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Herd, Katarzyna

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# That Little Football Girl

## Swedish Club Football and Gender Expectations

By Katarzyna Herd

The title of this article comes from a comment made about me. It was uttered informally, but within a research community nevertheless. I was referred to as “that little football girl”, and although the comment was swiftly trivialized, as in “I did not mean anything negative”, it left me pondering on how my gender reflected on the seriousness of my research. The aim of this article is to explore from an intersectional perspective how the researcher’s social markings influence the studied field and how gender can be constructed, performed and contested in a context of Swedish club football. The emphasis is on ethnographic work done by a female researcher, but it probes *gender expectations* that become visible when expressed in the context of football, a context that traditionally excluded rather than included females.

The article engages in a discussion of femininity and females in football first, then focuses on one encounter from match observations in 2015, which highlights the complexity of this field. The material presented here was acquired while conducting interviews and observations in four Swedish football clubs, but not with gender in focus. However, the fieldwork happened in the social space described and acknowledged as being dominated by men. The intensity of this field and polarization in terms of the gender perception made this perspective unavoidable. Focusing on small-scale agencies could be one way to approach the taken-for-granted male domination that seems mostly uncontested. The article deals with questions that were triggered within this gendered context. How are women framed in this context? How do they negotiate bounda-

ries? How are women evaluated through the broader social context?

Entering football as a female researcher is not without problems, although, from my experience, it is not very dramatic either. Football is a very creative and flexible environment, and it reflects broader social contexts with all its issues and developments. Thus, a local football club is firmly situated in its local reality, and also constructed and performed by individuals who make football a part of their reality and of their everyday routines. The ability to accommodate different narratives, elements, and interpretations of football is also visible in gender constructions. Women are not only present physically in many different activities, but football also presents interesting “grey zones” of gender roles that are performed and interpreted on the spot. This article thus explores such instances, using examples from my own experience as a multi-layered stranger in the “male zone”, as football tends to be described (e.g. Welford 2011).

When one talks about football, the immediate association is with the men’s football. It does not need any additional words to be understood as a male activity. Because of this female football requires the adjective “female” before the name of the game (field notes, 2016). As Pierre Bourdieu commented in his book *Masculine Domination*: “The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it” (Bourdieu 2001: 9). The norm has been established and one gender’s domination has been institutionalized. When I write about my study ob-

ject, which is a set of Swedish male football clubs, I can say “football” only, and I reproduce a pattern of inequality that is taken for granted.

In this article I problematize this specific gendered space and the gender expectations that surround it. The aim is to explore how females are perceived and written about in the football context. This article also presents a certain way of doing masculinities while having femininities in focus, exploring the margins that women tend to be ascribed to and showing how the centre can be disrupted (Fur 2006). While taking on board my ethnographic experiences from several years, I shall present female participants in the “male preserve” who are supporters, who work for clubs, and deal with football professionally as researchers. The available literature concentrates mostly on females as fans (Dixon 2015; Mintert & Pfister 2015; Richards 2015; Dunn 2014; Pfister, Lenneis & Mintert 2013). A recent British study of female supporters focuses on their experiences in modern football and rugby from a sociological perspective (Pope 2017). In Sweden, Aage Radmann from Malmö University has been involved in a project about Swedish female supporters. Women are present at stadiums in different roles, but their agency is often filtered through the masculine reading of football. Thus, the negotiating and contesting of borders that happens there is not acknowledged.

The category of gender is introduced here rather crudely, but because the interest in football is more inclined to be attributed to men (e.g. Mintert & Pfister 2015), this field does constitute a space of male dominance, thus making females

trespassers and forcing them to apply categories and evaluations already filtered and established through this domination (Bourdieu 2001:35). Further, gender comes with the combination of class, age and ethnicity (to name some of the intersections) that contribute to evaluations of the present form of football.

### **Women – Present but not Noticed**

Football environment is associated with a certain type of masculinity and specific displays of gender constructions, usually strengthened by media depictions that focus on different sorts of aggression and violence, both by male fans on the stands and by players on the pitch. But women do watch football and they make up a considerable share of spectators. A quantitative study from 2006 from Sweden gives a number of 28 per cent for women present at the standing section during a match in Malmö (Horsner & Söderberand 2006). Danish researchers present similar figures (e.g. Pfister, Lenneis & Mintert 2013).

