

# WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN AFRICA: THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

PRESENTED BY ROSALIND K. AMOH  
(SPORTS JOURNALIST, GHANA)

AT THE 2018 SWAG-AIPS AFRICA SEMINAR  
AT SWISS SPIRIT ALISA HOTEL, ACCRA  
NOVEMBER 26, 2018

*"We have always believed that the future of football is feminine. Our intensive work and consistent approach to development means that we can now look back on our considerable success and also look forward to the future with a sense of confidence."*

Joseph Sepp Blatter (2011)

This is not just a philosophical statement from a man who believed so much in the progress of women's football, but indeed, it is a statement that reflects the story of women's football in Africa and there is no doubt that there has been a headway.



*Nigeria's Super Falcons were the first African side to play at the Women's World Cup in 1991*

## THE PAST

I doubt if many people here gathered remember how it was in the beginning. Indeed, in the past, women's football in Africa was described as Nigeria and the rest of the continent. And soon, we will find out how.

While it is documented that women's football began around the world about 100 years ago, it is not exactly clear when it caught on in Africa.

However, **Peter Alegi**, professor of African history at Michigan State University, and author of *Laduma! Soccer*, in several write ups, tackles the start and the development of Women's football in Africa in three parts – The emergence and development (1970s–1980s), the growth and transition (1990s), and institutionalisation (2000–present).

Though women's football around the world began just years after the men's game began with England showing the way, it was not until the 1940s that it caught on in Africa, with Nigeria women teams competing and those matches being reported in the national newspaper *Nigerian Spokesman*. No wonder, Nigeria remains the pacesetters in the game on the continent.

This slowly caught on with the rest of the continent. For instance, in South Africa in the 1960s, women tried to create women's football clubs including **Jessie Maseko** who tried to create a girls high school football club in 1962. In Cape Town a high school team called the **Mother City Girls** was created and played against boys' clubs.

By the 1970s, regular matches were being played by women in Senegal and South Africa.

In Ghana, the fever caught on in the late and early 1980s, mainly for fun purposes with a number of clubs dotted around the country in areas such as the Greater Accra Region, Ashanti and Western Regions.

As the men's game developed and progressed, the women's game pressed for recognition, but football administrators, mainly men, were not enthused about women's football and thus paid no attention.

Also, the development of women's game was greatly hampered by cultural and traditional beliefs in Africa, as sports in general and football in particular, was considered a predominant male's game.

Unfortunately, the continental body also did not find it compelling enough to encourage Member Associations to have female national teams.

The turning point came when FIFA decided to hold the first Women's World Cup, held in China in 1991 and required to have a representation, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) decided to call for participation and at that time, only Nigeria and Ghana were able to respond positively.

***Nigeria won the 1<sup>st</sup> Africa Women's Championship in Abeokuta in 1999 and have won the title a record eight times***

With the foundation already laid, Nigeria benefited and became the first team to participate in the WWC in China.

Though they could not go past the group stages, they picked valuable lessons which they built on for the future.

Nigeria will go on to hold their own as the leaders of the women's game, and enjoyed patronage and support in terms of resources.

South Africa would have come close in terms of resources and organisation, however the country's international ban due to apartheid, prevented them from competing.

Nigeria remained the fore bearers and recorded cricket scorelines in all matches they played in, their rivals, Ghana at the receiving end the most then.

With a Women's World Cup on the cards and the game developing, CAF could no longer sit aloof but join in and came up with the first Africa Women's Championship (AWC) in Abeokuta, Nigeria in 1998.

The eight teams that eventually made it after the qualifiers were – Nigeria as hosts, Ghana, Cameroun, South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt and Morocco. Mozambique withdrew from the tournament, despite qualifying.

The performances and results were encouraging. Nigeria lifted the first trophy and continue to dominate, with Equatorial Guinea, the only side to have been able to win the trophy twice.



***Ghana's Black Queens were one of eight teams to have played in the first Women's AFCON in 1998***

Ghana will go on to make their debut at the Women's World Cup, the first time a senior team from that country made it to this highest stage.

