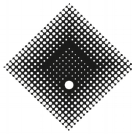

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"Our Right to Play": How Afghan Women Navigate Constraints, Agency, and Aspirations On and Off the Soccer Field

Ramón Spaaij[1,2,3], Aish Ravi[4], Jonathan Magee[4], Ruth Jeanes[4], Dawn Penney[5], and Justen O'Connor[4]

Abstract

In the wake of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and its ban on women's sport, hundreds of Afghan athletes, including several Olympians, decided to flee the country rather than give up their sports and see their rights curtailed. This paper explores how Afghan women now living in Australia navigate agency and aspirations on and off the soccer field within the context of high levels of uncertainty, instability, and constraint. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 18 participants, the results demonstrate how soccer offers an insightful microcosm of settlement as a continuation of a fraught journey. The findings reveal both the multi-layered constraints the women experienced and how they navigated these constraints with creativity, resourcefulness, and aspiration for the future.

Keywords

gender, sport, human rights, social navigation, settlement

[1]Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia
[2]School of Governance, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
[3]Centre for Sport Leadership, Stellenbosch University, South Africa
[4]Faculty of Education, School of Curriculum, Teaching and Inclusive Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
[5]School of Education, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

Corresponding Author:
Ramón Spaaij, Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Ballarat Road, Footscray, VIC 8001, Australia.
Email: ramon.spaaij@vu.edu.au

Introduction

Sport mega-events present a highly visible global platform for conversations about human rights. A notable and current issue of contention is the exclusion and discrimination of women athletes from Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, following the withdrawal of international forces. One of the many restrictions the Taliban imposed on women and girls was to forbid them to play sport in public places, where their bodies might be seen. This is a violation of both international human rights law and the Olympic Charter, the latter mandating nondiscrimination in sport. Hundreds of Afghan athletes, including several Olympians, decided to flee the country rather than give up their sports and see their rights curtailed. Among them were several members of Afghanistan's women's national soccer (football) team who continue to play in exile.

With their flight from Afghanistan, the Afghan women's national soccer team ceased to exist according to FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation. Former national team captain and coach Khalida Popal, together with Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, publicly called on FIFA to officially recognize the Afghan team in exile in Australia as the national team of Afghanistan, arguing that the governing body "has to send a message to the Taliban that women belong at work, in the classroom and on the football pitch" (Popal & Yousafzai, 2023). In 2021, it was Popal and her organization Girl Power (www.girlpowerorg.com) who orchestrated the evacuation of the team to Australia, with support from, among others, the Australian government and the Australian Olympic Committee. In a more recent interview, Popal expressed her disillusionment about the lack of progress, noting: "As one of the players who played in the very first national team of Afghanistan and fought hard with my teammates to make history and make women's football part of the culture in Afghan society, it's sad to see now it's fading away and it was all for nothing." She criticized FIFA and sports governing bodies for "once again [showing] women's football is always the second and not the priority" (Popal, cited in Nestler, 2023).

Similar critique has been leveled at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for failing to put any genuine pressure on the Taliban. The IOC expressed its "extreme concern" about the plight of women and girls in Afghanistan (Dunbar, 2023), noting that it had been negotiating with Afghanistan's National Olympic Committee (NOC) to select an Afghan team for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Human Rights Watch (2022) urged the IOC to cease to support or recognize the NOC considering the discrimination and harm the governing regime was inflicting on Afghan women and girls. The IOC had previously suspended Afghanistan's NOC between 1999 and 2003 on grounds that the Taliban was barring women from competing in sports. The IOC's perceived inaction on the matter since the Taliban takeover in August 2021 led one commentator to argue that the IOC "has turned a blind eye to Taliban violations of the Olympic Charter" (Jørgensen, 2023).

While public attention largely focuses on the performances of the select group of elite athletes proudly representing their countries during sport mega-events, in this paper we turn our gaze toward the margins. That is, to those athletes who have been

denied the right to play in their (former) homeland and/or to represent their country in international sporting competitions not because of their lack of talent or ability, but because of their gender. It is their voices and experiences that we bring to the fore in this paper, in an attempt to enrich scholarly conversations on sport as a human right and as a context or resource for social inclusion. The question we address in this paper is: how do Afghan women who identify as soccer players and who now live in Australia navigate their agency and aspirations on and off the field? Our approach in this paper recognizes that people exercise agency with creativity and resourcefulness even under extreme forms of coercion, displacement, uncertainty, and instability (Rostami-Povey, 2007; Thorpe, 2021; Thorpe & Ahmad, 2015). In doing so, our analysis seeks to adopt a strengths-based approach and therefore foreground the importance of diverse capacities and resources for individual and community empowerment and growth (Luguetti et al., 2022; Thorpe, 2021). Conceptually, we explore this through the notion of social navigation. It is to this conceptual framing of the study that we now turn.

