

# THE FIRST INAUGURAL SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN LEAGUE REPORT 2021



**Bidali Henry**

**FUTURE STARS FOOTBALL ACADEMY-JUBA**

Website: [www.futurestarsjuba.org](http://www.futurestarsjuba.org)

E-mail: [bidhensam@gmail.com](mailto:bidhensam@gmail.com)

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# Overview of the First Inaugural South Sudan Women Football League 2021

## Background

The world's youngest country with a population of about 12 million people, South Sudan is not known for gender parity. Its women and girls go hungry more often than their male counterparts, and at least 4 out of 10 women and girls say they have experienced one or more forms of sexual violence.

Soccer, which has long been used to unite a country torn apart by war, is now being used to combat some of the gender equality that women persistently face in this East African nation. South Sudan men's soccer team was established in 2012, making it the 209<sup>th</sup> official member of the global soccer body (Federation of International Football Association). Since then, the team has taken part in world cup and African Cup of Nations Qualifiers.



*Fig1: Yei Joint Stars Champions of the Inaugural Women League & rep in CECAFA 2021 (courtesy photo/lbway)*

The South Sudan Women's League is the top flight of the women's association football in South Sudan. The competition is run by South Sudan Football Association. In 2019, a national women's team was formed. The soccer league for women is directly linked to equal human rights in South Sudan. The first women soccer team competed against this backdrop for the first time two years ago, earning a 5-0 win over Zanzibar in regional match ups, along with a 9-0 loss to Tanzania and a 3-0 loss to Burundi.



*Above: Buluk Training Center-the only turfed field apart from the national stadium (courtesy photo)*

Sensing potential, the South Sudan Football Association (SSFA) launched Stars Unite, a first time, four-year strategic plan to promote women's football in the country. "Pledging to build a transparent, inclusive and sustainable future for women's soccer in South Sudan". It envisions an international federation-funded soccer league consisting of eight teams from each region with players 18 to 27 years old.

The teams that participated in the inaugural women league are Yei Joint Stars, Juba Super Stars, Torit Women, Wau Women, Kuajok Women, Bentiu Women, Yambio Women and Aweil Women.

### **The Achievements Realized During the League**

#### **Peace and Social Cohesion**

As the league is a 2 tier (home/away), teams travel from state to state to participate in their games. It has attracted a number of fans/supporters as women football seem to be enjoyable. The drawing together of spectators created some interactions and hence peace and social cohesion amongst them. Communities that have been involved in communal fights have come together to watch the beautiful women football and thus communal conflicts reduced.

#### **Gender Based Violence**

In the South Sudanese Society, women playing football is a taboo as the game is considered for the boy/men and the women league has confronted that stereotype as many young women were seen participating positively.

In the current situation, there are many negative practices happening in the society. These include, but not limited to forced marriage and teenage marriage, rapes, prostitution, drug and alcohol

consumption, but with the women league, most young women spend their time more productively in training and games.

### **Income Generation**

The women league was FIFA funded and it has positively impacted the economy as airline companies and hotels were contracted during the league. The local airline companies like CityLink, Kush Air etc.

### **Regional/International Recognition**

As a result of the league, the champion had to represent South Sudan in the CECAFA Women Championship Qualifiers in Nairobi, Kenya which was a great recognition for the nation. In addition, the women senior national team participated in the AFCON Qualifiers and COSAFA tournaments in Kenya and South Africa respectively.

### **The Myriad Challenges Facing Women Football Players**

Reviewed literature reveals that women who participate in sports particularly football are faced by many challenges (FIFA, 2015; Hargreaves, 1997; LeUnes and Nation, 1991; Yan & Thomas, 1995). These challenges include biological, social-cultural, economic factors. Some scholars such as Henderson et al., (1999) have also argue that women lack the strength or the stamina to run, kick, or tackle.

