 6
Training per week (hours)	3.79±1.47	3.88±1.44	3.62±1.51

Further, in Portugal 35.9 % of women football referees and 45.4 % in Spain have completed university. Referees were classified into three categories. Portugal - Elite: first women's division at national level; Non-elite: second, third national categories and national assistant referees; Regional: referees and assistant referees from regional championships. Spain - Elite: professional referees and assistant referees; Non-elite: national referees and assistant referees; Regional: regional championship referees and assistant referees. (Table 2).

Table 2. Women referees' academic degree and categories

	Total (n=427)	Spain (n=271)	Portugal (n=156)
No higher education	167 (39.1%)	97(35.8%)	70 (44.9%)
Graduation	179 (41.9%)	123 (45.4%)	56 (35.9%)
Master's degree	62 (14.5%)	33 (12.2%)	29 (18.6%)
PhD	19 (4.4)	18 (6.6%)	1 (0.6%)
Elite	60 (14.1%)	*43 (15.9%)	17 (10.9%)
Non-elite	87 (20.4%)	37 (13.7%)	37 (13.7%)
Regional	280 (65.6%)	191 (70.5%)	89 (57.1%)

*Professional referees

Procedure

After presented and approved by the directive board of the national referee councils, the questionnaire was disseminated through the regional associations and national federations. These institutions hold a database of active qualified referees, and this has been used to obtain the samples from each country. This online questionnaire was emailed by the referee directive board to active female referees in Spain and Portugal. All active female referees replied to the email, after confirmation of informed consent. There is ethical approval, and all ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and other deliberations of the scientific technical committee will be complied with, including the use of informed consent Code of the ethics committee CTC-ESDL-CE002-2022.

Focus group is a tool that allows a group interview where the discussion is centred on a specific topic and moderated by a chair (Chestnutt & Robson, 2001). The purpose of focus groups is to obtain data regarding the ideas, feeling, attitudes, understanding and perceptions, as well as learn the typical vocabulary and thinking patterns of the selected sample (Silva & Assis, 2010; Tausch & Menold, 2016). Focus groups have the unique advantage of allowing the participants to hear and respond to diverse viewpoints (Beyea & Nicoll, 2000; Stewart et al., 1990). This can facilitate discussion, as a comment from one participant may trigger a chain of responses (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008).

According to the literature, the recommended size for focus groups is three to twelve participants (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008).



Group size is important because a group with too few participants might limit the diversity and quantity of the lived experiences (Hall & Prentice, 2000). A small group may run the risk of insufficient interaction or have a dominant individual (Sim & Snell, 1996). Conversely, a large group may prevent acceptable participation by all participants (Roberts & Paula, 1997) and perhaps hamper quieter or shier group members from sharing their ideas (Chestnutt & Robson, 2001). It is difficult to manage the discussion in a large group and it is also hard transcribing data (Chestnutt & Robson, 2001).

The face-to-face focus group interviews were validated by Lima et al. (2022) and were conducted in several associations and federations in Portugal and Spain. Each group was composed by eight-twelve female referees. During the interview, the questionnaire needed to be adjusted due to the different categories that emerged from female referees' answers.

Instrument

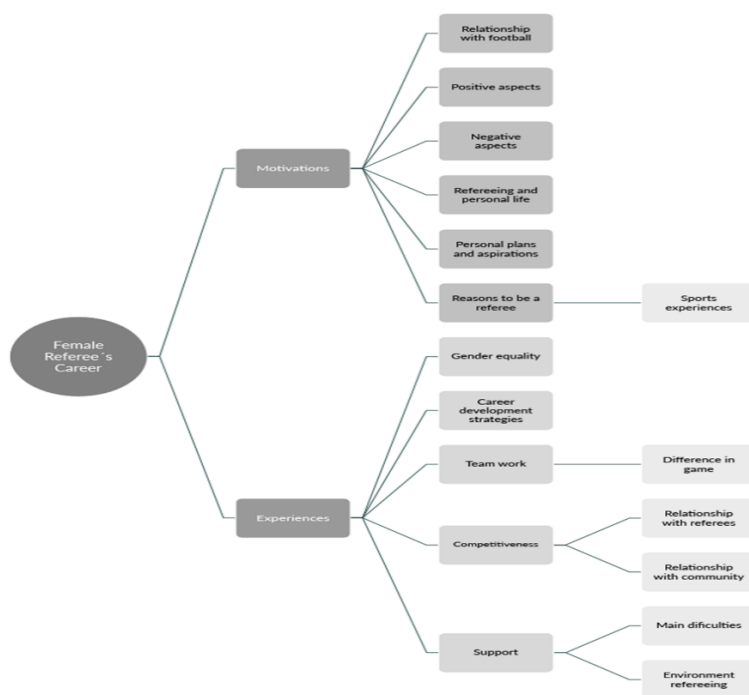
The Referee Retention Scale (Ridinger et al., 2017) was used to identify the retaining female football referee considering intrinsic Motives, Mentoring, Remuneration, Sense of Community, Lack of Stress and Continuing Education.