If the rivalry among the big guns on the continent has been intensive when it comes to football, the women's game has also carved a niche of their own when it comes to the rivalry, with Nigeria versus Ghana, Cameroun versus Nigeria, Ghana versus Cameroun, Nigeria versus South Africa or Ghana versus South Africa, being the most dominant.



## THE PRESENT

Presently, women's football is the in thing in African football now.

On the pitch, Nigeria's overwhelming dominance has diminished as it is no longer Nigeria women's football and the other teams.

Strong rivalries have been built along the line and the rivalry in the male's game among the continent's giants, have been extended into the women's game.

Africa has moved away from recording cricket scorelines, like 1994 when Nigeria walloped Ghana in the two-leg Women's World Cup qualifying tie. Of course, there are some few cricket scorelines, but those are exception and it is obvious the game has just started in those countries.

Equatorial Guinea's success in winning two Women's AFCON tournaments is also ample evidence.

***Equatorial Guinea are the only side to have won the Women's twice AFCON aside of Nigeria***

These present steady and remarkable progress can be attributed by the visibility of women's football in the media and the coverage it is receiving now.

The advancement of technology has made it possible and now, parents and guardians are not preventing their daughters to play football, but now encouraging and supporting their young daughters who show interest and talent to take it up.

The growth of the women's game on the continent has been helped greatly by the introduction of the FIFA Under-17 and Under-20 Women's World Cup. The biennial tournaments have been a great opportunity for young girls to showcase their potential.



Asisat Oshoala

At that world stage, African teams do not go just to make up the numbers, Nigeria have been twice the runners-up at the FIFA Under-20 Women's World Cup losing both finals in 2010 (2-0) and 2014 (1-0 after extra time) to Germany while Ghana's Black Maidens also claimed bronze at the 2012 Under-17 Women's World Cup.

Not only at the playing level, but more women are also showing interest in the other aspects of football – coaching, refereeing, medical and the other highly professional areas.

It is a source of pride, watching Florence Omagbemi, the first captain of the Super Falcons who led them to two titles, return to become the first female to lead the team to another title, this time as a coach.

At the moment, Desiree Ellis, another player I was privileged to watch and interview at the 1998 Women's AFCON is in charge of South Africa's team and we all can attest that she has the brain to much her skill and the talent she displayed as a player then.

*Mercy Tagoe has made a remarkable history so far as the only female to have played, become a FIFA referee and now a national team coach*

Can I make this presentation without making reference to Ghana's very own, Mercy Tagoe Quarcoo, also a product of the 1998 Women's AFCON who has transitioned beautifully through the three most important aspect of football as a player, a FIFA referee who handled a Under-17 Women's World Cup final, and now a coach of the national team?

Mercy's case may be unique and needs to be celebrated, perhaps to the point that she will inspire the young ones.



Certainly, from the days were women were made only the welfare officers of the national teams, we now also have assistant coaches, doctors, physiotherapists and even scouts.

Proudly, the progress of women's football has also seen an increased number of female sports journalists, in a field, which otherwise was considered a man's world. They are now telling the women's football story.

I recall when I became a sports journalist some twenty-three years ago. There was only one known female sports journalist in Ghana. The joy of adding up to the number when I graduated from journalism school was cut short when she left to pursue further studies abroad. It took four years before two more joined in.



*Women's football now also have more journalists covering women's football*

Currently there are at least about 100 females practicing in the sports media with various specialisations. And they are not just in it, they know their stuff.

It was the same in Nigeria, where a lady we referred to as Pepsi, was the face of women's football reporting. Now, it is always a source of pride to see more women following the game.

*Goalkeeper Memunatu*

*Francoise Bella – Cameroun*

*Sulemana – Ghana*

## **TALENT**

Africa has never lacked talent and that is so true in women's football too. The roll call is impressive and enviable:

For Nigeria there was: Goalkeeper Ann Chijeni, Memunatu Sulemana, Nigeria captain Florence Omagbemi, forwards Mercy Akide, Stella Mbachu, Perpetual Nkwocha,

Ghana showcased the likes of Alberta Sackey, Patience Sackey, goalkeeper Memunatu Sulemana, Vivian Mensah, Mavis Djangmah, Adjoa Bayor, then had South Africa's Veronica Phewa and Joanne Solomon, while Cameroun was made proud by the likes of Bernadette Anong, Antoinette Anounga and Francoise Bella.