Football studies acknowledge the presence of women, yet they have also shown that access does not mean equality (Welford 2011). The norm has been firmly based on male supporters, with women becoming “an oddity” in the masculine background. As Pierre Bourdieu remarked, “The dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural” (2001:35). While doing research I fell into that trap. I started “noticing” women, writing in my notebook that there were many, that they were of different age, hopped and sang in the standing section or accompanied their children (field notes 2015). I

fished them out of the crowd as something that I perceived as unusual due to my own perception of football.

Kevin Dixon (2015) and Carrie Dunn (2014) have pointed out, referring to older categorizations, that women still tend to be branded as “new fans”, not authentic or traditional, but civilizing, in contrast to aggressive, authentic and norm-making male fans. This “authentic” is rooted in the perception of a working-class masculinity, especially in the English context. The idea is that women have different reasons to engage with football, or rather that football would not be the first and foremost choice of entertainment. One female interviewee, Maria, talked about interesting gender perceptions within the supporters’ organizations:

As a woman, you can only join Black Army and Sol Invictus, you can’t join the others. At Sol Invictus – they have a code during a match, if you want to be with them. You are there for AIK, not for yourself. No kissing, you have to sing 90 minutes, no mobile phones, no selfies, no cute girlfriends. You are there for the team.

Maria was a devoted fan and she was very active in one of the supporters’ organization. She singled out a phenomenon that bothers some football goers – that women there were just “girlfriends” accompanying the boys. The code of behaviour prescribed for the aforementioned group prohibited things that could hinder support, “cute girlfriends” becoming one such problem. Although women could be in the group, they were described from the male point of view, even by Maria, objectified and classified in the same category as phones and photos that distracted people from the match and from providing a good atmosphere.

Devoted fans, referred to as ultras groups with their picturesque accessories (flares and smokes), are a relatively new phenomenon (see Herd 2017; Testa 2009). They claim a strong influence on the philosophy of being a “good fan” and behaving according to specific rules during matches, but as Maria stated, women had rather limited access to specific supporters’ organizations, especially those perceived as contesting the law and order. One ultras group in Malmö was said to openly ban women from their structures (field notes 2013). While attending an away match I suddenly needed to get back home and I was told I could not get into the same bus because women were not allowed to travel with them. A group of young men from different social and ethnic backgrounds, and also openly opposing racism (field notes 2015), would then create gender division in their organization.

This was both curious and unsettling as female presence was just not physically acceptable. Manliness could be seen as a relational notion that was “constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of *fear* of the female, firstly in oneself” (Bourdieu 1978:53). This dichotomy of male-female might have become even more important since, as mentioned above, “the other” in the form of ethnic divisions has become neutralized. Racial tensions previously visible in Sweden football faded away (field notes 2015). Many of the interviewed match-goers were positive that there was a mix of all possible social classes at stadiums too. Although very proud of how inclusive and integrated they were with other social categories, the group man-

aged to build that unity by excluding women.

One young woman I spoke with really wanted to engage with the ultras, whose members liked to bring flares to stadiums. She said that she faced some very harsh evaluations because she was a female and thus suspected of going “after the guys” (field notes 2013). However, women could be seen in the standing crowd, and for example, young girls put black hoods on and held flares (field notes 2015). The space was not forbidden to them, but quite often the male structure made it difficult for them to participate without adhering to “masculine” values.

Kevin Dixon (2015) and Jessica Richards (2015) have both pointed out that female supporters need to acquire “masculine” behaviour in order to be seen as “proper” fans. However, this masculine behaviour presents only one possibility of being a fan. The descriptions of purely “masculine” or “feminine” behaviour seem to monopolize the popular understanding of gender performance. Connell (1995:70) pointed out that majority of men do not fit with the dominant picture of masculinity in Western societies. It is then possible to problematize this further as both women and men experience the “hegemonic” way of being a loud and slightly abusive supporter, but they do not necessarily intend to reproduce it. Certainly, because the majority of spectators are men, there is a tendency to view their behaviour in terms of “masculine” (Connell 1995:79). Female supporters are faced with a lot of prejudice not only from their male counterparts but also from other females (Mintert & Pfister 2015).

Pierre Bourdieu commented on interpretations of female behaviour in restricted spaces: “More generally, access to power of any kind places women in a “double bind”: if they behave like men, they risk losing the obligatory attributes of “femininity” and call into question the natural right of men to the positions of power; if they behave like women, they appear incapable and unfit for the job” (Bourdieu 2001:68). Evaluations from researchers, as well as from their football-oriented peers, leave women with little room to manoeuvre. They depend on the external gaze and they can be dominated by those who hold power over them, meaning the dominant supporters’ groups as well as those evaluating them from external positions.