This scale is a 7 factor (28-item) with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The survey evaluates and predicts a referees' likelihood of retention with results providing strategic information in Administrator Consideration, Intrinsic Motives, Mentoring, Remuneration, Sense of Community, Lack of Stress and Continuing Education (Ridinger et al., 2017).

Focus group through a semi-structure interview is a procedure data collection and an instrument in which the researcher has the possibility to hear several subjects at the same time in addition to observe the interactions characteristic of the group process. It aims to obtain a variety of information, feelings, experiences, small group representations about a certain theme (Silva & Assis, 2010; Tausch & Menold, 2016).

Focus group interviews were face-to-face in all elite female referees in Spain and Portugal. Focus group interview was used to assess motivation, experience and career development. This interview included thirty-two questions and comprised two components: experience and motivation (Lima et al., 2022). The Motivation component had six categories and the experience component five. The former had different variables such as: relationship with football, positive aspects, negative aspects, refereeing and personal life, personal plans and aspirations and reasons to be a referee. The latter covered: gender equality, career development strategies, teamwork, competitiveness and support. (Fig.1).

Figure 1. Mind chart of the categorical tree.



To respond to the purpose of this study, some items of the questionnaire were used to analyse selection and recruitment of female referees, such as: a) If you were a football player; b) whether sporting experience influenced your decision to become a referee; c) If the selection, retention and support strategies for female referees career have the same indicators as male referees; d) There is effectiveness in the strategy of recruiting women for refereeing and what was the main reason that led me to choose refereeing in football? This information was complemented with focus-group interviews, namely experience component with the categories: gender equality, career development strategies and motivation component with reason to be a referee.

Full interviews have been transcribed and analysed through NVIVO version 14.0 for windows. It is the most powerful and intuitive research software for gaining richer insights from diverse data. Data from focus-group interviews allows to complement the results of the online questionnaire with greater consistency and validity in the results.

Data analysis

The associated score was calculated based on the seven dimensions of the referees' retention scale. Descriptive measures were estimated, minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation. We performed the mean comparative test (Mann-Whitney Test) with confidence interval of 95%, to verify the score differences between Portugal and Spain. A multivariate linear regression identified the significant dimensions of retention score of female referees. In all tests a 5% significance was considered.

Results

To compare the results of the retention scale in Iberian women's refereeing, we carried out comparison tests, namely the Mann-Whitney test, which found no significant differences in the average score of the two countries ($p=0.742$). Following this assumption, we analysed the two countries together. (Table 3).

Table 3. Relative importance of referee retention scale dimensions in the score

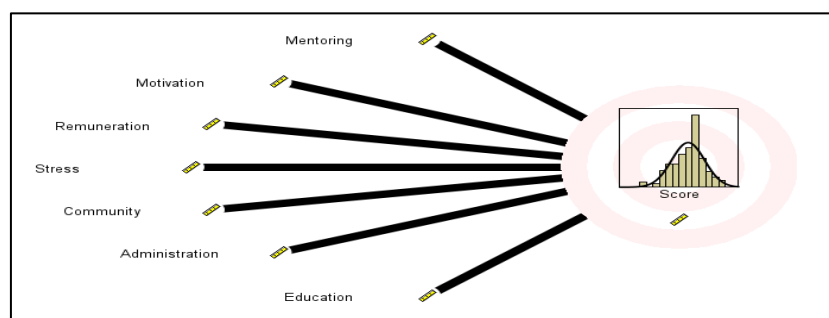
	p-value	Confidence Interval 95%	Importance
Mentoring	0.000	]0.986; 1.013[	33.6%
Intrinsic Motives	0.000	]1.021; 1.060[	17.8%
Remuneration	0.000	]0.995; 1.041[	11.5%
Lack of Stress	0.000	]0.977; 1.024[	11.0%
Sense of Community	0.000	]1.014; 1.067[	9.1%
Continuing Education	0.000	]0.986; 1.040[	8.5%
Administrator Considerations	0.000	]0.967; 1.020[	8.5%

