

## Review - Women, Soccer and Transnational Migration

Written by James Esson

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JAMES ESSON, MAY 24 2016

*Women, Soccer and Transnational Migration*

Edited by: Sine Agergaard and Nina Clara Tiesler

Routledge, 2015

It is now a little over two decades since the publication of *The Global Sports Arena: Athletic Talent Migration in an Interdependent World*, a seminal collection of essays on sports labour migration edited by John Bale and Joseph Maguire in 1994. The book was noteworthy not so much for its focus on the practices of so-called highly skilled migrants, as this was already an area of interest among academics across an array of disciplines. Rather, the novelty resided in its attempt to position sportsmen as a viable lens through which to examine and further debates over migratory patterns and globalisation. The emphasis on men in the previous sentence was deliberate, because the authors openly acknowledged that the text failed to consider the experiences of women migrants in the world of sport adequately.

The intellectual landscape on sport migration has changed markedly since 1994. This is particularly evident in the gradual movement away from conceptual tools and theoretical approaches associated with functionalism and/or structural historical narratives, e.g. world systems theory and dependency theory. There has also been a parallel gravitation towards micro-sociological perspectives informed by qualitative methods that bring migrant's agency and subjectivities to the fore. This is in contrast to previous work that was able to map and highlight general trends and macro processes, but did so in broad-brush strokes. Nevertheless, academic scholarship on migrant sportswomen still remains comparatively sidelined, and in many ways constitutes a sub-field within a sub-field. Given the increasing status and coverage afforded to female sports beyond academia, particularly soccer, it is bizarre that the majority of scholars, me included, maintain a conceptual, methodological and empirical focus on sportsmen that borders on the myopic. This parochial malaise ignores the experiences of a considerable population group thereby leaving what is already a relatively small sub-field intellectually impoverished.

It is for the reasons above that I approached 'Women, Soccer and Transnational Migration', which is a collection of essays edited by two of the most influential sport migration scholars, Sine Agergaard and Nina Clara Tiesler, with genuine intellectual curiosity and anticipation. This curiosity was piqued further upon seeing the headings for the book's three key parts; Part 1) Globalisation, migration and women's soccer: State of the art, history and current patterns; Part 2) Women's soccer across the globe: Case studies of migratory flows and experiences; Part 3) Developing transnational perspectives on sports migration: A conceptual framework. Put simply, these headings suggested that the book was trying to achieve the difficult but worthwhile triumvirate of highlighting old and current research, engage with wider debates taking place in the social sciences, and then translating these insights into conceptual tools that can be used to shed light on sports labour migration more broadly.

Additionally, I was tentatively hoping that the book would be able to do something that the vast majority of research on sports labour migration is typically unable to, which is to not only draw upon and engage with wider debates, but to generate insights that will contribute to them substantively also. In other words, it would be a book that non-sports labour migration scholars should read and cite. I was therefore pleased to see the editors state explicitly that contributing to studies of highly skilled women's transnational migrations was a higher priority than contributing to studies of sport labour migration (pg. 13). So did the book meet my expectations? My answer to this is almost.

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Agergaard and Tiesler manage to achieve something quite impressive across *Women, Soccer and Transnational Migration's* 12 chapters and 215 pages, namely, coherence and continuity. I did not expect to find this in a book that places historical research on migratory trends (see chapters by Jean Williams; and Vera L. Botelho & Bente O. Skogvang) alongside contemporary case studies of amateur and professional players' experiences from the United States (see Sara Booth and Katie Liston), Trinidad and Tobago (see Roy McCree), Brazil (see Carmen Rial), Japan (see Yoshio Takahashi) and Germany (see Gertrud Pfister, Marie-Luise Klein and Nina C. Tiesler). Moreover, these case studies generally used a range of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches to good effect. So how is this consistency possible? The answer to this question resides in the editors' positioning of women soccer players as not simply highly skilled migrants, but as highly skilled transmigrants.

