
Sponsorship as a Fuel for Emerging Female Football: Stakeholders' Perspective

Submitted 13/11/25, 1st revision 05/12/25, 2nd revision 20/01/26, accepted 20/02/26

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study examines how sponsorship influences the development, visibility, and professionalisation of women's football in Portugal, with particular attention to the Liga BPI. The research explores how sponsorship is perceived by key stakeholders and assesses the extent to which Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) frameworks shape sponsors' motivations and the broader commercial ecosystem of women's football.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A qualitative research design was employed, consisting of semi-structured interviews with 6 stakeholders, including athletes, coaches, club managers, and fans. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns related to sponsorship value, CSR expectations, and the perceived developmental impact of investment in women's football. The findings are interpreted through the theoretical lens of CSR and sport sponsorship literature.

Findings: The results indicate that stakeholders perceive sponsorship as a critical driver of growth in women's football, particularly in relation to increased media visibility, enhanced league credibility, and improved playing conditions. Participants consistently highlighted that high-profile sponsorship contributes to higher attendance and greater public interest. CSR emerged as a central theme, with respondents noting that brands are attracted to women's football because of its association with values such as gender equality, fairness, and integrity. Stakeholders reported that the women's game offers sponsors a "cleaner" and lower-risk environment compared to men's football, reinforcing CSR-aligned investment. Despite progress—including the entry of major clubs into Liga BPI—participants emphasised ongoing structural challenges, such as limited media exposure and insufficient financial resources, which continue to constrain professionalisation.

Practical Implications: The study provides actionable insights for clubs, federations, and corporate sponsors. Brands can leverage sponsorship of women's football to enhance their CSR portfolios while supporting gender-equity initiatives. Clubs and governing bodies should position women's football as a socially meaningful and reputationally safe investment, emphasising values-based branding to attract long-term partners and accelerate professionalisation. The findings also underscore the need for coordinated strategies to expand media coverage and strengthen commercial infrastructures.

Originality/Value: This research contributes to the limited literature on sponsorship in Portuguese women's football by integrating stakeholder perspectives with CSR theory. It offers novel insights into how CSR-driven sponsorship can shape the commercial and

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developmental trajectory of emerging women's leagues, providing a foundation for future strategic and policy recommendations.

Keywords: *Equality, Sponsorship, CSR, Football, Sport development.*

JEL Codes: *L83, M14, Z20.*

Paper Type: *Research paper.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Historical Perspective on Women's Football

Women's football, from being pushed to the side or even completely forbidden in some countries, today, has reached a peak in popularity it has never reached before. Some might think that women's football just appeared in recent years, but it has been around for over a century, Kerr Ladies FC was famous around 1920 and attracting up to 53,000 spectators.

This was not well-received by everybody, and therefore, in England, the FA decided to ban women from playing in FA affiliated football grounds, which lasted 51 years. The FA's Consultative Committee even stated, "Complaints having been made as to football being played by women, Council felt impelled to express the strong opinion that the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and should not be encouraged." (Wrack, 2022).

Brazil, Germany and Spain banned women entirely from playing, Australia basically did the same, by refusing to provide the resources for women to play, which forced many of them to play in the shadows (Lewis, 2023). Some might think it has been a century and things have been different in the last decades but Sarina Wiegman, one of the most famous women's coaches, stated in her book "What it takes, my playbook on life and leadership", that when she was younger, she too faced disapproval for playing football, even cut her hair short so that she would not stand out. This brings up the question of where women's football would stand today if a big organization like the FA did not ban it when it was starting to flourish.

It has taken nearly a whole century to beat that record attendance. On March 17, 2019, the Wanda Metropolitano, the home of Atlético Madrid, in a game between Atlético and FC Barcelona, 60,739 people were in the stands (Burhan, 2020). Since then, several games have surpassed this mark, with FC Barcelona versus Wolfsburg in April 2022, being the existing record, with an astonishing attendance of 91,948 (Humphreys, 2023). There are clear indications of progress, especially looking at attendance numbers, but there is still a long road to travel to reach the point of

attention and recognition that women deserve in this sport. To have a more precise indication, women make up approximately 40% of all participants in sports, yet they only receive 4% of media coverage (Mackenzie, 2019). Women's sports are overshadowed by the coverage of men's sports.

1.2 Examining Women's Football Through a Critical Lens: Evidence from the Portuguese League

Women's football in Portugal is often associated with Sport Lisboa and Benfica and Sporting Clube de Portugal, the two dominant teams of the Liga BPI. However, before those teams decided to enter this sport, there were several smaller teams keeping women's football alive in Portugal.

The Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) itself admits that there are not a lot of registered documents on women's football in Portugal, so it is hard to trace the background of women's football in Portugal. In 1985, the FPF decided to implement the first official women's competition in football, it was only after 2012 that bigger clubs like Sporting Clube de Braga, Sporting Clube de Portugal and Sport Lisboa e Benfica decided to enter the competition today known as Liga BPI (Federação Portuguesa de Futebol, 2022).

The entry of those bigger clubs into league increased the quality of the athletes. Therefore, a notable increase in quality was seen in the national team, where Portugal, in 2023, made it to the Top 20 in the FIFA women's ranking for the first time in history (Mais Futebol, 2023). The entry of those clubs did not only have a positive impact on the quality of play, but it had an enormous impact on attendances.

Several records were broken, on the 3rd of March, with 1,100 being registered in Albergaria's stadium (Record, 2024). More surprisingly, Torreense versus Benfica registered more fans in a women's game than Torreense managed to register in a men's game in the second division in the beginning of the season with 1,314 fans in the women's game compared to 979 and 974 in the men's games (Record, 2023). There is a common factor here in all these games, it's Benfica and this is a cultural problem. Nearly 50% of fans in Portugal support Benfica,

46% to be precise, with 24.7% supporting Porto and 23.8% supporting Sporting (Observador, 2019), which indicates that there are not a lot of fans supporting other clubs. This clearly highlights the importance of having the biggest three clubs active in women's football, it will create visibility for the athletes and guarantee a massive development.

It is looking favorable for the future of women's football in Portugal with FC Porto creating a team for the season 2024/2025 and wanting to enter the third division (Pinto and Sousa, 2024), it will not take them long to be alongside Benfica and Sporting in the first division.