Navigating Uncertainty and Constraints in Settlement and Sport

In this paper, we focus on the experiences of playing soccer among Afghan women who migrated to Australia on humanitarian visas. We acknowledge that participation as players is only one aspect of women's encounters and experiences of sport (Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017). Our analysis is particularly concerned with how the women navigate structural constraints and how they construct their future aspirations as players. Our use of the verb "navigate" to refer to the experiences of Afghan women soccer players in resettlement contexts is inspired by Vigh's (2006, 2009) social navigation approach and its application in refugee studies by Nunn et al. (2017). The concept of social navigation enables us "to focus on how people move and manage within situations of social flux and change" (Vigh, 2009, p. 420), especially in volatile environments. It seeks to address how "people not just act in but interact with their social environment and adjust their lives to the constant influence (in *potentia* and *presentia*) of social forces and change" (Vigh, 2009, p. 433). This approach helps us recognize people with refugee backgrounds as active agents while simultaneously acknowledging the social forces that mediate their positionalities and possibilities.

Nunn et al. (2017) explain how the concept of social navigation acknowledges sociopolitical environments that are fraught with unpredictability, precariousness, and risk—conditions that the women whose experiences we document in this paper are all too familiar with both from their time in Afghanistan and in Australia's precarious settlement context. For example, research has shown the institutional normalization of violence against women in "post-war" Afghanistan (Ahmad & Avoine, 2018) as well as the persistent constraints Afghan women experience after settlement in Australia, including poverty, food insecurity, and poor housing and employment opportunities (Kavian et al., 2020). Nunn et al.'s (2017) reconceptualization of settlement as "a continuation of a fraught journey in which refugee settlers must continually seek new strategies to pursue viable futures" (p. 45), captures these navigational challenges

well. They frame settlement as a process in which people with refugee backgrounds navigate shifting social possibilities in pursuit of viable futures within an inherently precarious settlement regime.

The concept of social navigation has some parallels with the notion of bounded agency, which conveys how the expression of agency is circumscribed and shaped by the situationally and temporally specific boundaries and conditions in which people find themselves (e.g., Evans, 2002, 2007). Evans (2002) describes bounded agency as "a socially situated process, shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures" (p. 262). Both social navigation and bounded agency evoke a dynamic concept of temporality but seem to refer to different paces and intensities of change and movement. The concept of social navigation is particularly apt for this paper because of the high levels of entropy and instability in the women's social worlds, as opposed to the slower processes of sedimentation and habituation that the notion of bounded agency conveys (Vigh, 2009).

Research on the intersections of gender, migration, and sport has explored how sport offers a valuable site through which to explore questions of agency, belonging, and the politics of identity for women with migrant and refugee backgrounds. For example, Palmer's (2009) research with young women with refugee backgrounds in Australia found that "soccer became a means through which the women could present a visible, narrative of achievement on behalf of the broader [community]" (p. 34). In a similar vein, Truskewycz et al. (2022) found that the women with migrant and refugee backgrounds in their study were able to draw on resources and skills to successfully negotiate their participation in soccer in the face of varying degrees of sociocultural, gendered, and religious pressures and tensions. They note that "while participants had different experiences, their shared resistance, agency, resourcefulness and negotiation of complex multi-layered social forces to pursue football was a shared characteristic" (Truskewycz et al., 2022, p. 596).

At the same time, these and other studies show the multifaceted barriers that can limit migrant and refugee women's access to sport participation or affect the kinds of activities they may choose to participate in. These include, for example, racial, religious, and gender discriminations, lack of culturally appropriate facilities, affordability, and lack of family support (Sawrikar & Muir, 2010; Spaaij et al., 2019). Women with migrant and refugee backgrounds may also be less likely than their male counterparts to feel they have the freedom and opportunity to participate in sport (Cortis, 2009; Spaaij et al., 2023). However, the nature and extent of these constraints vary greatly, as do the women's experiences, needs, practices, and aspirations, which highlights the need to attend to intersectionalities (Agergaard, 2016; Ratna, 2011; Van den Bogert, 2022). According to O'Driscoll et al. (2014), relevant factors include, *inter alia*, time spent in the country, prior experience of sport, migration experiences, socioeconomic status, cultural or religious factors impacting participation, and the cultural value or meaning attached to sport. For example, Walseth and Strandbu's (2014) study of Norwegian-Pakistani women found parents and community members put limits on the women's participation in sport and that young women felt a sense of tension between sport participation and their embodied faith and modesty. These issues can