Mintert and Pfister put forward the notion that the idea of femininity within the football context might get a different evaluation outside that context, as the majority of participants are still biological males. Women are then “confronted” with “norms and ideals of femininity in society” (Mintert & Pfister 2015:417).

Women in this context face contradictory evaluations and meet stereotypes based on the idea that there are female biological bodies in a presumably masculine environment. Statements produced by some scholars, that women who swear and shout like men do not do any favour to other females, indicate the persistent notion of some sort of required “sisterhood” in this kind of environment that would draw women together. Such evaluations seem to be based on a specific idea of femininity that is an intersectional construct of gender, class and ethnicity as well, yet resulting in opinions based on

gender as just one category (Skeggs 1997: 99). In short, when becoming active in football, women are faced with a strong division between their gender identity and gender roles (Hatty 2000:111–112). Why would women care about other women? As football supporters they are framed in a range of intersectional, anarchistic conflicts (see Foucault 1994:330) that include supporters of rival teams, supporters of their own team from different factions (with indicators like age and social class being spelled strongly), police, club officials etc. (field notes 2015).

### Women in Stadiums

How do female fans describe themselves then? Those that I encountered became fascinated with this world, sometimes travelled for hours just to see their teams, wanted to do more than just sit and watch and got involved in various organizations. They talked about prejudice and hindrances, but through the lens of being a supporter. Through engaging with a club and establishing themselves in the scene they started feeling included, they did not differentiate themselves from other supporters just based on the gendered issues.

Maria said in her interview:

An AIK woman is a tough woman. You have to be able to defend your club and it is not easy. There is not a week without something written about AIK in the newspapers, like *Aftonbladet* constantly writes about us. And they can gang together against you. [...] But as a woman you feel safe here, because if the guys see you at away matches and so on they look after you, they make sure that you are safe (2015).

Another woman, Martha, said:

Some just want to see the difference because you are a woman. Before some would say “oh those

girls just come to see guys” but I don’t see that anymore. We are all just fans there (interview with Martha, 2013).

These women, Maria and Martha, supported different teams, and they were very emotional towards their clubs. They were also sensitive to the categorizations that can happen within the context. They were insiders, holding their ground against outside forces like the security or media, but they were aware that they could be singled out on the ground of their biology, in a both excluding and including way. Maria’s remark about feeling safe was a curious statement that revealed that it is up to men to control security issues as well.

Dixon’s evaluation (2015:645–646) that female presence during matches “does not necessarily disrupt established gender discourses [...] but perhaps does nothing more than celebrate the practice of masculinity and segregate those females that are unwilling to participate” is a valid statement, but it takes into consideration only one version of masculinity that currently dominates in football discourses making the hegemonic display of it the only one (Connell 1995:76–77). Also, the point of their performance is to be a fan, femininity becoming something to be negotiated in this specific context so that it would allow women to participate fully rather than becoming a hindrance.

Although female supporters were never officially banned from watching football, the specific character of this context made them unsuited for participation. Women experienced what Bourdieu describes as “socially imposed agoraphobia” (2001: 39). Certainly, it was not an institutionalized thing not to have women cheering for football, but the historical developments

and the sheer fact that football means men's football imposed a frame of behaviour and social acceptance that did not work in women's favour.

Irene Andersson, a researcher in history and gender, in her text about photographs from early twentieth-century Malmö, pointed out how few women, almost none basically, appear on the old photos taken in the streets of this city. Andersson also presents a nutshell definition of the masculinity construct from those days; a man who would work in a shipyard, watch matches of the local team Malmö FF, and vote for the Social Democrats (2013:7). Although her book had nothing to do with football, she connected this sport event to the image of typical masculinity in the city, as that would be an essential ingredient for working-class men.

To develop this thought further one could reason that the behaviour described by scholars as the "masculine norm" could be viewed as being context-specific and, as Connell presented, masculinities rely on historical evaluations and can be interpreted as political constructions as well (1995). Not everybody strives for aggressive forms of expression and unruly behaviour, but these performances attract the media attention and persist as the norm there. These are negotiated within the framework of a club and a specific fan group as this environment is a socially constructed space (Lefebvre 1972). Moreover, supporters change their supporting style according to age, current life situation and the group's preferences. This means occupying different parts of a stadium too, from the very active standing section, to "sitting & singing", and even the family section (field notes 2014–

2015). The heterotopic character (Foucault 1984) of this space means that there are no rigid boundaries and participants have a certain room to explore and develop their presence at stadiums. If females are selected and framed based only on invariant displays of femininity, then they are used yet again to strengthen the dominant group.