1.3 Aim and Expected Outcomes of the Study

The aim of the study is to identify and characterise the value of sponsorship in women's football. Keeping in mind sponsorship context of corporate social responsibility (CSR), as a theoretical framework. The study aims to identify potential of involvement with women's football as a sponsor and how it refers to society change and women's football development.

The research aims to show that the commercial value is only a small portion of all the values it has to offer. The study aimed to identify these values and point out the importance of being connected to women's sports and how this might benefit sponsors in creating stronger community ties.

2. Literature Review

Understanding why sponsorship has become a critical resource for women's sport requires an examination of its role in shaping visibility, legitimacy, and long-term development pathways. In line with research in sport management, sponsorship is not merely a financial mechanism but a strategic driver that enhances media exposure, strengthens organisational capacity, and contributes to the professionalisation of women's leagues.

This section therefore synthesises the existing literature to illuminate the multifaceted value of sponsorship in women's football, with particular attention to how commercial partnerships contribute to the growth of the sport and the advancement of female athletes.

By analysing these dynamics, the review aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the extent to which sponsorship functions as a catalyst for organisational development, market expansion, and the potential transition of women's leagues toward full professional status.

Although women's sports can receive so much from sponsors, they can also help businesses achieve their own objectives. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an integral component nowadays in every business and sports sponsorship has become an integral part of it. Therefore, there will also be a deep analysis of the impact that women's football can have on the businesses themselves underscoring the importance of gender equality and community engagement.

2.1 Sponsorship of Women's Sports

Sponsorship plays a crucial role in women's sports and has therefore been a topic of considerable academic interest. Sponsorships are key to helping women's football develop and gain visibility. In the past, sponsorships were seen as a quick exchange between a club and a sponsor to display the sponsor's logo on the shirt (Petrić and

Pepur, 2021). Thanks to a lot of research in that area, nowadays it is clear that sponsorships can impact both the image of the sport and the sponsor- The sponsorship choices affect consumer attitudes and have long-term implications for brand management.

Research by Jensen and Smith suggests that the resources that sponsors allocate to women's sports sponsorships are met or exceeded by the resources received in return. This suggests that the ROI of women's sports may be the same or higher compared to men's sports, suggesting that investing in women's sports is not only equitable but also very advantageous to sponsors.

2.2 Professionalization of Women's Football

The professionalisation of the Liga BPI constitutes a critical component in the broader development of women's football in Portugal. As women's football across Europe undergoes rapid structural transformation, maintaining competitiveness increasingly requires national leagues to align with the professional standards set by leading competitions such as the English Women's Super League and Spain's Liga F.

As noted by Agergaard and Tiesler in *Women, Soccer and Transnational Migration*, the process of professionalisation extends far beyond improving athletes' working conditions; it also necessitates the establishment of robust league governance structures, sustainable management practices, and coherent development pathways for players and clubs.

In recent years, the Liga BPI has demonstrated meaningful progress toward these objectives. This evolution is evidenced by the significant improvement in the technical and tactical quality of players competing in the league, which has translated into enhanced performance at the international level.

Notably, Portugal's recent Women's World Cup campaign drew widespread attention, with the national team narrowly missing a historic elimination of the two-time defending champions, the United States a dramatic outcome determined only by a late shot striking the goalpost (Baxter, 2023). The competitive progress of the women's national team underscores the developmental potential that can be achieved when athletes benefit from high-quality training environments and professional support structures.

A major contributor to this progress has been the Portuguese Football Federation's (FPF) investment in elite infrastructures. The establishment of Cidade do Futebol in 2016 created a centralised, high-performance environment for all national teams - men's and women's - integrated under the FPF (Monteiro Taveira, 2017). The national team therefore illustrates what becomes possible when institutional resources, organisational capacity, and strategic intent are effectively aligned.

For the Liga BPI, the challenge and opportunity lies in translating the national-team model to the club level. Achieving durable professionalisation will require coordinated efforts among clubs, the FPF, commercial partners, and increasingly invested fan communities, whose growing attendance figures indicate a shifting cultural landscape. Together, these actors play an essential role in shaping the professional future of women's football in Portugal and ensuring that domestic competition remains globally competitive.

2.3 Stadium Attendance

Stadium attendances play an important role in a team's budget, especially in smaller teams who have more problems attracting sponsorships. According to Mangeloja and Szeróvay in 2024, the competitiveness of the league affects stadium attendances. This increase in attendance in the Liga BPI is also due to the increase in the quality of the athletes.

On March 26th, the record of attendance in Portugal was broken, 27,221 spectators, previously it was 15,032 just two months before. The attendance in the stadium also has an impact on fans at home, most fans believe it is not enjoyable to watch football without fans on the stands (Statista, 2020). Attracting more people to the stadium will also attract more people to the broadcasting channels.

2.4 Impact of the Media

Media coverage plays a crucial role in shaping the perception that the public has of women's football, and it can be helpful to draw sponsors. Women are undoubtedly underrepresented in media coverage, consequently women's football is less likely to attract sponsors as it has limited exposure.

This leads to a very reduced public awareness which will lead to reduced viewership and match attendance (Caple *et al.*, 2011), this will influence brands when they want to invest in women's sports. Sports media possess a lot of influence, they have the chance to promote awareness of diversity (Sun and Wang, 2023) and therefore thrive towards societal change.

Traditional media is not the only way to reach women's football's audience, social media nowadays is a great tool to reach and engage with audiences directly, this is observed in Eagleman's article "Acceptance, motivations, and usage of social media as a marketing communications tool amongst employees of sport national governing bodies". This can also lead to a societal change whether fans support a club or a player, athletes nowadays are also seen as influencers.

Although some might suggest that society might lose inherited loyalty towards a club to go through thick and thin with them with this change (McPhail, 2023), Caitlin Clark is the perfect example of how a young athlete by themselves can create

a big impact and “revive” a sport. Catilin Clark’s popularity helped Iowa beat record-assistance and amplify fan interest in women’s basketball (McGuire, 2024). In Portugal, they have a similar case with Kika Nazareth, seen as the big superstar in the Liga BPI, attracting lots of young players, her talent and number leave no one indifferent (Laezza, 2023). Although Portugal is still faced a lot by gender norms, the appearance of young athletes like Kika Nazareth and even Joana Martins from Sporting has fought of the idea that women cannot play football.