combine to create exclusionary forces that discourage migrant and refugee women's participation. But so can stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination on the part of sport providers (Walseth, 2006). For example, research has found that while sport providers often perceive that religious traditions discourage Muslim female participation, this is not always the case, as such constraints affect women in different ways depending on their interpretation of Islam and their particular family and community contexts (Agergaard, 2016; Kay, 2006). As Agergaard (2016) points out, this erroneous dominant perception and "othering" among policymakers and practitioners can constitute a powerful barrier to participation. Van den Bogert (2021) thus invites us to also focus on Muslim girls' and women's practices and spatial performances that are not explicitly religious, as they emphasize the potential for resistance.

In the remainder of this paper, we explore how the Afghan women soccer players who were the protagonists in this study navigated their agency and aspirations on and off the field.

Methods

This paper is a case study drawn from a broader research project that examined informal sport and its health and social implications. The study received approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The case emerged from the interactions between the research team and a grassroots sports association that was founded by and for the Afghan community in Australia. Established in 2019, the association provided informal soccer programs and an annual soccer tournament in Melbourne, Australia. Our initial interview with representatives of the association occurred not long after the Afghan women's national team had arrived in Australia with some players being located in Melbourne. We learned that the association had been assisting in the resettlement of some of the Afghan women's national team members in the local area, including organizing training opportunities for the national team players. This eventually resulted in one of the authors developing rapport with female Afghan coaches who had been leading soccer programs for the Afghan community, coaching teams in the annual tournament, and lending support to the recently arrived Afghan women's soccer team.

Following these initial research encounters, the research was expanded to include a total of 18 participants, all of whom participated in semi-structured interviews. We deliberately describe their roles in relatively generic ways to protect the women's identities. Confidentiality and privacy were essential ethical considerations in the study due to the safety risks to both the women themselves and their families in Afghanistan, something our respondents were acutely aware of. It is for this reason that we have omitted any identity markers from the respondents' quotes used in this paper. In general terms, the respondents included four coaches/leaders and 14 players between the ages of 18 and 40. The players had varying levels of experience with soccer; from participating in informal games and kickabouts in the park to international, elite-level players. The women had a wide spectrum of migratory trajectories to Australia, with some having migrated to Australia as early as the 1980s, while others

had resettled to Australia in the aftermath of the 2021 Taliban takeover. This also meant that the women had lived in Afghanistan during different times under different regimes, resulting in diverging experiences concerning their sense of agency, gender roles, and sport participation.

The interviews took place either in person or online. Participants gave their informed consent in writing. The interview schedule focused on the women's life histories, migration journeys, experiences with soccer, the barriers and opportunities they encountered, how they sought to navigate challenges and uncertainties, and their future aspirations in and beyond soccer. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was managed and analyzed using the Nvivo 11 software package (produced by Lumivero, formerly called QSR International) through what Braun and Clarke (2021) call "codebook" thematic analysis. The coding comprised inductive processes (e.g., the emergent theme of equal rights, as discussed later on) but primarily centered on a conceptually informed coding framework for developing and documenting the analytical decisions and procedures. Two authors read, discussed, and coded the data, iteratively grouping and regrouping the codes into themes and subthemes. For example, the interview response, *"Family, sometimes they can be a little hard-headed with soccer, but I force it, you know. They say stuff like—sexist stuff, like 'soccer's not for girls,' and stuff like that,"* was coded as family discouragement, which was later constructed as a subcode of constraints to participation. The code became part of the theme we constructed as "gender and the right to play." In the next section, we discuss the findings across this theme and two other key themes we developed from the data: informal soccer as transitional support, and future aspirations in and beyond soccer.