*Significant differences, $p < .05$

According to the linear model, selected by forward stepwise, all dimensions of the retention scale were significant for the referees' retention score. This model explains 99.6% of the score variation according to the seven factors. However, the relative importance of each factor is different.

Mentoring emerged as the most crucial factor, accounting for 33.6% of importance, with Intrinsic Motives following at 17.8%. In contrast, explaining 8.5% of the model, the Administrator and Continuing Education dimensions were deemed the least important (Fig.2).

Figure 2. Referee retention scale dimensions.



The analysis of selection and recruitment of female referees has shown that 61% agreed that their sports experience influenced them to be referees. Indeed, we perceived that 58% of women referees (38% Portuguese and 54% Spanish) were football players. Additionally, 77% of female referees referred that selection, retention and career support strategies did not have the same indicators as for male referees.

Retention of female referee in career

In Portugal, the interviewees mentioned that the retention of female referees could be enhanced through greater awareness of the women's role in the sporting community. Also, through closer and consistent monitoring by a team of specific mentors (refereeing coach, psychologist) working exclusively with these sports agents throughout their entire career, particularly in all female national categories, as in the case of 1st men's referee league.

In this sense, the Portuguese Football Federation (PFF) has sought to enhance the monitoring of female referees and female assistant referees of high national category and recently selected a mentor to work exclusively with these female referees. As of today, it is still too early to make an interpretation of this follow-up.

Other difficulties highly emphasized by the Portuguese referees were how to reconcile professional life with motherhood. Many female referees postpone motherhood because they do not have the means of support and help on this important phase of their life as a woman and a female referee.

"The strategies for selection and retention, now, are not exactly the best. This retention is the responsibility of the nuclei, it is voluntary work and therefore, there is no specialized work or anything close to it, so monitoring and retention also fall short of what would be expected" (PT).

"The way to retain women in refereeing is to foster a culture of greater awareness of female referees in football" (PT).

"We should have another follow-up as it happens for example in Spanish women referees and in male referees here in Portugal"

"The important thing would be to have a specific program aimed at retaining the female referees, someone with that specific function (...)" (PT).

"Refereeing is a very closed system, people know the referee as the one who will referee and have no idea of the involvement and preparation that refereeing requires. Therefore, it would be good to have greater institutional and social openness so that everyone understands what it is to be a referee, it would certainly attract more men and more women (...)" (PT).

"Taking into account the level of demand in physical terms and what refereeing requires in terms of sacrifice, I think that there are basic things that we should not miss, such as psychological and physical follow-up, rehabilitation after injury, that is, an exclusive team that take care of us, as in high competition athletes". (PT).

"Referees who want to be mothers do not have any support and this goal of being a mother is sometimes postponed, or it is the career that is left on standby, I think there is still a lot to be done in this field, to give sustainability to the referee's career" (PT).

In turn, the Spanish referees revealed the same difficulties as their Portuguese counterparts, demonstrating the need for closer, specialized and exclusive monitoring throughout their careers, as well as great difficulty in reconciling their professional and personal careers. They also reported that many female referees were fired for not being able to combine both careers. However, the fact that they have recently managed to professionalize their careers has given them greater security and stability in performing their work. Thus, they are calling attention and promoting their referee's career, which they believe will help more girls to consider building a career in refereeing as a valid option.

Selection and Recruitment of female referees in career

In this way, selection and recruitment strategies of female referees is influenced by the fact that she was a soccer player and by her sporting experiences in other sports, federated and non-federated. Selection and recruitment strategies of female referees will gain greater support with the media coverage and visibility based on the professionalization of their career and, transversally, will support the retention

of female referees through the security, stability and sustainability that professionalization will bring to them.

“I played on a football team from 6 to 18 years old, I reconciled for a few years until I left football for refereeing.” (SP).