2.5 Corporate Social Responsibility and the Sponsorship of Women’s Football

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a central theoretical construct in contemporary management and sport studies. CSR describes the ways in which organizations integrate ethical, social, economic, and environmental considerations into their strategic decision-making and stakeholder interactions.

Carroll’s (1991) four-part CSR framework—economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities—remains one of the most influential academic models for understanding the multidimensional nature of corporate responsibility. Subsequent work has emphasised similar pillars, with environmental and human-rights elements increasingly incorporated into CSR analyses in response to societal expectations (Dahlsrud, 2008; International Organization for Standardization [ISO], 2010). These frameworks provide a strong conceptual basis for examining sponsorship in women’s football, where CSR-driven motivations are particularly salient.

CSR has become essential for brands seeking legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and reputational capital. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that CSR engagement enhances corporate image, fosters positive consumer attitudes, and contributes to competitive advantage (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). In sport, CSR has emerged as a powerful strategic tool through which organisations align themselves with socially relevant causes, promote community development, and reinforce value-based branding (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009).

For sponsors, partnerships in women’s football offer opportunities to enact visible commitments to gender equality, diversity, and social inclusion areas that now hold significant weight in corporate evaluations of responsible conduct.

A CSR-oriented approach is especially relevant in women’s football because the commercial value of the women’s game, while rapidly increasing, remains lower than that of men’s football. This dynamic means that sponsors are often motivated not only by traditional commercial returns but also by the social impact and reputational benefits associated with supporting women’s sport (Lough and Greenhalgh, 2022). Indeed, scholars argue that women’s sport offers sponsors a unique value proposition grounded in authenticity, integrity, and positive cultural

narratives characteristics that can differentiate brands in highly competitive markets (Lough and Greenhalgh, 2022; Elardt *et al.*, 2015).

CSR also helps explain why sponsors may perceive women's sport as a lower-risk branding environment. Research has shown that female athletes are historically far less associated with reputational risks such as doping violations, violence, or governance scandals issues that have periodically troubled men's sport (Dimeo and Møller, 2018).

This risk differential strengthens the argument that women's football provides a "cleaner" and socially safer platform for CSR-aligned sponsorship activation. Such characteristics align with broader corporate concerns about authenticity, ethical partnerships, and avoiding sportswashing or reputational harm.

Moreover, CSR-driven sponsorship plays a developmental role within women's football. Sponsorships anchored in CSR principles contribute to increased visibility, improved infrastructures, talent development pathways, and broader cultural recognition for women athletes.

These mechanisms support league growth, professionalisation, and long-term financial sustainability, particularly in countries where the women's game is still consolidating its commercial footing. As Elardt *et al.* (2015) emphasise, CSR engagement can help elevate the commercial value of women's football by associating the sport with socially desirable values that appeal to both brands and consumers.

In sum, CSR provides a rigorous and widely accepted theoretical framework for understanding the value of sponsorship in women's football. It highlights why brands are drawn to the women's game, how sponsorship contributes to both corporate and sporting outcomes, and why CSR alignment represents a strategic differentiator between women's and men's sport. This conceptual foundation supports present study and offers a robust basis for interpreting the interview data.

3. Research Methodology

Approach chosen in the study had a qualitative characteristics which was useful to investigate unexplored areas. Qualitative research values the experience of the research participant and can offer constructive comprehension of the participant's work (Clarke and Jack, 1998).

As there is a limited number of studies about sponsorship development in progressing women's sport this thesis targeted participants that have a direct connection to Portuguese football, as players, coaches, team managers, supporters members and brand managers. During the interviews, there were many ethical considerations that were important to be aware of and consider (Clandinin and

Connelly, 2000). To ensure that participants knew the topic of the study, they were sent out a "Participation Information Sheet". After accepting to take part in the interview, the participants had the opportunity to choose whether they preferred to have the interviews on "Zoom" or "Teams".

Each participant had to sign a "Consent form" document to ensure that they were fine and gave their consent that the data collected from them would be use in the study. The content of the "Consent form" was also verbally mentioned before starting the recording of the videos, each interview was recorded so that it could be re-watched to filter data out more easily. Participants will stay anonymous to protect their career-post-participation.

3.1 Research Participants

Research was based on purposive sampling method. It was motivated by the exploration of the new contemporary factors and understanding the process of sponsorship in a progressing women's football. It helps to gain deeper insights from the insiders in this sector. In the same time it is worth to mention that accessibility to the potential responders is highly limited by their number, spare time, closed network and willingness to share their experience.

Finally we could involve chosen stakeholders such as athletes, inside administration, fans representatives and sponsor representative. Six interviews were conducted involving two athletes playing in the Liga BPI, which is the highest women's division in Portugal. All participants had close relationships to women's football in Portuguese league.

3.1.1 Research participant 1 (RP1)

Female young athlete that started her career in women's football career at Sport Lisboa e Benfica. From there, she transferred to Sporting Clube Portugal where she spent most of her time playing for the B team of Sporting's women section. Although she played mostly for the B team last season, she always trained with the main team. Next season she made her official first appearance for the main team. She is part of the squad that qualified for Champions League.

3.1.2 Research participant 2 (RP2)

Also an athlete that made her formation at Benfica, from there she moved to "Sport Clube União Torreense". Her experience in the first league is crucial to get a clearer input from the athlete's perception of sponsorship in women's football as well fan perception as younger athlete.

3.1.3 Research participant 3 (RP3)

It is a team manager of one of the clubs in women's football, surprisingly ending the season in the top four. The most experienced out of the research participants, she had been team manager of a male team in the third and second division. She had

important knowledge on the differences between men's and women's football which is very insightful for this study.

3.1.4 Research participant 4 (RP4)

Coach of a team in the second women's division in Portugal. Her career as a football started rather late, much because of the difficulties that women go through to be accepted in women's football. She played official federated football from 2017 until 2021 and has been coaching for 2 years now. Her experience as a coach and athlete is very valuable for this study, plus her difficulties getting into women's football.