Findings

A Soft Landing? Informal Soccer as Transitional Support

The literature highlights the role that sport participation can play as "a practical and accessible entry point for addressing the needs of newly arrived communities" (Olliff, 2008, p. 55). A key theme in the present study is that while the women recognized the importance of having access to such early transitional support, this was more likely to be found in the preexisting network of informal playing opportunities in Australia than in established club environments. This finding adds nuance to the current knowledge base that tends to neglect the vital role of informal sport as a resource for navigating settlement (Jeanes et al., 2023; Nunn et al., 2022). We describe informal sport in this context to be situated on a continuum of sport, whereby during informal sport the players themselves are in close proximity to many of the key decisions that govern their participation. That is, during more informal sport, decisions about weekly commitment, uniform, and team structure are made largely by or in close proximity to the players themselves. Where there is a transition on this continuum toward more formal forms of sport, these decisions (including place, time, fixture, and equipment) begin to be made more distally from the playing group.

At the most rudimentary level, the informal soccer that recently resettled Afghan women tended to participate in, at least initially, was kickabouts in the park. In this form of sport, many of the key decisions about the experience were being made by the women themselves: "We just message each other. Be like, 'Let's go." One woman similarly noted: "We do it individually. [. . .] We just gather up, you know. . . All we do is just text each other like, 'Hey you want to go out to play soccer?' That's it."

The coaches we interviewed recognized that while the women had a desire to play soccer, they often lacked the knowledge or capacity to do so in the Australian sporting system. Even for those who had vast prior experience as international elite athletes, accessing suitable playing opportunities in Australia was not easy. For some of them, their kickabouts in the park coexisted alongside more organized competitions and pathways, including a women's team that competes in the Victorian Afghan Football Association (established in 2019) and the National Afghan Annual Soccer Tournament. One coach recalled:

> Oh, it was a bit—really hard. It was not easy. Me and [my friend], we started this [team] back from 2014. Because we had seen some girls, they had potential. They had talent. But they didn't know where to go or what to do, like from where to start. So we started from the one girl especially, and then she was really talented and we started with her. And she had friends who wanted to play soccer. First week, two of them came, second week four, five. We had big numbers.

This quote gives an insight into how talent mediated the role of shifting participation along the informal/formal sport continuum from a kickabout to a point where key decisions, such as where and when to play, were now being externally organized. That is, there was a need to invest external resources in supporting talent to be nurtured. Yet it was the players who ultimately grew participation in this context by drawing on their social networks and it was the flexibility of playing informally that supported participant engagement, particularly when it came down to decisions about weekly commitment, team structure, rules, fees, and uniform:

> If you don't come for a week it doesn't mean you can't come the next week, so you can come in and drop in and drop out whenever you want, that's the other good thing. Also it doesn't even cost anyone. It doesn't even cost them a dollar to attend. . . we're seeing right now where there's 15 or 18 girls rocking up at every indoor session. . . there is no uniform so you can wear whatever you feel comfortable in. . . I think everyone loves that flexibility. Even me personally I would love to just rock up to playing football in whatever gear I feel most comfortable in as opposed to being told what to wear and how to wear it.

These remarks also highlight the issue of cost, which all respondents perceived as a major barrier to participation in soccer clubs, especially for those who wanted to play in higher, more expensive levels of competition: "I know a lot of the girls here who want to play at the level that I and some other girls do, and they can't afford it." In the

informal soccer opportunities available to the women, resources were limited, as the following remarks by one of the organizers indicate:

> Luckily right now we have a bit of equipment that we are good, but still we always needed equipment. That's why the girls said they don't know what's going on, because we're always trying to bring the facilities, equipment for the girls. They never feel that we are playing in a club, it's not a formal club or it's not a good level, because the facilities, the equipment, we're always trying to being best for them.

As noted earlier, participants had varying migration histories. Some were elite-level players, while others had rarely played at all. Some had grown up in Afghanistan during the national Afghan government (2001–2021), but others had grown up in Afghanistan during the first term of the Taliban with its ban on women's involvement in sport. These differences shaped their level of prior experience with soccer, as we explore in the next section. Yet there were also patterns of similarity in the experiences they reported in the interviews, especially concerning the meaning they attributed to soccer as a temporary escape from the strains of displacement and life in Australia and a vital source of social connection. For example, respondents typically highlighted the release of stress and tension when playing:

> It's just really fun, like a really fun environment where you come in for like two hours and you basically just forget about your stresses and everything else, and all the girls are really cool. Yeah, it's just really fun.

> It's something that we can focus more and forget the bad things whenever you have the bad days you can go just chill with the football. It is much more fun because there is not much focusing on rules, and you know about the rules but you're not considering that much focused. And yeah, so it is, it's really good because you're just trying to be yourself and having fun with your friends as well. As I'm thinking it so effectual and it will change the mood of the player.