“I did kickboxing for many years and then when I saw a football match, I decided to take the course (...)” (SP).

“It's difficult to reconcile a professional and personal career, and even more with motherhood, we must stop 9 months beyond the recovery time that this involves for an athlete. There should be some measure in place to help us in this overcomplicated but very important phase for sportswomen.” (SP).

“The media should make refereeing more visible, promote greater awareness of the referee's role, we need more conventions that make known this world of refereeing, we need more projects like this that involve women and that these women are leaders, help to develop refereeing and all sports agents, because everything is interconnected, the development of women's football influences the development of female refereeing.” (SP).

Selection and recruitment of female referees should preferably be conducted by district associations together with educational institutions as well as with sports institutions to make known female's referee career concurrently. All these selection and recruitment strategies will gain greater sustainability through the dissemination and promotion mechanisms provided by the Portuguese Football Federation and by the European Confederations through the opportunities given to women, such as the fact that a woman refereed a men's football match in the Champions League. This visibility given to the female referee makes it possible to incite greater curiosity and greater interest in the refereeing career.

“The selection and the respective recruitment of female referees has been done by the nuclei on a voluntary basis, through training and invited referees to hold lectures (...)” (PT).

“I practiced several sports before coming to refereeing namely athletics in school sports and swimming for 8 years (...)” (PT).

“Women's football is growing; many young girls are deciding to be footballers and women are finding a place in football that they love so much. These women, like Stéphanie Frappart, who had the opportunity to manage men's games, are starting to be an inspiration for future generations, and for women who would like to take this path, they are starting to feel that it is possible and that the barriers that existed a few years ago are fading away (...)” (PT).

Despite all the difficulties identified in the selection, recruitment and retention of the female referee, there are still many challenges to overcome in this male-dominated sport.

Challenges encountered by women referees in a male-dominated sport

Culturally, football is considered a sport mostly for men, but women referees have been building their place and reducing some of the socially implemented barriers in this sport.

In Portugal and Spain, female referees referred that they are perceived as having the same competence as male referees when given the same opportunities. However, some barriers have to be overcome both internally, within refereeing, and externally in society. In both countries, they stated that it is necessary to work twice as hard as men to achieve the same goals, in this so-called macho society. This is guided by the fact that women are physiologically different from men and must fulfil the same requirements to ascend to male career. They mentioned that they must prove their value in each task and in each game or competition they perform.

They are perceived as having the same competence as their male colleagues and recognized by them as having value. Female referees felt that their fellow referees support female referee's career development as it develops in women's competitions. However, this support ceases to exist when female referees compete in the same competition as theirs, being seen as a threat to their position.

Despite these difficulties and cultural barriers identified by the referee, there is a concern and an incentive by the European entities to deconstruct these barriers. Indeed, the referee is provided with some of the opportunities that will have an impact on the elimination of these cultural difficulties, such

as the fact that a referee having managed a men's game in one of the most emblematic competitions, such as the champions' league, potentiates the dissipation of some of the internal and external barriers to football.

In Portugal, work is also beginning to help women to overcome these barriers, insofar as some female referees have been given the opportunity to take the access tests for the male panel and, in this way, the assistant female referees managed to do the tests with success, competing on the men's board in the 2nd men's professional league.

Consequently, in Spain, these barriers can be easily overcome by implementing professionalization and having female referees enforcing the rules of the game in men's competitions.

These strategies with different magnitudes applied in Portugal and Spain allow to incite a change of mentalities, making it possible to approach gender equality.

“At European level, a different opening begins to exist, and women begin to be given the same opportunities to reach the same level as men. At the regional level there is still resistance in some associations to give the same opportunities that are given to men (...)” (PT).

“Women have to work twice as hard to achieve the same results as men, in this still very sexist society (...)” (PT).

“I think the biggest difference between genders is in financial terms (...)” (PT).

“Our mistake is seen differently from that of a man (...)” (SP).

“We are always constantly analysed and constantly proving that we are worthy of that place for the competence shown (...)” (SP).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study that aimed to identify the most effective strategies in selection, recruitment and retaining in female football refereeing and determine the main barriers for female referees in a men-dominated sport in Portugal and Spain.