3.1.5 Research participant 5 (RP5)

Media & Sponsorship expert focused on the importance of communication in women's football in Portugal. Part of the "L'EQUIPE" for three years to vote for the best women's football player in the world. Her experience related to women's football from outside of the pitch made her insights very valuable for the research.

3.1.6 Research participant 6 (RP6)

Expert and researcher of women's football and sponsorship. Having a position in the Benfica football club focused on Sponsorship Activations. The knowledge of women's football and sponsorship make him well suited for the interview.

3.2 Data Collection and Its Limitations

This study aimed to conduct individual interviews with professionals to get a clear insight into women's football in Portugal without interfering too much on their opinion. The questions were asked in a natural tone without any bias towards a possible direction of answer to avoid influencing the research participant's answer.

Every interview was done online, either through the platform "Teams" or "Zoom", depending on the research participant's preferences. A total of 10 open questions were asked to get as much information as possible in order to answer the aim of the study. Elaborated questions were as follows:

RQ1: What factors motivated your involvement in women's football for your role, position?

RQ2: What changes have you observed in women's football over the years?

RQ3: How do you envision the development of women's football over the next five years?

RQ4: Do you believe that sponsorship can influence public perceptions of women's football? If so, how does it achieve this?

RQ5: How would you assess the current level of sponsorship in women's football in comparison to men's football?

RQ6: Why do you believe business should maintain and increase sponsoring activity in women's football teams?

RQ7: What can women's football offer in return to their sponsor?

RQ8: With two Portuguese teams competing in coming year's Champions League, how do you foresee changes in the league? Do you anticipate an increase in sponsorships?

RQ9: Do you believe the league and the clubs require additional sponsorships for a development and professionalisation?

RQ10: Does the reduction of teams in the league facilitate securing larger sponsorships?

Most participants were found and invited by LinkedIn to fill the necessary expertise needed for the study. In order to collect the responders more than 30 invitations were sent out. Invitation of the players were messaged on Instagram by collective post where over 120 players were tagged, where two players showed interest in participation.

To compensate for the small number of participants, follow up questions were asked, and some interviews ended up being over thirty minutes long. Further research should include maybe quantitative approach and gain even more insights into women's football and as well verify obtained results from the current studies. All interviews were held in Portuguese language as all research participants were native Portuguese speakers. Later transcript of all questions were translated into English language.

4. Results

In this section, the results of the interviews will be summarized question by question. Every question will be called "RQ" for research question and then followed by the respective number of the question. This will provide a comprehensive overview of all significant points discussed during the interview, thereby facilitating a more thorough understanding when analyzing the results in relation to our theoretical framework.

4.1 Interviews

RQ1: What factors motivated your involvement in women's football, whether as a player, coach, or supporter?

This question was meant to break the ice between the interviewer and the research participant but ended up giving valuable information that showcases the difficulties women must go through to play football, especially in the past. All participants showed great interest in women's sports. All the research participants except the male one mentioned the difficulties getting into football as women. From not having the support of the parents to not having a place to practice women's football. RP4 for example, started her career very late as her father would never have approved of her playing football when she was younger.

RQ2: What changes have you observed in women's football over the years?

Among answers to this question we were expecting to identify unanimity as the main observable changes and some side “ideas” raised by responders. Therefore finally we really observed this unanimity in opinion about the growth of women's football in recent years. RP2 gave the example of ex-international player Carla Couto who was never professional although she has the most appearances for the national team.

Nowadays mostly all the players of Torreense are professionals, this shows the evolution of the sports in Portugal. RP3 made an interesting point that women's sports in Portugal was the only one not facing a decrease in participants and members during the pandemic. The "Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude" (Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth, 2024), they released a document “Praticantes desportivos inscritos nas federações desportivas [1996-2023]” showcasing the number of female athletes registered in the federation, from 2019 to 2020 there was an increase in participation in women's football from 5,375 to 6,347 registered female athletes.

RQ3: How do you envision the development of women's football over the next five years?

All interviewees agreed that women's football has a lot of potential, that it will come closer to men's football eventually but that they do not believe that it will catch up with men's football. RP4 hopes that although it will never reach the same level, that it will reach a fair value in the market for those that work in it. RP2 made an interesting observation, she mentioned that next season all matches in the Women's League must be played on natural grass fields. In the beginning of the season, the FPF gave financial aid to clubs to help them all have natural grass fields (SportMagazine, 2024).

This was also mentioned by RP1, although in a negative manner, she says it's all nice and beautiful to the outside world, they might play in natural grass fields, but they still train in synthetic fields and are only allowed to train in natural grass fields once a week. This is harmful for their bodies, “: Football matches on synthetic fields can lead to serious orthopedic injuries.” (Akkaya, 2011). So, although things seem to be changing, there is still a hidden side behind the curtains that they try to hide. It is good for the public who see them playing in natural fields but they do not see players still training in the same conditions they have before.

RQ4: Do you believe that sponsorship can influence public perceptions of women's football? If so, how does it achieve this?

RP2 believes that it is important for bigger sponsors to help the teams. She believes that the sponsorship of Adidas in Benfica makes it more attractive for people to buy

their shirt than Kappa's sponsorship with Torreense. RP3 believes that there has been good work in progress, mainly due to the work of people in women's football, a solid structure, they are the reason that it is attractive nowadays to sponsor women's football in Portugal. She highlights the importance of "Canal 11", the channel of the FPF, they have been broadcasting the games, when a game is not live on TV you can still watch it live on their YouTube channel.

This has brought bigger visibility to athletes. She believes young female players nowadays start looking up to Kika Nazareth instead of looking up to Ronaldo. This was also mentioned by RP2, she grew up wanting to buy the same football shoes as Ronaldo but nowadays when she goes to a shop, she looks for the same shoes as Maria Pilar León, mostly known as Mapi. Mapi is currently sponsored by Adidas. It provides several collaborations to promote women's football (Adidas, 2022).

RQ5: How would you assess the current level of sponsorship in women's football in comparison to men's football?

There is obviously a big difference between both, which was observed by all interviewees. Although men bring more "money" and viewership, all research participants agree that women's football has more to offer in terms of family audiences. RP6 claims that fans of women's football value completely different things than those of the men's football although overlapping support, when looking at women's football fans expect different things. Many research participants mentioned the advertisement of Liga BPI, "it's a girl", to highlight that although men appear more on television advertisement that there is a clear indication of improvement.