These quotes also point to the inherently relational nature of playing soccer, which all respondents emphasized as being essential to their sense of inclusion and connection. The following comments illustrate the centrality of social connection in the women's experiences of playing soccer:

> It's the social gathering, all together. Almost three of my best friends I've gained through football. I've known them since I was maybe first week of high school. So that's been amazing. But yeah, mostly the fact that we get together, leave everything else behind, whatever's happening in personal lives, get together, yeah, come here and just play the game.

> For me always my team was my second family. This is the same thing for my teammates. So we are so lucky that we are not losing our second family, and so right now when we are not having our first family, this is really amazing that we are having our second family.

> It's so much fun. Seeing my friends. They were the first people that really—first people I met playing football, and really shaped what football looked like to me. It was very welcoming. A lot of fun, just having a good time and kicking a ball around basically. Just—everyone is there to enjoy the game and enjoy each other's company.

Beyond these shared experiences of the micro-level dynamics of playing soccer, the women we interviewed were acutely aware of the broader politics of identity within which their involvement in soccer was situated. It is to their experiences of navigating these gender politics that we now turn.

"I Just Force It": Soccer, Gender, and the Right to Play

Previous research has shown that engaging in the familiar practice of playing soccer can provide a sense of embodied affective connection to the past, offering a sense of continuity amid, and a means to navigate, uncertainty and precariousness (Dukic et al., 2017; Nunn et al., 2022). Our findings emphasize the highly gendered nature of this resource for navigation. Several respondents did not have prior experience with playing soccer before migrating to Australia. Indeed, they were denied access. And even when there was no official ban on their participation in sport, they often experienced strong societal pressures and discouragement. Their agency in navigating these constraints is aptly conveyed in this reflection by one of the interviewees:

> Family, sometimes they can be a little hard-headed with soccer, but I force it, you know. They say stuff like—sexist stuff, like "soccer's not for girls," and stuff like that. But it doesn't bother me, I just force it.

The complexity of this social navigation becomes clear when we consider the intersecting, historically and situationally specific constellations of gender discrimination the women experienced. For those who migrated to Australia during the first Taliban regime, playing soccer was an opportunity to assert their rights and identity as women by playing a sport previously denied to them in Afghanistan. For those who came to Australia during the national Afghan government (2001–2021), it provided an opportunity to both continue to express their identity through a sport they grew up playing and progress an equal rights agenda that extended beyond the soccer pitch.

Reflecting on her experiences under the Taliban, one respondent stressed how "The biggest thing in the Taliban's ideology is, they're thinking that [this] sport especially women's sport, is against Islamic ethics and it's against the rules." Others added:

> When the Taliban came they don't want women to play football and they don't allow them to play football because they think that football is bad for women. They have a different opinion, they have different ideas about women, about playing football and some things like this.

> Most of people, they didn't support girls. They just making fun to us—of us, and they don't want girls to play football and making fun of us. . . they do everything they can to make us stop playing football.

Respondents were well aware this issue ran much deeper than soccer: "Forget about sport, forget about other things, they're not allowing the women to go for education so how are they going to allow them to go for sport or politician or something else like that? That's the problem, that's the biggest problem that we faced with last year, and we were targeted."

Beyond the Taliban's prohibition of women's sport, the women in our study experienced various forms of societal discouragement in both Afghanistan and Australia. Reflecting on her experience in Afghanistan, one respondent recalled:

> So it was a shame for the family as well to not protect their girls, to let them go outside and to be in front of the people, and also as an athlete to be in front of the people and play. So due to the consideration of mind and these are the experiences as I know the bad things and the minds of the parents and the minds of the people who were thinking the football is not—the sport is not good for the girls.

Others drew parallels to the pressure and disapproval they felt among Afghan community members in Australia, echoing previous research on Afghan women's frustration with the imposition of traditional gender roles by the close-knit Afghan community in Australia (Afrouz et al., 2023):

> But for us it was very hard, because the Afghan culture, they didn't accept that girls play soccer, because they never seen that, the girls play soccer in Afghanistan. And then everyone was blaming on us. They were talking a lot of things that, "Well, why you guys supporting these girls? What you get benefit? Do you get money from someone else?" There were so many negative comments, always.

> But still, even today, most of their parents are not happy that girls play soccer. And then because we've been almost seven, eight years in this field they're really trust on us, but also that's why they're letting the girls come.