#### **(a) Biological Factors**

Since a woman's body is biologically adapted to her main biological role of giving birth, her body goes through several body processes such as menstruation and pregnancy which may interfere though rarely with sports and physical activity. Hargreaves(1997)carried out a research that proved and demonstrated that strenuous exercises did not negatively affect the menstrual cycle, nor did menstruation significantly affect physical performance. However, LeUnes and Nation (1991), argued that menstrual irregularities are caused by heavy exercise and training.

#### **(b) Socio-Cultural Factors**

According to Fasting (1987) it is culturally accepted, in the world over, that a woman is subordinate to man. This is stronger in the African society which is mainly patriarchal. He further argues that such cultural beliefs make women think that they will never attain the levels of their male counterparts where sport performance is concerned. "A woman's place is in the kitchen" would appear to be still a common saying and many cultures still firmly believe in it. This argument is reaffirmed by Kiouvula (1995) who argues that the participation of women in sport has always been seen as the presence of women in a man's world. Therefore, women's involvement in sports is seen as a form of resistance that disturb the apparently already existing logic of male supremacy" as argued by Birrel and Cole (1989).

According to Bailey (1999) there are myths that discourage women from participating in sports, for instance, that girls may lose their virginity by practicing sports and that women who play football are bisexual. Though these are just myths, they still negatively affect to great extent the participation of women in sports. Clothing is also an issue as many cultures do not tolerate tight clothes and bare limbs. Different religions and their ways of dressing may have effects on women's involvement in sports. The football attire usually shorts and jersey is still not accepted by many cultures and religions for women and girls as they are seen to dress like boys and men. It is, therefore, a challenge to such women as they feel and are also seen by others like they are half dressed.

According to Renold (1997), women sports and games involve a power relationship with coaches and sport leaders majority of who are usually men yet the culture in the African communities do not accept girls to be in the hands of men. As such, some parents feel unsafe when their daughters are in the hands of the coaches who are mostly males as they are prone to sexual abuse. The reputation of girls and women in sports may be damaged such that they are viewed negatively by the society at large for keeping the company of men for long hours. Brady (2005), asserts that the location and accessibility of the sports ground is yet another important factor to sports and women. For instance, if the playground is far, the parent may feel that it is unsafe for his/her daughter to be away from home for long hours. In Afghanistan, women and girls were largely confined to their homes unless accompanied by a male relative, a fact that kept many of them away from the football pitch (UNICEF, 2008).

In their studies of the historical context of Physical Education offered in schools, Scraton (1986) and Hargreaves (1994) have both described how stereotypes dictate attitudes towards what activities are considered appropriate to females, and football has been widely considered as an undesirable activity for girls.

### **(c) Economic Challenges**

According to Digest, (1998), lack of economic power, facilities and even time especially for women and girls due their other gender roles is a huge barrier that blocks women's participation in sports. Crompton (1995) argues that participating in any sports activities definitely requires some financial input; therefore, a child from a poor family is least likely to participate in sports as compared to one from a rich background. Football is an expensive game as it requires sports equipment and attire. They also need to access the playing ground and to pay for travelling expenses. Hargreaves (1997) indicates that low levels of physical activity are common for the disadvantaged groups because their family, parents and guardians cannot afford to finance expenses. Clearly, the funding aspect discourages a number of women to participate as they would wish in football activities.

Women's lack of involvement in football can be attributed to financial difficulties, unemployment and if employed, the number of hours they perform their gender roles. Women who have full-time or part-time jobs have to use their free time to take care of their families and perform the gender

roles instead of attending sporting activities. Their young daughters are also disadvantaged as they have to look after the younger siblings or perform other minor roles thus makes it impossible for them to participate in sports. Digest (1998) indicated that some low income group families also depend on the daughters to provide childcare for younger siblings after school, prepare family meals and run the homes when the parents are at work. Involvement of girls in sport would be perceived as comfort and luxury and at the expense of other important duties.