### **Complexities of Gender and Football**

As the main empirical field of my research consists of male football clubs that are region-oriented and dominated by native male participants, it marks me as an outsider on several levels – I was not born or raised in Sweden, I was an undergraduate student, I was not a supporter, I saw my first match live when I began my work. The fieldwork happened in an environment that I did not grow up with and thus it was quite unfamiliar. Categories like gender, nationality and purpose of participation did not exactly resonate with the majority of spectators at stadiums, and gender was one of those categories.

Beverley Skeggs has written extensively about the position that is ascribed to women in various environments. As she comments, "In order to produce spatial exclusion a centre has to be constructed that represents "real" belonging, and those who really belong have to display and embody the right characteristics and dispositions" (2004:19). The issue of inclusion and exclusion is right in the centre of various football discourses. It is not only about the immediate opponent in a form of another club. Further, deep divisions can be observed within one organization, for example among various supporters' groups (Herd 2017). Nobody really holds

a monopoly on the right kind of supporter, and evaluations of support vary. A “hegemonic” interpretation does exist, but mostly in the collective imagination created by the media, and it is contested and re-evaluated (Connell 1995:77).

Nevertheless, football is acknowledged, treated and described as an example of a “malestream”, an environment built by men, for men and further still studied by men even in modern research (Welford 2011; Dixon 2015; Richards 2015). As Mintert and Pfister put it:

Up to now, football research has been a predominantly male domain. Male scholars conduct research on men’s football on male fans. [...] Football is a game invented by and for men. Until 1970, the national and international football federations did not support women’s football teams and games (2015: 406).

Welford (2011:365) even referred to it as a “time honoured male preserve”. Thus, the field I operate in puts women outside of the core cultural capital on many levels and situates them in the margins. Current football research has acknowledged the presence of female spectators, yet it also acknowledges that access does not mean equality (Welford 2011). Being able to conduct research in this field does not mean inclusion as such. At the same time, women, no matter what position and interest they might have, encounter evaluations based on the established connection between football and masculinity.

Male performances of gender could undergo similar processes of evaluation, albeit in a different way. Because the broader social context holds a strict view of what femininity is, female participants can face ongoing criticism for being “like men” or not being “like women” (Mintert

& Pfister 2015:417). Being feminine is then about public acceptance and validation. Women are not feminine automatically; it has to be constructed in an act of public performance (Skeggs 1997:107). This ideal is not suitable for many women and excludes different variabilities, embedded in a dominant class ideal that intertwines with age, ethnicity, education and economic capital. Thus, doing “feminine” is not a natural behaviour but a learning outcome (Skeggs 1997:116).

One could argue that while on the one hand female football supporters need to become more masculine, they are also given social permission to explore femininity within female behaviour, just as men do, as neither of those categories is fixed. Masculinities are also complex and context-dependent. Far too often there is just one-sided form of presenting football through specific masculine performance that fits with the established mainstream evaluation of football as violent and dangerous. I would suggest that football does offer women and men possibilities to transgress and challenge the one-sided view of femininity and masculinity.

It should be stressed, though, that women in football are not given the cultural capital when it comes to the “traditional” view of the sport, commonly understood as a stereotype of a male, slightly abusive and slightly drunk, connected to the idea of working-class activities. However, the developments in football have been oriented towards the experience economy, profitable marketing and family fun (Kennedy & Kennedy 2012; van Uden 2005). After the tragic events in English football (e.g. the Hillsborough disaster – a



deadly accident during a match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest in 1989 when 96 people were killed) there have been a number of voices advocating for more women and children at stadiums as that would ease the atmosphere and make them feel safer, basically making them a part of the gentrification process (e.g. Dixon 2015 and Jones 2005, after Taylor Report 1990). In that sense, women as a gender group became desirable precisely because of their sexuality that somehow would guarantee a safer space. Presumably for this reason, family sections at stadiums in Sweden are placed right next to sections for away supporters. It is supposed to soften some thugs' hearts to see small children, but it also means that those young fans listen to abuse directed at their team. Interestingly enough, one of the favourite forms of offence in the Swedish context refers to female reproductive organs (field notes 2014).