Yet, similar to Agergaard's (2016) findings, the data reveal important nuance, with several respondents perceiving shifts in community attitudes and encouragement from family. One woman observed how she was "starting to see a lot of changes like a really positive shift in that where parents are very supportive and you actually see the parents coming out and watching their daughters participate." Another added: "I feel like now parents, they more want them to exercise so they're like, 'Yeah go out.' Back then they're like, 'No, stay home.' But now they're like, 'You can go. Go exercise.'" We heard multiple stories of families being supportive of the women's involvement in soccer, with brothers in particular being named as facilitators of their participation, as illustrated by the following comments:

> How I got into football? It's kind of strange. My brothers have always played football, and it's been around me for a while. But I started getting into it when there was a new park built near my house, and everyone would go. So, I was like, "I want to go." And there was a huge group of Afghan boys that would come and play football. And I just started to join them. And yeah, I just started from there.

> Our coaches definitely, and my brothers. They—I don't know they just want me to play so they always train me and try to make me play, take me places, and that's it. My parents they're like, "As long as we have someone to take you. It's okay."

> At first, [my parents] weren't supportive, they were like, "Don't play." But then since I have all the siblings who play soccer—but they're guys, so there's a difference. But then since they supported me, then my parents were fine with it. Yeah. So, since I was young, my brothers would always play and then I would try to join myself with them, and basically just play around with friends.

Navigating societal or parental pressures and support is an active and creative process that can include both open and hidden forms of resistance. For the women in our study, their social navigation was underpinned by a strong belief in equal rights, as the following comments illustrate:

> So when we are saying equal rights, why for men, why not for the woman? And that's the thing that I was always in my head and I was trying to deal with it. So it was the same thing for a lot of my teammates who was trying their best to be active and to play and not to stop because that's the thing, that was our fight was for our rights, nothing else. So that was so important for us, and yeah, we were trying to encourage a lot of girls and we did it, a lot of girls joined us, a lot of girls was interested in football. Without even just saying, without just even doing something, when you're just playing, when you're just training and those girls and others are witness, and even the family members or brothers or sisters of some girls and back in Afghanistan or some of their family members when they witness about our playing the football they were being encouraged to encourage their own, encourage their own daughter, encourage their own sister to let them to join.

We were struck by the various ways respondents reportedly exercised their agency to resist, challenge, or circumvent constraints to playing soccer. One woman shared the following story to highlight the importance of continual resistance:

> I think it's the resistance that gets the parents from like just giving up. I know one of the girls personally whose parents [. . .] simply straight up said, "No, you can't go." She ended up making excuses and made all this crap, like a joke or random—she was saying she was going over to one of her sisters' places. She made all these excuses every time and now the parents have simply given up so she doesn't even need to say anything to her parents and just rocks up to the game, matches, training, everything.

Others explained how they used bargaining and conformity to claim their right to play, agreeing to play with a *hijab* to appease the Taliban regime while simultaneously challenging its ban on women's sport participation:

> When they were witness about the hijab, "These girls are having their hijab and going to football and going to soccer and there is nothing to stop them," there is no such a thing to say it's against Islamic ethics or something because we were following that rule, as a Muslim we were following the rules of having hijab. [. . .] If you want us to follow our hijab, we are in, but just we want our rights, equal rights. "It's about that scarf? No problem, we are having it." And yeah, so we are following our rules as well [. . .].

Another woman recalled how she was able to use concealment when growing up in Afghanistan:

> [W]hen I was starting to play football I was like a boy, my hair was short and I dressed like boy, and then my neighbours and some of the people, they didn't know that I'm a girl. I was playing football in the street and the park, and I started playing football like that because people don't know about me, that I am a girl. They think I am a boy.

Such navigational strategies weren't confined to obtaining the right to play but extended to ways to address constraints such as financial cost, transport, and registration. Doing so, however, tended to incur personal costs for the women. Participants reported having to navigate these constraints largely on their own by earning their own money to pay for soccer-related costs, educating themselves on playing opportunities and requirements, and reaching out to coaches for support. The following comments illustrate some of these strategies:

> Financially, I've always supported myself. And that's why I work to support my fees and my boots, my clothing. Everything that I need for football, I support myself with it. I haven't really had anyone else pay for my stuff, except for last year with the fees, as it was really expensive, and I couldn't afford to pay it as a student.