The findings on retaining of female referees in career, revealed that mentoring was the most important dimension to retain women referees in career, which agrees with Nordstrom et al. (2016). The authors referred that all participants reported the importance of having a mentor to help them to maintain the employment in the challenging football vocation. Additionally, the present study highlights that the mentoring process should involve a specialized team comprising expert mentors, refereeing coaches, and psychologists. This team should exclusively support and work with female referees throughout their entire careers, mirroring the structure observed in the first men's referee league. These results are reinforced by the literature that has highlighted the importance of social interactions in the informal learning development process, namely the relationships established permanently with mentors (Mack et al., 2018; Sefton-Green, 2013).

We have also notice that intrinsic motives dimension was identified as the 2nd most important to their career retention. Passion to refereeing seemed to be an important intrinsic motivational force in their hard work and time-consuming routines, which corroborated with Johansen (2015) who mentioned that social-based motivations had approximately the same importance for the two different groups of referees, elite and non-elite. Livingston and Forbes (2016) also identified that intrinsic motivation and resilience to enter and remain in active refereeing are the main factors that allow referees to continue.

Career sustainability is also influenced by selection and recruitment strategies as female referees were football players and had sporting experiences in other federated and non-federated sports. These results are in line with Mack et al. (2018) that referred that diversified sports practice before specializing in a particular modality or function has been recognized as advantageous in several sports and in football refereeing. According to Côté et al. (2003) and Côté and Erickson (2015) the past as a player positively influences the definition of the referees' rankings. This confirms that a wide initial exposure to the practice of other modalities or activities, practiced for pleasure and with flexible rules,

contributes to the development of cognitive and motor skills fundamental to the exercise of other functions.

It is important to note that women referees have been conquering their place and reducing some of the socially implemented barriers in this men-dominated sport. The current work has found the main barriers related with three aspects: a) Lack of institutional support throughout the career; b) Lack of potential career, in spite of being perceived as having the same competence as male referees when given the same opportunities; c) Difficulty in reconciling personal and professional life, namely motherhood. These findings are in line with Kim (2017) who verified the relation between distributive justice and referees' job satisfaction and career commitment and the perception of the unfairness of rewards. Referees do not believe they receive sufficient returns from their associations compared with the effort, time, or contributions these members make by refereeing. Most referees are paid on a per-game basis as part-timers and cannot live on such wages, unless they are professionals (Swayne & Dodds, 2011).

The lack of potential career corroborates with Tingle et al. (2014) who found that female referees experienced social inequity in their officiating experiences (perceived inequity of policies; a lack of role modelling and mentoring for and from female officials; and experiencing more gendered abuse than did their male counterparts) and experienced a lower sense of control and more often felt a lower work-life balance. These are the first findings about motherhood, which should be studied in further studies.

This study has the strength to be the first to identify the most effective strategies in retaining in female football referees and determine the main barriers for a female as a football referee in a men-dominated sport in Portugal and Spain. Thus, it is necessary more research to analyse other realities, e.g., in professional contexts.

As a limitation, the difference in professionalization between Portugal and Spain, which provides different working conditions with different opportunities. The growth and visibility of women's football is greater in Spain, other variables could have been analysed and compared, as previous contact with sports and occupation. However, considering the exploratory factors of this research and the main purpose, selection, recruitment and retention strategies might be considered as future guidelines for female referee's career.

Conclusions

Selection, retention and career support strategies do not have the same indicators as for male referees. The support and follow-up given to male's referee career is different from that offered to female's referee.

The strategies for retaining and supporting the career of female referees are deficient in terms of professionalization, which is a constraint on their progress. The support and accompaniment given to the career of female referees has considerable limitations. Women referees' career sustainability is predisposed by Mentoring dimension and Intrinsic Motivation.

The main barriers in the development in women football refereeing were related with 1. Lack of institutional support throughout the career; 2. Lack of potential career despite being perceived as having the same competence as male referees when given the same opportunities; 3. Difficulty in reconciling personal and professional life, namely lack of support in motherhood.