RQ6: Why do you believe business should maintain and increase sponsoring activity in women's football teams?

RP5 made a curious point by mentioning that the world is made up of more women than men, she believes that there is a big market still to be developed. But in reality the world population is actually composed of 50.24% men and 49.76% women (Statistics Times, 2024). Although her point does not stand 100% correct, there is still a market nearly as big of women as men, many participants believe that it is beneficial to be associated with women's football. RP1 also believes that players in women's football are closer to the fans than those in men's football. Regarding responders opinion fans of women's football seem to feel a tighter connection to the players as they also approach the fans closer, which does not happen in men's football so often anymore.

RQ7: What can women's football offer in return to their sponsor?

RP5 believes that women's football can offer what men's football does not offer anymore, fair play, respect but especially empathy and closeness. RP4 believes that

it is similar, and that men's sports are more aggressive and toxic in the stands. Responders stated it is easier for sponsors to be associated with positive emotions and actions. They mentioned it is possible to reach wide audience by sponsors when it comes to young athletes nowadays that do not only look up to male players such as Ronaldo or Messi but also to female ones: Aitana Bonmati or Alexia Putellas.

RP5 affirmed that it does not own any football shirts with men's names but only three shirts with Catarina Amado (female player) and from the two FC Barcelona female superstars: Bonmati and Putellas. RP1 believes that women's football can offer a new target audience which makes them attractive to sponsors.

RQ8: With two Portuguese teams competing in coming year's Champions League, how do you foresee changes in the league? Do you anticipate an increase in sponsorships?

RP6 believes that this is very beneficial for the league; opponents will start to analyze both teams and will as a result see that there are good players in the other teams of the league. This will automatically generate more views which leads to higher visibility of sponsors. RP2 states that the league needs investment in weaker teams that do not have the budgets of Benfica and Sporting. If not they will not have competition in the league which will lower their quality of the whole league.

Therefore, she believes that the impact of European competitions can actually in long term perspective decline popularity of the league. Answers to this question was mixed. There is no coherent way of responders about European competitions participation and their impact.

RQ9: Do you believe the league and the clubs require additional sponsorships for a development and professionalization?

RP6 mentioned that it is time to professionalize but it is important to not rush it. Now, he believes the league needs more investors, more sponsors coming in. RP2 claims that the league is ready, it is already notable that most players are professionals but that there is a problem at the hierarchy of the teams, she believes that most team owners or presidents belongs to senior generations and do not share the same vision as a sport population nowadays.

She gave the example of her away game at "Famalicão", where they played in a very bad conditions although just next to it was a perfectly fine field where only men are allowed to play. She wants teams to try to give equal opportunities to both genders. In general, the research participants claimed the league needs more investment and sponsors to take this step, it is also important to think about staff development and not only players.

RQ10: Does the reduction of teams in the league facilitate securing larger sponsorships?

This was the most controversial question, to understand why we have decided to ask it we need a bit deeper context. The FPF decided to reduce the number of teams in the league from twelve to ten in 2025/2026 with the objective to increase competitiveness in the league and ensure a better calendar for the athletes (A Bola, 2024).

Player that participated in the interviews was reluctant about this idea, because players believe that it is already difficult to attract the right sponsor and they question whether this is attractive for the sponsors. RP6 ask and suggested opposite solution to stay competitive with more teams, why not approach it differently to keep it competitive. He gives the example of the English Premier League which has 20 teams and is seen by many as the most competitive league in the world.

4.2 CSR Perspective Based on Interviews Results

By sponsoring women's football, companies are not only helping the clubs financially, but they are promoting gender equality. Companies can address the issues that are still relevant in today's society by women's football support. The Portuguese banc BPI, which sponsors the women's first division have a program called "We engage" to help gender equality, to promote opportunities to disabled people and to promote a bigger cultural diversity (BPI).

Their sponsorship within the league makes absolute sense, they also sponsor the national team of Portugal, both men and women, recently to promote the men's team in the Euro's they used Kika Nazereth a female player, this shows that they make an effort to give the same opportunities to both. Some players in women's football are getting really big visibility and Kika Nazereth is recongnised as the key figure of the change.

Companies can identify specific benefits by women's sponsorship and finally enhance their brand image and build a stronger community. As mentioned by RP5, we associate clubs and sports to brands, for example Portuguese associate the beer brand, to FC Porto, one of Portugal's biggest teams in Portugal, nowadays you associate the bank BPI to women's football which is beneficial to the brand. They have built really strong community ties around women's football.

5. Discussion

The interviews provided a variety of rich insights on the topic of women's football. Some questions can be grouped together to contextualize these findings within the broader literature and theoretical framework. There were different important aspects such as the motivations to play, historical challenges, developments throughout the

years, sponsorship and professionalization. All these to highlight both the progress and the ongoing challenges in women's football.

5.1 Motivations and Historical Challenges (RQ1)

Although the first question aimed to break the ice between the interviewer and interviewee, relevant information was gathered to understand the barriers women face in football. Most of the research participants highlighted a persistent gender bias that has impeded women from participating in sports. Transgressing the boundaries of gendered space is difficult in some cultural context but it shows the ability of women to negotiate gendered expectations (Scraton *et al.*, 1999).

It is only since 1976 that the Portuguese Constitution granted full legal equality to women, being under a dictatorship until 1974 stagnated women's evolution in society (Silva, 2022). Yet, the evolution in recent years, show a trend of resilience and determination among female athletes.

5.2 The Evolution of Women's Football (RQ2)

Across all interviews, participants expressed unanimous agreement that women's football in Portugal has experienced substantial evolution in recent years. This perceived growth spans attendance, professionalisation, visibility, media exposure, and institutional support, illustrating a structural shift consistent with broader international trends in women's sport. The triangulation of participants' narratives with secondary data reinforces the view that the sport is entering a phase of accelerated consolidation rather than merely incremental progress.

A central indicator of this evolution is audience growth. Research participants consistently noted higher attendances at domestic matches and increased televised viewership. This perception aligns with national data from the Federação Portuguesa de Futebol (FPF), which reported that the Taça da Liga final between Benfica and Sporting reached an average share of 16.82%, corresponding to nearly two million viewers on SIC (FPF, 2024).