> [A]ll the registration I had to do myself because my parents were just like, "Just do whatever." So I had to go to training myself, games myself. There wasn't much support but that didn't stop me because I like the sport.

When asked what support they would like to be able to navigate their involvement in soccer, common responses were "just the opportunity" and "to get equal chances." In the next section, we shift our attention to the future, exploring the participants' aspirations.

Future Aspirations

A third theme to be gleaned from the data is respondents' future aspirations on and off the soccer field. We can distinguish individual and more collectivist expressions of future aspiration in the women's narratives. On an individual level, some participants

talked about their aspiration to grow as players and play at high levels of competition, ideally professional soccer. For example, one respondent articulated her aspiration as follows:

> So, my main goal and dream is to play professionally. And hopefully make it—get called up for nationals representing Australia or Afghanistan. Either would be such a good honour for me. Well, if you asked me when I first started playing, probably not, but at the moment, I do believe that there is like a slightest bit more chance for me to progress higher.

Others, especially those with less playing experience, had more modest on-field aspirations, illustrative of which are the following remarks:

> I just want to continue my football, I just want playing football more. And also I want to continue my education, and to support my family back in Afghanistan and I try to bring them here. That's it, yeah.

> I don't know if I'm going to study after high school. But football, I hope I keep that in my life a long time—as long as possible. Probably until I get married or something, I don't know.

> I'm trying my best to get my higher education as well here and to have good qualification on that, and then beside that, the thing is that I love it, that's my goal, it's in football, so I'm taking care of both.

These women's references to education were typical of the narratives of the women we interviewed, demonstrating a strong awareness of their needs and social situations off the field, with education being perceived as a key means for their and their family's social mobility. Some respondents reported how inspired they felt by other women in their families and communities, for instance:

> Studying wise, I think my sister inspires me a lot because she started from [10th Grade] and then obviously, she didn't know how to speak English, like all the stuff that comes with it. But I think what she's done now and then she's become a nurse and everything she start working, inspires me to do something better or something like her. Football, I think it's just our girls. I see a lot of our girls play [in the National Premier League] and stuff inspires me. I just want to be better or like just them or anything like that.

Beyond the impact on their social mobility, the women's reported aspirations indicated a commitment to make a difference within their communities. For example, one woman expressed her desire to support other women in their sport and physical activity:

> I do wish to do further studies. And become a personal trainer or like a fitness advocate, I guess, for women of multicultural backgrounds that don't really have the exposure to

> sport, and gyms and stuff. And help them get into a healthier mindset, a healthier lifestyle and really support them in that field where they're lacking.

This community-oriented aspiration resonated with those of other players and coaches who articulated collective aspirations for Afghan women and girls in soccer, illustrative of which are the following responses:

> Every day my expectations [are getting bigger] I want to see the girls to [. . .] get in the level that they want, that they represent Matildas [the Australian national women's soccer team]. And then they get in the W-League [Australia's top-division women's soccer league]. And then I [expect] then when these girls, they have to show their talents and I want to see all Afghan women to see that [. . .] if they are good, they should play where they deserve they should play in that level. That's what I want to see for them.

> Ideally I aspire that there will be a day where I'll be witnessing a Muslim woman or young woman being part of the Matildas' squad. Not even Matildas, I think if I started one level lower, like just being able to play for W-League. So having young women, young Afghan women being able to play for Melbourne Victory or Melbourne City that for me is my goals.

> And I want to see more Afghan players come without their parents stopping them. They should be—they will be able to come and join the team. And there should be more teams and more players for Afghans. So all other cultures, they get in soccer as well.

Considering the aforementioned constraints that the women had to navigate at the everyday level, it is unsurprising that they recognized that realizing their aspirations was "not going to be easy, it's never been easy." They pointed out that "the system is not fair and accessible for everyone no matter how talented and capable you are," due in part to the limited resources available to them. As one coach illustrated:

> There's so many talented players already within our community but it's just they don't have the avenue or didn't know how to navigate through the system to be able to compete or go to the trials so that they can showcase their talent and make it to the top. That's my aspiration from an elite perspective.

This sentiment was echoed by one of the elite-level players, who similarly stressed the complexity of navigating uncertain and precarious playing pathways even for those who had reached the highest levels of playing competition:

> The pathways for the Afghan [national] team is very unknown right now, as they don't know if they can qualify for any sort of tournaments in the future "cause they're not in their homeland anymore. They're in Australia. So that pathway is very uncertain, and we'll see what the future holds with that."