According to reports from WHO as cited in Van Deventer (1998), a decline in the participation of sport is most alarming in poor areas, especially in the densely populated inner cities of large and rapidly growing metropolises. The economic background dictates so much on whether females participate in sports or not in terms of finances, facilities and time. This is quite a challenge especially for women since men seems to have more free time, have more economic powers than women and have access to and control of resources.

## **Other Related Challenges Facing Women Football**

### **Inadequate Funding**

This was a major challenge that was noted from the previous league. The teams require adequate funds to participate in the league, to buy balls and sports attire and travelling expenses during the league and other forms of competitions.

### **Poor Governance**

The South Sudan Football Association manages football activities from the top to the grassroots with support from the local football associations. The women football department still lacks the technocracy to run women football activities. The poor planning and management of women football programmes in the country is a challenge. In the strategic plan of the inaugural women league, there few women coaches trained (CAF D), administrators and managers.

### **Limited Access to Facilities**

Access to playing ground is another challenge that affected women participation in football. The playing grounds available are few and most of them belonged to schools. The only artificial turfed ground is Buluk Training Centre which is occupied throughout by either the national teams or local teams playing the in the men's tier.

Most public spaces available for sport activities have either been grabbed by elite political or military leaders where they have used them for developing their personal infrastructure. It is difficult to secure the grabbed grounds though presidential and gubernatorial orders were announced respectively.

### **Accommodation and Feeding**

Teams experience poor accommodation and feeding whenever they travelled to play in other state. This is due to the limited financing by either SSFA or the local association where the teams come

from. In Juba, Multi-Purpose Training Center (MTC) is used by teams for accommodation, however, the management always charges a fee which is expensive while in other states teams are either accommodated in substandard hotels or schools.

Poor feeding and nutrition as teams rely on the most affordable food stuff like beans, lentils, rice and posho which sometimes a challenge in the sports diet.

### **Health and Menstrual Hygiene**

The insufficient financing has negatively impacted the menstrual health and hygiene of the women footballers as teams cannot afford to provide full dignity kits throughout the league.

In Multi-Purpose Training Center (MTC) the bushy environment is a habitat for mosquitoes and rodents which is dangerous to human life. Lighting and water is a great challenge in the MTC accommodation.

### **Marketing and Communication**

Currently women football has no recognized marketing and communication strategy. No active SSFA teams have social media pages.

Limited publicity as a challenge that faces the women football players as they participate in the local football leagues. The limited efforts by the stakeholders to ensure that the league is covered from day one to the last. The social media platforms such as South Sudan Sport Crackpot, SSFA Media and The MAIL have been in coverage of the league and limited to the city and other towns.

The locally based FM radios sometimes cover women league activities and these include Summer fm, City fm and EBC radio.



## **Value of the Award**

The champion was awarded a sum of Three Thousand United States Dollars Only (3000USD) which could not satisfactorily meet the demands of the whole team. The first, second and third runner ups did not receive any motivational award with exception of the best player, best goalkeeper and top scorer who did receive non-cash awards.

## **Case scenarios during the league**

### ***Minister threatened football fans using gun in Aweil-Northern Bahr-el-ghazel***

*Football fans in Aweil town of Northern Bahr el Ghazel state accused Peter Mayen of disrupting the match between Aweil and Juba Women teams. He reportedly stormed the pitch and demanded his wife, who plays for the Aweil women football team, to leave the match and go home.*

*According to the press secretary of Aweil Local Football Association, the minister appeared with his bodyguards before the end of the first half, demanding the immediate removal of his wife from the field without following the right procedures.*

*Akuei Deng Bak says the minister was told to wait up to the end of the first half so that a substitution could be made, but he refused”*

*Akuei also said the humanitarian affairs minister shot into the air to scare the spectators around him.*

*“He fired into the air three times using his pistol. When the fans realized he used his gun, they threw stones at him until the security personnel managed to take him away” he told Eye Radio*

*Akuei said the chaos forced the match officials to halt the game before it was restarted.*

*The South Sudan Football Association released a statement condemning the minister’s transgression*