Such numbers would have been unimaginable a decade ago and represent a notable symbolic milestone for a sport historically marginalised in mainstream Portuguese broadcasting. From a sport development perspective, these findings resonate with Chalip *et al.* (2016), who argue that major sporting events act as catalysts, not only by generating immediate visibility but by stimulating participation effects, particularly among younger girls who now see women athletes televised in prime-time slots.

Alongside audience growth, participants highlighted the professionalisation of clubs, using Torreense's transition to an almost fully professional women's team as an emblematic case. This development reflects a wider European shift where

professionalisation is frequently framed as a process of institutional legitimisation (Lock *et al.*, 2015; Suchman, 1995). By offering contracts, structured training environments, and competitive pathways, clubs actively reshape the organisational “myths and expectations” associated with women’s football, thus increasing its legitimacy.

The interviewees’ comments on career trajectories further illustrate this change: the contrast between past icons such as Carla Couto—who accumulated record national team appearances without being fully professional—and the present generation who increasingly rely on football as a viable career underscores a structural transition rather than isolated improvement.

Visibility also emerged as a central theme in the interviews. Participants repeatedly emphasised that media exposure has radically expanded, facilitated by “Canal 11” broadcasting league games and by the easy availability of livestreams on platforms.

These insights align with global research illustrating how increased media representation contributes to normalising women’s participation in male-dominated sports, challenging long-standing invisibility documented by Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015). Interviewees also framed this visibility as a crucial driver in shifting role-model identification patterns: girls now look up to national and international athletes such as Kika Nazareth, Aitana Bonmatí, or Mapi León, rather than exclusively to male stars. Such identity shifts are a recognised component of cultural change within women’s sport ecosystems.

The interviews further reveal that this evolution has persisted despite exogenous challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant noted that women’s sports were the only segment in Portugal not to record a decline in registered athletes during 2019–2020. Data from the Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude (2024) supports this observation: registered female football athletes increased from 5,375 to 6,347 during this period.

This resilience contrasts with global declines in sport participation across multiple demographics and suggests that women’s football in Portugal benefits from powerful community-driven and grassroots dynamics, consistent with the more participatory and inclusive cultures observed in women’s sports internationally.

Still, participant narratives highlight that the evolution of women’s football is not linear, and progress remains marked by structural contradictions. For example, the FPF’s mandate requiring Women’s League matches to be played on natural grass is widely celebrated, yet several interviewees criticised that teams still train predominantly on synthetic pitches, potentially exposing athletes to higher injury risk (supported by Akkaya *et al.*, 2011). This mismatch between public-facing improvements and behind-the-scenes resource constraints illustrates what Lock *et al.*

(2015) describe as the tension between symbolic compliance and material implementation.

- Taken together, these findings illustrate a multidimensional evolution characterised by:
- Growing visibility and broadcast presence,
- Rising attendance and public interest,
- Increasing professionalisation,
- Expanding grassroots participation, and
- Persistent structural inequities, particularly in training conditions and resource allocation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the evolution of women's football in Portugal aligns with global trends identified in sport sociology and governance literature: the sport is transitioning from marginalised status toward greater institutional legitimacy, driven by visibility, investment, and changing cultural attitudes.

5.3 The Potential of Women's Football (RQ3)

The interview data revealed as well consensus among participants that women's football possesses substantial and still-untapped potential. While none of the respondents believe that women's football will reach the commercial magnitude of the men's game in the near future, they collectively expressed optimism that the sport is on a clear upward trajectory and will continue to expand in terms of professionalism, visibility, and societal impact.

This finding mirrors broader scholarly perspectives that position women's sport as entering a transformative phase marked by rising audiences, increasing media exposure, and shifting cultural attitudes (Cooky *et al.*, 2015).

Interviewees identified as well some limitations. These insights align with Moawad's (2019) argument that gender inequality in sport persists not only through financial disparities but through everyday organisational barriers that shape athletes' lived experiences. Providing equitable facilities, medical support, and training conditions is therefore not merely a logistical matter but a prerequisite for enabling women to reach their developmental and competitive potential.

We can argue deeper and ask a question for future research lines: If sport organizations provide women's athlete with similar resources will they be able to achieve similar media and economic results. It is a topic not to a dummy answer but to consider what and how resource management generally in sport should be managed efficiently. At the same time, the perceived potential of women's football extends far beyond sporting performance. Many interviewees framed this potential through a CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) lens, noting that women's football

embodies values—such as fairness, inclusivity, empathy, and community engagement—that resonate with contemporary CSR agendas.

CSR scholarship highlights that organisations increasingly seek partnerships that generate social value and reinforce brand authenticity (Walters, 2009; Grover, 2014). Women's football, by virtue of its inclusive culture and strong community orientation, offers a platform well-aligned with these objectives.

Sponsorship of women's football can therefore serve as a CSR-driven strategic investment, enabling brands to promote gender equity, support youth development, and contribute to broader societal goals. This aligns with sponsorship theory, where the positive emotional and moral associations of a sport property can elevate sponsor image and deepen consumer trust (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005).

Ultimately, the interviewees' optimism reflects the belief that women's football is entering a critical window of expansion, shaped by favourable cultural trends, CSR-aligned sponsorship opportunities, increased visibility, and growing grassroots participation.

Yet this potential can only be fully realised if clubs, federations, and sponsors collaboratively invest in equitable infrastructure, professional working conditions, and long-term development strategies. The sport is at a turning point: with proper support, it can consolidate its gains and continue evolving into a competitive, socially impactful, and commercially attractive sector.

5.4 The Public Perception of Sponsorships (RQ4 & RQ5)

High-profile sponsorships enhance the attractiveness and validity of the sports, as for example mentioned by RP2 who believe that bigger brands associated with merch of a club, makes it more attractive to buy. Adidas and Benfica versus Torreense and Kappa was the perfect example given by the interviewee. This example shows how a brand can influence a consumer in their perception of an item when looking at the market (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005).

There is also a notable change in role models in sports, especially young female athletes looking up to other female athletes in football. This indicates a cultural change towards greater acceptance of women's football and the creation or realization that there is a big market to be worked with for sponsors.