### Hugs and Punches

Thus, women in football face different evaluations depending on whether it is the "old" shabby and slightly drunk football one wishes to portray, or the new, glossy enterprise financed by rich oil magnates. Femininity has been caught in the economic and class struggle on football stands. I found myself in this maze when I entered the field as an MA student doing qualitative research for one of the top clubs in Sweden. I was lucky to be granted access inside and I could observe and interview not only supporters of various kinds but also the clubs' management and players. I could watch matches with supporters, from the section for journalists or from the pitch. The different points of en-

try let me become an insider in one sense, but also fixed me as an outsider as I did not have one role but shifted from situation to situation, from match to match. I could become, as Sara Ahmed puts it, a stranger-friend in one (2000). My participation and eagerness to learn and observe were usually greeted with warmth and respect but it would not result in deeper relationships.

This contextualized friendship, as problematized by Ahmed, resulted in relative safety and self-assurance when watching football. My role and position were in a way fixed as the one who translates the football context into an academic environment. Thus, I became a "professional stranger" while maintaining rather close relations with my informants (Ahmed 2000:59). I mostly interviewed and spent time with men and it seemed that my gender contributed to separating me from the group. Nevertheless, football is very flexible and accommodating, and very different people are attracted to it as well. I have been hugged quite a lot, usually when a team scored. The overflow and over-the-top display of emotions usually resulted in an urgent need to embrace a person nearby. Sometimes it happened to be me (field notes 2014–2015).

The "friendship" or hugging would not really happen outside the context. My established position was as a researcher and as such I was granted a degree of access. It also, I dare say, made me into a "safe" individual. I did not claim knowledge or superior interpretation, which is a touchy issue in football. The categories that differentiated me from the usual football crowd created a zone for fairly neutral discussions.

Since those categories could be explained and brought forward, the other hindrances were not as problematic for the purpose of the study. I was there to learn and since I was so different from what could be called an average Swedish supporter I could claim total oblivion to football-related matters and not be punished for that. In my case, then, not knowing a thing was perceived a norm, and being able to state just some facts was greeted with enthusiasm. I would assume male researchers could be faced with the opposite problem, when “not knowing” would damage their position.

The sociologist Jessica Richards (2015), while conducting fieldwork in a football context, described herself as being viewed as harmless and naïve, feminine, and advocated for a “trusting relationship with key informants, who can play a protective role and assure the personal safety of the ethnographer” (Richards 2015:400). Although I understand the call for a safe research environment, this statement establishes the football scene as a closed space with rigid codes of behaviour that seem to refer to its one-sided masculine character requiring an insider to manoeuvre through it safely. Unexpected things happen, but like any context with its own logic, football is to be learned. The specific sense-making is based on routinized and ritualized behaviour.

Apart from the strategy of “toughening up” to be taken seriously, there is also a “mother-figure” connected to football. For instance, I have encountered women who bragged about the work they did fixing flags and banners for supporters’ groups, i.e. sewing fabric together on their

sewing machines. The ethnologist Jesper Fundberg wrote in his dissertation about youth football and masculinities (2003) that females, mostly mums, engaged in youth football teams in Sweden, tend to arrange food and drink, so to speak “nourish” the young players without having an immediate contact with the game or training.

The “occupational identity” (Alvesson & Billing 1997) that is at stake here not only encompasses the “male zone” of football (Welford 2011) but also the corporate character of the clubs that are currently run almost as businesses and embrace the idea of being “experience economies” (Kennedy & Kennedy 2012; van Uden 2005). That process results in framing women in a very specific way. They become visible as non-masculine workers and thus not challenging but strengthening the gender dominance. It should be pointed out, though, that a football club does not limit itself to male features only. Terms like logic, rationality, or strategy are very much associated with masculinity, but there are also features like love, emotional involvement, compassion clearly visible and expressed, which tend to be associated with stereotypical femininity (Alvesson & Billing 1997).

Football thus carries a strong association of a specific version of masculinity, and as a popular sport it also contributes to a certain version of heroes that enter popular imagination. The heroic stories usually have a man in the centre, who establishes his power over nature, animals, and also women (Hourihan 1997:28). Women are like artefacts in fairy stories, props that usually play the role of the final price for the finished mission. Football is not only a

place for heroes on the pitch. Supporters also feel like the important participants, even owners of clubs. Female bodies might disrupt the presupposed – expected – male space for heroism.