To strengthen women's refereeing in Portugal and Spain, it is crucial to adopt comprehensive measures. This includes establishing specific training programs, ensuring access to high-quality training and mentoring for emerging female referees. In addition, it is crucial to promote gender equality in soccer through awareness campaigns and educational programs that challenge stereotypes. Including female referees in competitions at different levels, from local leagues to elite events, will provide valuable experience and increase visibility. Instituting anti-discrimination policies, creating a positive working environment and offering incentives are crucial steps to support the continuous development of female referees. Collaboration with international federations, financial investment and continuous evaluation will help boost quality and representation in women's refereeing, thus promoting equal opportunities on the sports scene.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Portuguese Football Federation and the Royal Spanish Football Federation, as well as the female referees who took part in the study.

Financing

This study was supported by the UEFA Research Grant Programme // Selection for the 13th cycle 2022-2023.

References

- Aragão e Pina, J., Passos, A., Araújo, D., & Maynard, M. T. (2018). Football refereeing: An integrative review. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 35, 10-26. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2017.10.006>
- Beyea, S. C., & Nicoll, L. H. (2000). Learn more using focus groups. *AORN journal*, 71(4), 897-897.
- Castagna, C., Bizzini, M., Póvoas, S. C. A., Schenk, K., Büsser, G., & D'Ottavio, S. (2019). Aerobic fitness in top-class soccer referees. *The Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 33(11), 3098-3104.
- Castillo, D., Raya-González, J., Usabiaga, O., Cámara-Tobalina, J., Castellano-Paulis, J., & Yanci-Irigoyen, J. (2019). Analysis of the success in soccer match officials' decisions during an international tournament according to contextual factors. [Análisis del éxito en las decisiones de los árbitros en partidos oficiales de fútbol durante un torneo internacional atendiendo a factores contextuales]. *RICYDE. Revista Internacional de Ciencias del Deporte*. doi: 10.5232/ricyde, 15(57), 225-234.
- Chestnutt, I., & Robson, K. (2001). Focus groups—what are they? *Dental Update*, 28(4), 189-192.
- Côté, J., Baker, J., & Abernethy, B. (2003). From play to practice. Expert performance in sports: Advances in research on sport expertis. United State: *Human Kinetics*, 89-113.
- Côté, J., & Erickson, K. (2015). Diversification and deliberate play during the sampling years. In *Routledge handbook of sport expertise* (pp. 305-316). Routledge.
- Cuskelly, G., & Hoye, R. (2013). Sports officials' intention to continue. *Sport Management Review*, 16(4), 451-464.
- Forbes, A., Edwards, L., & Fleming, S. (2015). 'Women can't referee': exploring the experiences of female football officials within UK football culture. *Soccer & society*, 16(4), 521-539.
- Hall, & Prentice, M. (2000). Krueger, RA and Casey, MA (2000) *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications. Kumar, R. (1996) *Research Methodology: A Step By Step Guide for Beginners*. Longman. Leedy, P and Ormond, JE (2001) *Practical Research: Planning and Design*.
- Johansen, B. T. (2015). Reasons for officiating soccer: the role of passion-based motivations among Norwegian elite and non-elite referees. *Movement & Sport Sciences-Science & Motricité* (87), 23-30.
- Kim, S. (2017). Perceived organizational support as a mediator between distributive justice and sports referees' job satisfaction and career commitment. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 20(2), 169-187.
- Kittel, A., Larkin, P., Elsworth, N., & Spittle, M. (2019). Identification of key performance characteristics of elite Australian football umpires. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 14(4), 490-497. Lima, R. F., Camões, M., Clemente, F. M., Castro, H. d. O., & Silva, B. (2022). Exploring the motivations and expectations in the amateur football referee. *Journal of Physical Education*, 33.
- Livingston, L. A., & Forbes, S. L. (2016). Factors contributing to the retention of Canadian amateur sport officials: Motivations, perceived organizational support, and resilience. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 11(3), 342-355.
- Mack, M., Schlenker, N., Adair, D., & Bennie, A. (2018). Factors influencing the development of elite-level sports officials in Australia: The AFL, ABA and FFA. *Sport in Society*, 21(9), 1240-1257.
- Meckel, Y., Balikin, K., & Eliakim, A. (2020). Pre-and mid-season repeated sprint ability of soccer referees from the first and second divisions. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 15(1), 82-90. Nordstrom, H., Warner, S., & Barnes, J. C. (2016). Behind the stripes: Female football