They all have proved their mettle, shining not only on the continent, at the world stage when presented with the opportunity.



***Mercy Akide - Nigeria***

***Perpetual Nkwocha - Nigeria***

***Adjoa Bayor - Ghana***

***Portia Modise – South Africa***

Currently, the likes of Nigeria's Asisat Oshoala and Desiree Oparanozie, Brenda Banda and Rachael Kundananji both of Zambia, Ghana's Elizabeth Addo, Portia Boakye and Priscilla Okyere, Cameroun's trio of Christine Manie, Raissa Feudjio and Gabrielle Onguene, South Africa's Thembi Kgatlana, Mali's Fatoumatou Diarra

***Mali's exciting ladies***

***Thembi Kgatlana – South Africa***

***Mukarama Abdulai – Ghana***

At the youth stage, it is getting more exciting: the Sandra Owusu-Ansahs, Grace Asantewaas, Princella Adubeas, Mukarama Abdulai, Grace Animahs, Rasheedat Ajibades,

## THE FUTURE

That more females are showing interest in the game as administrators and in other technical areas as well as Africa's young girls are able to do well at the youth stage is an indication that when things are done right and given the needed opportunity, the future will certainly be bright.

But just how do we get to that bright future? How do we transition from this exciting state to a well-grounded future? In business terms, how can we use this mission statement into a desired vision?

*South Africa's Bayana Bayana seem to be on top being technically as well as being better organised*

Football at any level can no longer be considered a past time, where people believe that talent and skill is enough to bring success.

Success requires systematic planning, grooming of the talents unearthed and also the need to have a good technical base, with regards to coaching.

With my long association with women's football, I have come to believe that the persistent changes in the technical direction of the national teams do not augur well for good performance and progress. The performances and results are the evidence.

Ghana has been notorious in that area. For instance, since 1998, no coach has stayed on at his job for more than two years.

The only one who almost beat that record was Yusif Basigi and the after failing to do well at the 2014 Women's AFCON, he led the team to win

the All Africa Games in Congo in 2015 and finished third at the 2016 Women's AFCON.

Perhaps, if Basigi had been allowed to stay on, a different story would have been told of the Queens at the 2018 Women's AFCON.



***The decision by South Africa Football Association to retain coach, Desiree Ellis as the coach is paying dividend for Bayana Bayana***

The Super Falcons dominance, the impressive display of both South Africa and Cameroun are all there to show, that maintaining consistency in the coaching department in particular, helps to build strong and successful teams.



*Earlier in 2018, CAF held its first symposium for women's football to discuss the way forward for the game*

Again, Africa Federations must make a conscious effort to invest in women's football, developing it at the grassroots and justifying it at the national level.

I feel so proud of what the South Africa Football Association (SAFA) is doing with the various female national teams, and particularly very excited about the Bayana Bayana.

I was privileged to have travelled through the journey on this progressive road right from 1998 and thrilled by the set goals and targets for the team.

It has been systematic, planned and thought through and all is geared towards qualifying for the Women's World Cup for the first time. With Africa's slot increased to three now, there is no doubt that SAFA's investment will yield the desired results of the WWC qualification.

However, it will not be enough to just show up at the World Cup and exit at the group stages has had happened in the past.

The main problem for most Member Associations has been financial. I would therefore like to use to this opportunity to propose to the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to extend the same financial assistance to the males to prepare for the World Cup to the women as well.

This year, the teams that went to Russia 2018 all received some additional financial support from CAF apart from the \$1million from football's world governing body, FIFA.

*Fran Hilton-Smith once the coach for South Africa, is now part of the CAF coaches instructors.*

CAF should find a way of helping the coaches dedicated to women's football and female coaches in particular, to build their capacity to the highest level, so that the technical base for development will be broadened, thereby encouraging more women to also come on board.