These comments convey an image of soccer as a microcosm of the precarious settlement context that Nunn et al. (2017) refer to in their reconceptualization of settlement

as "a continuation of a fraught journey in which refugee settlers must continually seek new strategies to pursue viable futures" (p. 45).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings discussed in this paper provide insight into how the Afghan women who participated in our study navigated their agency and articulated their aspirations on and off the soccer field in the face of considerable constraints, uncertainty, and instability. Their experiences in Afghanistan, especially under Taliban rule, highlight the human rights violations they encountered including being denied the right to play sport. The women's experiences during their settlement in Australia suggest both continuities and changes in ways that are consistent with recent research. The migration process led the women to reassess their possibilities and demand the right to pursue opportunities, in this case playing soccer, previously denied to them based on their gender (Afrouz et al., 2023). This was reflected in how they articulated their personal aspirations for their soccer and educational pathways, but also in their collective vision for Afghan women and girls in soccer. These narratives suggest the prioritization of their individual needs and independence as well as a recognition of interdependence and solidarity.

At the same time, the results of this study show the complexity of social navigation within the intersecting, historically and situationally specific constellations of gender discrimination the women experienced. Participants reported ongoing constraints to obtaining gender equality post-migration, reflecting the notion of settlement as a continuation of a fraught journey (Nunn et al., 2017). Our results demonstrate how soccer offered an insightful microcosm in this regard, revealing both the multi-layered barriers the women experienced and how they navigated these constraints with creativity and resourcefulness. The women did so by drawing on a range of navigational strategies including engaging with each other, resistance, bargaining, concealment, and tapping into support from coaches and into perceived shifts in community attitudes and family support. These findings help advance current conceptual and empirical understandings of how women with migrant and refugee backgrounds negotiate complex multi-layered social forces to pursue their participation in sport (e.g., Truskewycz et al., 2022). This study's finding regarding the women's struggles to navigate restrictions and barriers in club-based sport is also consistent with previous research (e.g., Gibbs & Block, 2017; Sawrikar & Muir, 2010; Spaaij et al., 2019). The access and early transition support that respondents sought to obtain in soccer were more readily available to them in informal playing opportunities, a finding that can inform emerging scholarly conversations on the meaning and social implications of informal sport as a growing form of collective leisure activity (Neal et al., 2023). Identifying what decisions participants would like to retain control over (e.g., uniform, rules, and commitment) and what decisions they need external support with (e.g., regular place, regular time, and access to equipment) can help match experiences with needs in this transitional space.

Finally, the results add important nuance to previous research that highlights the significance of possessing a "sporting habitus" (i.e., an embodied social history of, and

"feel" for, the game) as a resource for navigating access to and a sense of inclusion in sport (Dukic et al., 2017; McDonald & Spaaij, 2021). Our findings confirm that "being able to play" was recognized by other players as valuable and desirable, for example, the way novice players expressed feeling inspired by the Afghan women who played at the elite level. Yet, the high levels of entropy and instability in the women's social worlds meant that even the most elite players in our study faced major constraints not only in Afghanistan but also in Australia. Their ability to use their sporting habitus as a resource for social navigation in this case appeared to have been trumped by the constraints inflicted on them based on their gender. Whether and how Afghan women athletes' capacity to navigate these complex social forces increases over time, especially *if* the levels of entropy and instability in their social worlds slow down, would merit further research. Such a research endeavor would be particularly well served by longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork beyond what this relatively contained qualitative study can offer.

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Author Biographies

Ramón Spaaij is Professor of Sociology in the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University. His research addresses questions of social cohesion, conflict, and social change, with a focus on sport as a lens through which to understand complex social issues.

Aish Ravi is a teaching associate in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, soccer coach, and educator whose PhD examined the progression of women football coaches. She is passionate about making sport a more inclusive space for all. She is founder and director of the Women's Coaching Association.

Jonathan Magee is a research fellow in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. His research examines sport, labor migration, and social exclusion.

Ruth Jeanes is a Professor and Head of School in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Her research focus on sport and social inclusion.

Dawn Penney is a professorial research fellow in the School of Education at Curtin University, leading research project developments addressing quality and equity in health and physical education, physical activity and sport.

Justen O'Connor is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. He utilizes systems thinking, social ecology and strengths-based approaches to explore curriculum and pedagogy associated with health, physical education, sport, and lifetime physical activity.