One could also comment that women are more on the outside as supporters because of the traditional way of looking at male and female experiences. The medievalist Caroline Bynum Walker (1996 (1984)) in her critique of Victor Turner's use of *liminality*, pointed out that his analysis seemed to be based on a particular class and category of people, namely men high on the social scale (Bynum Walker 1996 (1984):75). The liminal character of religious experiences analysed by Turner was then possible to notice because of the social structures those men operated in. An important part of entering liminality was “turning points” that were extraordinary for men (for example involving emotions) but ordinary for women (Bynum Walker 1996 (1984):74). Fans at the stadium engage in the behaviour that is specific for the space, but since men are more expected to be there, it might be that the presence of female fans just does not fit with the established narrative.

### Reevaluations

As mentioned above, I have been able to enter the football context from several different angles. The degree of engagement and the style is individual and it is constantly reworked and reinterpreted. Thus, categories of being insider or outsider are not only a matter of external evaluation, but there is also a degree of personal decision.

Researching football has its special flavours: “Ethnography is very different



Some of the police and security present at the stadium and a broken soda machine, May 2015.

from other forms of research because of the intensity of the experience” (Skeggs 1995:197). One can say that this intensifies during matches as it is a highly emotional event. After spending a couple of years with this field and becoming familiar with evaluations there, I have become aware that I could somewhat influence the scene. Sometimes supporters would ask who I was when seeing me writing frantically in my notebook, but generally, I was not given that much attention.

The following extract from my field notes refers to a match that I attended in May 2015 together with away supporters.

Since it was not the “home ground”, we were thoroughly checked and all the time surrounded by, what seemed like, hundreds of policemen and security guards, dressed as if prepared for the worst of riots, with batons, huge helmets, guns and so on ready to be used. I attended several games with away fans, but this was the first real “high profile” match with visiting fans. I was alone on this occasion. Also, I chose to wear a scarf in the colours of the away team. Since I travelled with those fans to the stadium, wearing the scarf seemed to me like showing some respect.

During half time something happened. Many young guys dressed in black, who were at the bottom of our section, rushed inside to the area with small shops and toilets. I follow them. There were lots of people, many policemen and security guards. Half of the crowd was grey-bright yellow (the security forces), and the other half was mostly black. The young supporters made like half a circle and just stood there. Hardly anybody was talking, the atmosphere seemed incredibly tense, but it was also very still, seemed frozen almost. There were some 4–5 people standing in the middle, talking to themselves. It did not take long to notice earpieces that they had, and unnaturally thick clothes. They had to be in a secret police force of something. They made an odd scene in the middle of this.

One security guard was standing a bit to the side, the others talked in a big group, looking like giant bees with huge helmets in their hands and a lot of equipment attached to their belts. I kept thinking that there were more members of the police force than there were supporters. [...] I wanted to take a photo of the policemen and I took a step forward, raising my mobile phone. In this instant, the lonely security guard grabbed me by my shoulders and pushed me rather violently to the side. I almost fell down. I was extremely surprised but instead of walking away I went back to a straight position and started to reason with him.

“What did I do?”

I said it in English because the shock completely cleared Swedish from my head.

“It’s a closed area.”

He replied in Swedish. I did not see any tape, any markings, anything. Nothing was happening, there was nothing behind him, just chatting policemen to his right side.

“You can just tell me you don’t have to push me.”

I was almost screaming, I felt so angry. He stared at me, almost as if he suddenly realized that I was speaking English to him. I was very upset but also, to my surprise, I turned almost confrontational. I did not want to move from there. [...] Slowly, the policemen and guards left, supporters slowly moved back to the stands. Secret police kept talking to themselves. When the movement began, I could go towards that “closed area”. Behind a pillar, there lay a broken soda machine. Was this what happened? Somebody knocked down a soda machine?

I went back to the stands too but I began to feel overwhelmed. I started feeling scared. Legs were shaking and I felt like crying. I had to leave. There was almost no one outside, I walked out of the stadium and through several security fences, trying to find my bike. I took the scarf off. I was almost crying at that point.

The situation presented above decontextualized my former experiences and re-framed my position in the field. It also brought the realization of how dependent I was on the external gaze and the evaluation of my position.

This encounter was rather brief and lasted perhaps ten minutes. Nevertheless, it made a lasting impression on me and my position in the field. I felt violated and incredibly vulnerable and I knew how powerless I would have been should the guard proceed in this evaluation of me as a dangerous (or unwelcome) individual. Suddenly, I was stripped of the many categories I would define myself with. It all was replaced by my supporter identity, the

one that I was not even fully aware of. But I had a scarf around my neck. I was, clearly, a supporter. Would that mean that I should have expected physical force? It seemed that I was influenced by the evaluations of females in football that I came across but it did not protect me. Perhaps I started to perceive myself as a harmless individual, a pacifier, a small woman who keeps making notes and taking photos not bothered by excited men around her. One could say that I should have been aware of the impression that I was making. I naively assumed that if anything, police would be after the men in black, a sort of picture one gets from mass media. My own prejudice was questioned.