5.5 The Power of Sponsors (RQ6 & RQ7)

Despite the persistent disparity in sponsorship investment between men's and women's football, participants emphasised that women's football possesses distinctive value propositions which should attract socially responsible businesses. These values—fair play, empathy, inclusivity, family-friendly environments, and

close player–fan relationships—align closely with contemporary expectations of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Participants repeatedly stressed that women’s football provides a stadium environment perceived as safer, more respectful, and less hostile compared to men’s football. The male interviewee (RP6) described shifting his own loyalty toward women’s football precisely because it feels less toxic and more community-oriented.

Such narratives reinforce a key argument in CSR literature: brands seek partnerships that allow them to project values of trust, inclusion, fairness, and positive social change (Walters, 2009). In this context, women’s football operates not merely as a sport property but as a high-credibility CSR delivery platform, offering companies a unique opportunity to associate with authentic, socially valued behaviours and communities.

Sponsors today are increasingly aware that consumers—especially younger demographics—expect brands to contribute meaningfully to social progress (Grover, 2014). Women’s football provides exactly this opportunity: by supporting gender equity, empowerment, and pathways for female athletes, sponsors can demonstrate an alignment between corporate purpose and social value creation. Interviewees explicitly highlighted that women’s football is often perceived as genuine, approachable, and emotionally resonant, qualities that amplify the effectiveness of socially oriented sponsorship.

These findings resonate strongly with sponsorship-linked marketing studies, which argues that sponsorship is most powerful when the values of the sport property and the sponsoring brand are seen as coherent and mutually reinforcing (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005).

Furthermore, many respondents identified that women’s football offers something that men’s football has increasingly lost: closeness and human connection. Players in women’s leagues often interact openly with supporters, participate in community outreach, and communicate transparently on social media. RP1 and RP5 described this as a defining difference, noting that women’s teams cultivate a sense of proximity and authenticity, elements that modern brands highly prize.

These characteristics strengthen the emotional return on investment for sponsors, who gain access to fan communities built not on aggression or tribal rivalry but on solidarity, inspiration, and shared values. In CSR terms, this represents a shift from sponsorship as mere visibility toward sponsorship as corporate citizenship.

In addition, respondents emphasised that sponsors can benefit from the expanding audience and shifting role-model dynamics in women’s football. Young girls increasingly idolise players like Kika Nazareth, Aitana Bonmatí, or Alexia Putellas, rather than exclusively male icons. This transformation broadens the potential

consumer base for brands, allowing them to engage meaningfully with women, families, and socially conscious youth—audiences often neglected or stereotyped in traditional sport marketing. Notably, RP5 mentioned only owning female players' shirts, illustrating how modern fandom in women's sport can express itself through ethically aligned consumption.

Sponsorship thus becomes a mutually reinforcing mechanism: brands enhance their image by supporting a progressive and value-driven sport, while women's football gains essential resources for improving training conditions, investing in staff, enhancing visibility, and addressing structural inequalities.

Consistent with RQ7, interviewees believe that women's football "gives back" to sponsors through positive brand association, access to emerging fan markets, and alignment with gender equity goals. These benefits are not merely symbolic; they support strategic long-term aims for both sport organisations and their corporate partners.

Taken together, the findings suggest that women's football today offers an exceptionally strong CSR-aligned sponsorship proposition, grounded in:

- Positive emotional narratives (empathy, respect, unity),
- Safe, inclusive environments,
- Authentic connections between athletes and supporters,
- Demonstrable social impact, and
- A rapidly growing and increasingly diverse audience.

5.6 Competitiveness and League Professionalisation (RQ8, RQ9 and RQ10)

The combined analysis of RQ8, RQ9, and RQ10 reveals that Portuguese women's football stands at a critical structural crossroads, where international exposure, domestic professionalisation, and league design intersect to shape both the sport's competitiveness and its attractiveness to sponsors and stakeholders.

Participants acknowledged that participation in European competitions—particularly the UEFA Women's Champions League—is a powerful catalyst for elevating the status of the Portuguese league. Yet, they also emphasised that structural reforms, especially those concerning league size and professionalisation, introduce trade-offs that must be carefully balanced to achieve long-term sustainability.

Interviewees widely agreed that the presence of Benfica, Sporting, and SC Braga in the Champions League contributes significantly to elevating the domestic league's legitimacy. Drawing from Hutchins and Rowe's (2013) analysis of globalised sports media, international visibility increases both domestic attention and the perceived value of a league. Benfica's unexpected progression to the Champions League

quarterfinals—advancing from a group featuring Frankfurt and Barcelona—serves as a symbolic breakthrough. Such performances shift external perceptions of Liga BPI, making it more attractive for:

- foreign talent,
- international scouts,
- investment from global sponsors, and
- broader digital audiences.

This aligns with the competitiveness literature, which views strong international representation as a signalling mechanism: success abroad communicates that a domestic league is upward-trending, organisationally stable, and capable of nurturing elite talent. From a league-economics standpoint, this strengthens the league's competitive reputation, a factor shown to correlate with increased attendance, broadcast value, and sponsorship (Neale, 1964; Szymanski, 2003).

However, several respondents cautioned that Champions League participation may also accentuate inequalities within the league. Without sufficient investment in lower-budget teams, top clubs may strengthen disproportionately, widening competitive gaps and, paradoxically, reducing the league's internal balance.

All participants expressed support for professionalisation, but unanimously underscored that this transition requires greater investment, stronger governance, and modern leadership attitudes. The interviewees echoed the critique raised by Raquel Sampaio (Dinis Oliveira, 2024), who noted the absence of a strategic blueprint for professionalising the league.

Several respondents emphasised that generational differences among club owners and administrators remain a structural barrier: senior leadership groups often maintain conservative perspectives that do not align with contemporary expectations of women's sport.

Looking at this expected swift we need to understand what it means of sport professionalisation. In competitiveness theory is inseparable from league quality. Better contracts, improved training conditions, specialised staff, analytics support, and sport science all contribute to enhancing:

- match quality,
- athlete development,
- competitive balance, and
- international performance.

From a resource-based perspective (Barney, 1991), investment in professional capabilities becomes a core determinant of competitive advantage.

Perhaps the most divisive topic among participants was the upcoming reduction of the Liga BPI from twelve to ten teams. While the federation argues that a smaller league will increase average quality and scheduling efficiency, interviewees raised concerns grounded in both sport economics and sponsorship logic.