### ***Negative attitude shown to player of Yei Joint Stars by Kuajok Women Team-Warrap***

*A Yei Joint Stars player (names withheld) had to go through check by medical team about her gender. The Kuajok team raised an alarm about the look of the player that she was male. After check it was proved that her gender was female.*

## Indicators of Women Football Strategy South Sudan (2021-2024)

Women Involved in Football	Current Situation	By 2024
Coaches	4	100
Administrators	4 across all levels	20
Referees	29 across all levels	100
Women scouts	0	2
Women ambassadors	0 (*2 appointed after the strategy)	10
Medical	2	10
Delegates	7	14
Female employees	1	To be increased by 10%

Above: Women Football Strategy 2021-2024/South Sudan Football Association (women football strategy)

League	Current Situation	By 2024
League	Played in tournament	2 tier playing (tier 1, tier 2)
Quality of players	No playing license No club licensing so far	Players licensing be introduced All coaches coaching in tier to have coaching licenses
<b>National Teams</b>		
Competitions	1 competition participated in so far	To participate in 5 competitions
National Teams training camps	0	1 each category a year
Player management activities	0	Training workshops
NT player welfare incentives	No incentives by SSFA	25 NT player salaries a year (NT player contracts)
Marketing and Communication	No recognized marketing and communication strategy	A 4-year marketing and strategy plan

Above: Women Football Strategy 2021-2024/South Sudan Football Association (women football strategy)

League	Current Situation	By 2024
No. of women playing football	5000 across all levels	30000 across all levels
SSFA girls' grassroots football	0	3 SSFA grassroots football projects
Community outreaches	0	3 outreach projects in communities

Above: Women Football Strategy 2021-2024/South Sudan Football Association (women football strategy)

## Conclusions

There were several challenges that faced women football players. Among them, funding was the main one. Others included; society's negative attitude towards women football which translates to poor participation of women in football activities; biological factors such as menstruation and pregnancy; poor governance of the football organizations; limited access to facilities and equipment and women's gender roles and responsibilities.



*(L) Yei Joint Stars Vs Juba Super Stars R- Yei Joint Stars in action against Kuajok Women in Yei/Courtesy photo*

## Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this report, the suggested recommendations have been made according to the different institutions as follow;

### National/state government

- Set aside funds to support women football leagues from the grassroots level to the national level
- It should oversee and control all including the women leagues through the ministry of sports at all levels in order to minimize mismanagement.
- Provide incentives and rewards to women football teams and individuals who excel in football.
- Involve the media in publicising and promoting women football at the county level.
- Work with Non-Governmental and other community based organisations to sensitize the community on the benefits of women football.
- Improve and manage the existing playgrounds to ensure that women have access to these facilities whenever they require them.

## **South Sudan Football Association**

South Sudan Football Association's main mandate is to organise and manage football leagues for both women and men from grass roots level to the national level. It should therefore;

- Ensure that women leagues are organised and run smoothly
- Consider introducing the leagues in secondary schools and colleges since most of the women football players are young and still in school.
- Manage and maintain the available playing grounds to ensure that they remain in good condition.
- Include women in their leadership position who would represent other women.
- Publicise the women leagues through the media and other avenues.
- Recognise and reward women who excel in football so that they can be role models to other women.
- Increase the value of the awards

## **Media**

The media can help promote a positive attitude towards women football through publicising and promoting it. This can be achieved through;

- Screening women matches with a view of reporting in the local media
- Highlighting profiles of women football players who have excelled before
- Sensitising the community on the benefit of playing football in order to change the negative attitude towards women football players.

## **Non-Governmental Organizations**

NGOs have continued to play an important role in empowering women in various capacities and sports can be one of the platforms for development;

- Organise women football activities at grassroots level especially in poverty stricken areas.
- Offer rewards and incentives to women who participate in football
- Seek funds from sponsors and well-wishers to boost women football
- Organise sensitization meetings and exhibition matches at school and community level in conjunction with other stakeholders as a way of encouraging girls and women to participate in football activities.

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