Further, just like many interviewed female supporters, I considered a stadium as a safe place. Until the meeting with the law-and-order representative, I had never been scared there. I also heard in several interviews that men would never touch women when it comes down to fighting, unless of course women chose to participate (field notes 2013, 2015). Although football violence does not operate on gentlemen's rules, a former hooligan stated that he only "fought with those who wanted to fight" (field notes 2013). This exemplifies different evaluations of violence and different types of it that can occur there.

I entered the scene from a complete stranger perspective – in my own understanding – and I slowly learned it. My own understanding of my role and position was challenged by the security guard. He did not see me as a pacifier of any sort. I was ascribed a different position without noticing it. Skeggs (2004:55) argues that women are members of a social group

with a fixed identity rather than performing identity, and she stresses the passivity of the position. In the situation described above, the position as dangerous supporter was ascribed to me more than it was performed. My own gender expectations affected my judgement. I was supposed to represent the "not-so-dangerous" group.

Somehow, the space itself guaranteed that we would be evaluated as dangerous individuals. I use "we" here, as in the crowd of perhaps a thousand persons there were children and the elderly, many women, and a group of 50–60 youngsters in dark clothes that might have been more prompted into starting a fight (field notes 2015). But none of this mattered. The guard had no time to grade my individual femininity. We constituted a dangerous group when decorated with scarves or shirts, opposite to the considerably strong, well-organized group armed with various devices and officially organized, also able to communicate through ear devices.

Because I had a scarf, something that I did not pay much attention to, I openly marked myself as somebody different from the rest of society. I allowed others to recognize me in a way. I assume that it contributed to the guard's reaction to my attempt to take a photo. A social marker of my identity appeared, creating an intersection of other markers. As Ahmed puts it, "through strange encounters, the figure of the "stranger" is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger'" (2000:3). In that particular situation the guard did not need to evaluate people present there individually. We clearly formed two camps, one consisting

of law-and-order representatives, the good guys, and the other of potentially dangerous “strangers”. Where I saw diversity, a multitude of fan styles and people marked by different social categories such as age, class, gender, and ethnicity, he saw a wall of supporters. This rings in tune with the unchallenged process of recognition analysed by Ahmed: “The stranger comes to be faced as a form of recognition: we recognise somebody *as a stranger*, rather than simply failing to recognise them” (2000:21).

As discussed briefly above, the public and mass media seem quite stagnated in a one-sided view of football fans. Attention is concentrated on the loud, angry-looking males who like to bring flares to stadiums. The best pictures are the most dramatic, and so half-stripped young men with masks on and holding burning flares make it to the front pages. The image of a traditional supporter is being set within that frame and also fetishized as a dangerous stranger (Ahmed 2000:42). Because he (in the media it almost always is a he) often wears a mask, he has no face and no identity. His body is blurred by the smoke around it. He becomes the other, the strange individual that shames the society, a member of an affluent nation who chooses to ignore the rules and engages in what is officially considered criminal behaviour, the use of flares.

Police and security are confronted with such images. Thus, away fans are always escorted to stadiums, and the amount of police, fences, even dogs and horses, is staggering. It might look as if the forces are prepared for a well-organized riot with various weapons and vehicles included. The contrast between singing and hugging

fans and dead-serious, armed police could be described as grotesque.

This is not to claim that the space is safe and free from trouble, and when introducing here concepts of stranger and familiar, one can also ponder about the space itself. Especially the away section is an interesting construction of home away from home, where fans of the visiting team perform their social space. A heavy police presence disturbed the balance and the concrete structure was claimed by somebody else, by a stranger from the supporters’ perspective. I can only wonder who triggered whom and who would be to blame for crossing the invisible line of standing one’s ground or provoking the other. Ahmed developed the idea:

spaces are claimed, or “owned” not so much by inhabiting what is already there, but by moving within, or passing through, different spaces which are only given value as places (with boundaries) through the movement or “passing through” itself. [...] Women’s movements are regulated by a desire for “safe-keeping”: respectability becomes measured by the visible signs of a desire to “stay safe” (Ahmed 2000: 33).