A key argument against reduction concerns the loss of inventory for sponsors. With fewer teams and fewer matches, total “minutes of visibility”—a crucial metric for evaluating sponsorship ROI—drops substantially. Participants quantified this difference: the league currently offers around 11,880 minutes of match play; reducing to ten teams lowers this to 8,100 minutes. In sponsorship-linked marketing, less exposure translates into reduced value (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005), making sponsorship negotiations more challenging, especially for mid-tier clubs.

From a competitiveness theory angle, the reduction introduces a classic trade-off between: Quality Balance vs. Match Quantity. A smaller league may improve competitive balance at the top, as only clubs with adequate resources remain.

But it risks reducing the overall depth of competition, shrinking pathways for smaller clubs, players, and regions. Reduced match volume may also diminish fan engagement cycles and decrease developmental opportunities for younger athletes.

This echoes concerns raised in studies of league design (Fort & Quirk, 1995; Szymanski, 2003), which show that competitive balance is not only a function of team numbers but of resource distribution, governance models, and talent pipelines.

Participants offered mixed predictions regarding whether European exposure and league restructuring would ultimately strengthen Liga BPI. Optimistic perspectives suggest:

- Champions League visibility attracts sponsors and talent.
- A smaller league ensures higher minimum standards, aiding professionalisation.

Cautious or negative perspectives highlight:

- Unequal investment may exacerbate league imbalance,
- Fewer matches reduce sponsorship attractiveness,
- Clubs outside Benfica and Sporting risk being left behind,
- Loan attractiveness decreases with fewer opportunities for playing time.

In essence, participants put our attention that whether the league’s restructuring becomes a competitive accelerator or a competitive divider depends on how effectively stakeholders invest in the bottom and middle tiers of the league.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the value and strategic role of sponsorship in shaping the development of women's football. Drawing on qualitative interviews with key stakeholders embedded in the sport - including players, coaches, managers, and agents - this research explores how sponsorship interacts with structural reforms, league competitiveness, and emerging cultural dynamics to influence the development of the women's game. The findings highlight a sport in accelerated transformation, driven by rising visibility, institutional support, and shifting public attitudes toward gender equity in sport.

Empirical evidence confirms that women's football has undergone substantial evolution in recent years. Participants emphasised that strategic interventions by the Federação Portuguesa de Futebol (FPF) - such as safeguarding pathways for domestic players, mandating natural grass pitches, and increasing the visibility of matches through diverse broadcasting channels - have collectively enhanced the sport's institutional legitimacy.

These developments align with theoretical work on organisational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Lock *et al.*, 2015), which posits that the adoption of taken-for-granted professional practices strengthens an organisation's acceptance among stakeholders and the broader public. The continuity of these reforms signals a structural commitment to elevating the standards, safety, and credibility of the women's league.

Sponsorship emerged as a central engine of this developmental process. The findings demonstrate that women's football offers distinctive value propositions that extend beyond commercial exposure. Unlike the increasingly commercialised and, at times, adversarial environment surrounding men's football, the women's game is perceived as a space defined by empathy, respect, inclusivity, and strong community embeddedness.

These characteristics correspond directly to contemporary Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) expectations, where firms seek partnerships that advance social impact, ethical engagement, and diversity commitments (Walters, 2009).

As such, sponsorship in women's football can no longer be conceptualised solely through transactional marketing frameworks; instead, it represents a hybrid commercial-social investment through which brands pursue authenticity, purpose alignment, and societal legitimacy.

The growing cultural resonance of female role models exemplified by rising stars like Kika Nazareth, further strengthens this relationship by offering companies new, socially relevant narratives through which to activate brand meaning.

The study also confirms that the future trajectory of the Portuguese women's league will be shaped by complex structural considerations. Participation in the UEFA Women's Champions League functions as a competitive signaling mechanism that enhances the league's international reputation and attracts both talent and investment.

However, the impending reduction of the league from twelve to ten teams presents a contested strategic decision. While potentially increasing minimum professional standards, such contraction simultaneously reduces match inventory, sponsorship visibility, and developmental opportunities.

These tensions reflect longstanding debates in sport economics regarding optimal league design, competitive balance, and resource distribution (Neale, 1964; Szymanski, 2003). Whether the reforms ultimately foster competitive enhancement or competitive stratification will depend on the extent to which clubs and governing bodies address persistent disparities in facilities, investment, and staffing.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The qualitative design, while effective for capturing nuanced perceptions, relied on a relatively small sample of participants closely connected to the women's game, which may concentrate rather than diversify perspectives. Moreover, the study is context-specific, reflecting the unique social, economic, and cultural conditions of Portugal at a time of significant structural change.

Because the league is undergoing rapid transition - including professionalisation debates, infrastructural upgrades, and governance reforms, the findings represent a snapshot rather than a longitudinal assessment of evolving dynamics. Future research should therefore incorporate broader stakeholder groups, adopt mixed methods designs, and examine the effects of sponsorship and structural reforms over time.

Comparative studies involving other emerging women's leagues would also enrich understanding of how different governance models shape competitiveness and commercial sustainability.

The findings of this study offer meaningful managerial implications. Clubs should continue to invest in professional infrastructures, including training facilities and specialised staff to align with the expectations of sponsors and athletes and to reduce the symbolic - material discrepancies that hinder legitimacy.

Sponsors should recognise women's football as a strategic CSR asset, leveraging the sport's authenticity and inclusive culture to strengthen brand purpose. Policymakers and the FPF must ensure that structural reforms, including league size reduction, are accompanied by financial mechanisms that reinforce competitive balance and protect pathways for clubs with lower resource endowments.

Ultimately, women's football in Portugal is not simply an emerging sport—it is a socio-cultural project with the potential to advance gender equity, reshape participation norms, and redefine what constitutes value in the contemporary sport marketplace. As one interviewee noted, young boys now ask female players for autographs and interviews—something unthinkable only a decade ago.

This shift encapsulates the sport's broader societal relevance. In this evolving landscape, sponsorship is not merely a resource but a strategic partnership through which women's football can consolidate its legitimacy, expand its reach, and continue its trajectory as one of the most dynamic and transformative domains in Portuguese sport.

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