***The way to go: Nigeria's Perpetual Nkwocha, Ann Chiejine and Florence Omagbemi –all former Super Falcons have remained in the game as coaches***

Again, I would on behalf of women's football in Africa plead with CAF, that when major decisions are taken, it must include women's football so that it becomes binding on all Member Associations.

FIFA's insistence on things being done right, like for instance, having females form a percentage of the technical bench of national teams that participate in the WWCs, has seen more female participation in football at various levels, why can't CAF do the same?

Also, perhaps, it is about time that CAF considered modifying the qualification process for the national youth teams. The Under-17 and Under-20 male tournaments have helped in the development and

progress of the male's game. It will not be asking for too much if the stakeholders ask that same be done for the women's game.

Just as the Women's AFCON are used as World Cup qualification for the senior sides, the same should be done for the young ladies as well. The Africa Under-20 and Under-17 Women's tournaments will help. The other continents are doing that and Africa, with the excuse of financial constraints in the past, can no longer ignore the benefits of such a venture.

Personally, I am of the opinion that asking for a women's inter clubs competition may be a long term plan, given the dynamics and challenges travelling within the continent pose and the financial constraints.

However, at the sub-regional levels, such an idea could be tried for the national teams, to ensure that the ladies get more playing time.

The COSAFA, the CECAFA, WAFU tournaments could move from being only for the national teams, to the clubs so it encourages more people to invest in the game.

FIFA's interest in developing women's football has been beneficial to Africa. Now, it is up to the continent to use that leverage as the foundation to build for the future.

## **CELEBRATING THE LEGENDS**

Finally, the continent needs to celebrate the stars who blazed the trail in the past so that they can motivate and inspire the up and coming ones.

It is significant to note that earlier this year, CAF held a symposium for its football legends and gathered the continent's celebrated male stars to dialogue and find the way forward for the continent's continuous development and progress. Unfortunately, the females were left out.

Such a programme should be extended to the women so that in telling their stories and sharing their experiences, the young ladies will learn and be inspired to pursue their dream and in the process, take Africa women's football where it deserves to be.

After their playing days, those who have the potential and show interest, must be integrated back into the game just as we have seen of the Tagoes, Omagbemis, Ellis etc.

## CONCLUSION

I will again borrow the words of a man, under whose leadership, women's football saw tremendous progress, Sepp Blatter, who in a message to celebrate International Women's Day in 2011 observed: ***“With increasing investment over the years from grassroots through to the elite level, it is fitting that women's football will come of age and celebrate in style.”***

I believe the continent can borrow some lesson in this statement. It is indeed remarkable to note that the cultural, traditional and religious barriers that impeded the development of women's football in the past have been largely removed.

***The future of the women's game in Africa will be very much dependent on the decisions CAF makes***

However, we can celebrate in style only when the nations take that bold decision to invest more in women's football at all levels.

Member Associations must have a comprehensive development plan or policy to have a systematic plan and also have a transition from the grassroots, the youth level and then into the professionals and senior teams.

At least there is evidence that such projects eventually yield dividends.

The foundation has been laid for us and individually as countries, collectively as a continent, we are obliged to build on the sacrifices and successes of the women's football story to provide that bright future Sepp Blatter foresaw.

Women's football has come to stay in Africa and the benefits of it go beyond giving the talented ladies a chance to express themselves on the ball. It has brought hope, become the source of livelihood for some who otherwise, had no means of making ends meet. Graduates have been made out of playing football and they are now contributing their quota to the development of society

There is a popular saying that you cannot know where you are going if you do not know where you have come from. That should be the guiding principle for women's football.

The leaders and all stakeholders must ask: where have we come from, where are we right now and where do we want to go from here? When we have honestly and objectively answered these questions, only then can we plan and prepare to execute for a grand future.

It is possible for an African side to win the world title at either the junior senior level or at the Olympics.

It will however, not come by dreaming. It will take a concerted effort, planning and investment of resources and in talent.

It is possible, it is doable. We must not fail with this.

*Thank you.*