Police presence around the event and all the security precautions marked the space as dangerous at the point of entrance. Since football has been established as carrying a risk, the participants also have fixed ways of dealing with and approaching each other. In other words, one learns socially how to approach a stranger (Ahmed 2000:24). To my utter shock and confusion, I was dealt with appropriately by the norms established before. It would seem that once I marked myself with a piece of clothing, or by virtue of just being there, I became a citizen of another category.

### Concluding Remarks

This article investigates issues of gender together with other social markers in the football context. Being a female researcher can become a valid category in some spaces, but it is still tightly connected to place, context, social capital and former encounters. The football environment as a field of study does not become dangerous for a female by default. The process of establishing “danger zones” is tuned with establishing who is a stranger and who should be disciplined. That evaluation also operates on assessment and reassessment of cultural categories ascribed to every human being. As illustrated in an example above, this evaluation might collide when the “stranger” does not realize when he/she has become one.

The most burning question that I had directly after the incident was, what was that security guard protecting? He marked a space that was off limit for me, but since I did not notice or interpret it that way, I became a trespasser and I was treated accordingly. Neither steel fences nor dramatic actions were needed. Boundaries were established on the spot and fixed by omitting other categories than supporter/non-supporter. Although I perceived myself as a multi-layered individual with complex identities, these were reduced when the guard needed to perform an action and his assessment made me into a dangerous stranger. In other words, enforcement of boundaries needs somebody who has already crossed the line (Ahmed 2000:22). It could be mentioned further that the guard established another position as he became dangerous for me. The protection, law and order that he symbolized turned into a token of mistrust and fear. In

that light it might be not that surprising that many supporters like displaying an abbreviation ACAB – “all cops are bastards” (field notes 2015).

The category of a supporter in this situation worked like other social markers – gender, age, or class. It became available for creating intersections with different categories and overshadowing them. The analysis points out that some social contexts, like football, can result in creating strong temporary identities that are prone to be evaluated by the outside. A “supporter” seems to become a set category, whereas “gender” becomes more of a flexible construct that can be overshadowed by an evaluation of being a “supporter”. The intersectional approach in this case reveals an interesting way of different categories gaining strength and/or taken-for-granted character. To onlookers, a “supporter” should be a bricolage made of other different markers, but in the field, it became one of the recognizable and understandable categories that make it possible to act and react.

Further, gender appeared to be a result of intersectional interpretation. Rather than being just one marker, in football it seems to be a construct of evaluations, expectations, and influences from other markers. That could help to explain, in turn, why discussing masculinity and femininity in social spaces like football is a challenging task. The grey zones in gender performance are a result of a complex structure of this category that undergoes different evaluations simultaneously.

After the match referred to in the empirical example, I needed several weeks to recover from the experience. Not that much happened and it was not a high-risk

situation in any way. Nevertheless, the physical force, the unfamiliar and unfriendly touch, and the objectification that happened in that case made me extremely aware of my naïve approach to that situation. However, I re-entered the scene some time later, also with away supporters, but this time much more “match-smart”. Sara Ahmed (2000:34) have problematized the concept of street wisdom, how to walk safely and where to go to be safe which applies to females as they are required to know when and where they can be safe, although men are definitely not excluded from the problem of street crime. In a sense, I learned in a crash course how safety depends on mutual evaluations. During the next match I was able to read the police much better, I was able to localize the police in disguise, and I understood the flow of supporters much better. To quote Skeggs, “experience informs our take-up and production of positions but does not fix us either in time or space” (1997:27).

Far from being a simply-definable space, football can be used as an example of male dominance, as sports tend to be presented in general (Connell 1995:54) but on the other hand it is an environment that offers possibilities of variety and also contesting existing categories. Moreover, the very character of football and its history as a socially constructed space has traces of more than one hegemonic and victory-oriented evaluation. Discourses about love, devotion and compassion, narratives of fan groups describing themselves as a family question the established picture of the ideal masculinity focused on competition and conflict.

Both men and women learn and are so-

cialized into being supporters. This process depends on the ideal, class, history, and gender as well, although gender is not a decisive category in those circumstances. The title of this article suggests prejudice and tough learning curves for females in football, which are put in place by broader social structure more than the football space itself. When attending a meeting organized by supporters, and filled almost exclusively with men, I noticed one individual with an impressive beard, actively greeting entering people and shaking hands with the club’s officials. Besides a football scarf, he was also wearing a T-shirt with a text: *This is what a modern feminist looks like* (field notes 2014).

Katarzyna Herd

Ph.D. student

Department of Art and Cultural Sciences

Ethnology

Box 192

SE- 223 62 LUND

e-mail: katarzyna.herd@kultur.lu.se

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