- officials' experiences. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 16(3-6), 259-279.
- Passero, J. G., Barreira, J., Junior, A. C., & Galatti, L. R. (2019). Gender (in) equality: a longitudinal analysis of women's participation in coaching and referee positions in the Brazilian Women's Basketball League (2010-2017). *Cuadernos de Psicología del Deporte*, 19(1), 252-261.
- Philippe, F. L., Vallerand, R. J., Andrianarisoa, J., & Brunel, P. (2009). Passion in referees: examining their affective and cognitive experiences in sport situations. *J Sport Exerc Psychol*, 31(1), 77-96. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.31.1.77>
- Plummer-D'Amato, P. (2008). Focus group methodology Part 1: Considerations for design. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 15(2), 69-73.
- Potrac, P., Hall, E., & Nichol, A. (2022). Why do football referees quit officiating? Insights and implications: Final report (March 2019). Retrieved 29 mar 2022 from https://uefaacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/07/2019_Uefa-RGP_Final-report_Potrac-Paul.pdf
- Praschinger, A., Pomikal, C., & Stieger, S. (2011). May I curse a referee? Swear words and consequences. *J Sports Sci Med*, 10(2), 341-345.
- Reid, K., & Dallaire, C. (2019). "Because there are so few of us": The marginalization of female soccer referees in Ontario, Canada. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 27(1), 12-20.
- Ridinger, L. L., Kim, K. R., Warner, S., & Tingle, J. K. (2017). Development of the referee retention scale. *Journal of Sport Management*, 31(5), 514-527.
- Samuel, R. D., Galily, Y., Guy, O., Sharoni, E., & Tenenbaum, G. (2019). A decision-making simulator for soccer referees. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 14(4), 480-489.
- Schmidt, S. L., Schmidt, G. J., Padilla, C. S., Simões, E. N., Tolentino, J. C., Barroso, P. R., . . . Costa Filho, R. L. (2019). Decrease in attentional performance after repeated bouts of high intensity exercise in association-football referees and assistant referees. *Frontiers in psychology*, 2014.
- Sefton-Green, J. (2013). *Learning at Not-School: A Review of Study, Theory, and Advocacy for Education in Non-Formal Settings*. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning. MIT Press (BK).
- Silva, J., & Assis, S. (2010). Focus group and content analysis as methodological strategy qualitative research clinic in developmental disorders. *Cad Pós-Grad Dist Desen [Internet]*. 2010 [access in 2017 Sep 21]; 10 (1): 146-51. In.
- Sim, J., & Snell, J. (1996). Focus groups in physiotherapy evaluation and research. *Physiotherapy*, 82(3), 189-198.
- Stewart, D., Shamdasani, P., & Rook, D. (1990). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* Sage Publications. In: London New Delhi.
- Swayne, L. E., & Dodds, M. (2011). *Encyclopedia of sports management and marketing*. SAGE publications.
- Tausch, A. P., & Menold, N. (2016). Methodological Aspects of Focus Groups in Health Research: Results of Qualitative Interviews With Focus Group Moderators. *Glob Qual Nurs Res*, 3, 2333393616630466. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393616630466>
- The International Football Association Board. (2022). Laws of the game 21/22. Retrieved 29 mar 2022 from <https://downloads.theifab.com/downloads/laws-of-the-game-2021-22?l=en>
- Tingle, J. K., Warner, S., & Sartore-Baldwin, M. L. (2014). The experience of former women officials and the impact on the sporting community. *Sex Roles*, 71, 7-20.
- Valenti, M., Scelles, N., & Morrow, S. (2018). Women's football studies: An integrative review. *Sport, business and management: an international journal*.
- Van Biemen, T., Koedijker, J., Renden, P. G., & Mann, D. L. (2018). The effect of blurred perceptual training on the decision making of skilled football referees. *Frontiers in psychology*, 1803.

Authors' and translators' details:

Sandra Cristina Silva dos Santos	sandra.santos@iees.pt	Author
José Pedro Arieiro Gonçalves Bezerra	pbezerra@esdl.ipvc.pt	Author
Susana Rafaela Guimarães Martins	srgm@estg.ipvc.pt	Author
Ricardo Jorge Franco Lima	ricardo.lima@esdl.ipvc.pt	Author
Bruno André Ferreira da Silva	silvabruno@esdl.ipvc.pt	Author
Teresa Margarida Veloso Barbosa Marinho	teresamarinho1@gmail.com	Translator