Transnationalism is used throughout the book as a unifying concept to understand the economic, political and cultural cross border activities and practices of female soccer players from a range of social backgrounds, which is an astute move for two reasons. First, it enables the various authors to extend sports labour migration scholarship by allowing for a nonlinear understanding of migration involving multi directional flows and a multitude of actors. This allows the authors, most notably Thomas F. Carter in Part 3, to push back against the dominant macro-sociological analytical frameworks that often portray sports labour migration in a top down linear manner. Second, and perhaps most importantly, it gives the individual contributors conceptual space to tease out and critically examine the unique ways in which power relations associated with race, class and gender impact on players both spatially and temporally—while at the same time preventing the collection of essays turning into an interesting but disparate assortment of empirical and conceptual insights.

Some readers will argue that current work on sports labour migration must be quite stale if engaging with the concept of transnationalism is considered novel. To some extent I agree. However, to be clear, the point I want to make is not that the use of transnationalism is novel, but that as a unifying lens it allows the authors to potentially generate some remarkably fresh insights. Take the subject of the book as an obvious example. The case of female sport transmigrants is inherently novel because it inserts an alternative narrative into literature on highly skilled migration. As noted by scholars such as Findlay and Cranston, this literature is riddled with a heteronormative bias that customarily constructs the highly skilled migrant as a (white) male expatriate working in a secure white-collar job. Yet a key theme within *Women, Soccer and Transnational Migration* is that for many women soccer players, particularly those racialised as 'black', being highly skilled does not equal job security. In fact, many women soccer transmigrants live a highly insecure existence.

As indicated above, I think the editors and the various authors are correct in their assertion that women soccer players provide a useful analytical lens to further understandings of what it means to be a highly skilled migrant. Nevertheless, one of my main issues with the book is that although this assertion is frequently made, it is not followed through to the extent I was hoping for. For example, several of the more empirical chapters located in Part 2 of the book begin by making reference to wider literature on highly skilled transnational migrants, but rather than using the case of women's soccer to further these debates, the authors actually end up trying to extend work on sport labour migration instead. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, as one of the book's secondary aims is to further understandings of sports labour migration and it undoubtedly does so, particularly the final chapter by Agergaard, Botelho and Tiesler that provides a new typology of sport migrants. But I was left with a lingering feeling that the writers missed an opportunity to make a more substantive contribution to migration studies.

One example of where the book could have extended debates beyond the sport migration literature is the underlying argument that the combination of contractual insecurity, bodily characteristics and migrant status results in these elite athletes resembling 'unwanted migrants' and/or migrant groups typically associated with low skilled jobs. This is evident in the case of African soccer players discussed in Mari Haugaa Engh's fascinating chapter on gendered geographies of power and sports labour migration. The insights provided make reference to wider literature on gender and labour migration, and I noticed that the account resonated with existing work on demand for domestic workers, for example Bridget Anderson's UK based work on this topic.

Similarly to non-EU domestic workers who come to the UK to work, African soccer migrants in Scandinavia are attractive to clubs in host countries because of certain characteristics i.e. their race and gender, yet in both cases

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these same characteristics become mechanisms for their exploitation and low social status in a host country. My point here is not that Engh should have cited Anderson's work specifically, but that a deeper engagement with this and/or similar work on the interplay between race, gender and labour migration would have allowed for a more nuanced examination of the processes that allow these seemingly disparate groups to resemble each other. The outcome of this examination would have made for a contribution that would appeal to a wider audience.

The weaving of insecure temporalities, places and spaces as thematic elements throughout the various chapters is one of the book's best features. I have written about how migration within the football industry is innately uncertain, and how in some cases this uncertainty can result in human trafficking. I was therefore intrigued to find out about some of these ideas in relation to the women's game. Carmen Rial's chapter on the migration strategies of Brazilian soccer players provides a detailed and provocative account of how this uncertainty and precariousness plays out in young women's everyday lives. What sets this chapter apart from many of the others is that events within football are understood by interrogating the social context beyond it. Drawing on a mixture of secondary and ethnographic data, Rial not only shows that many of the women players who emigrate do so because it is the only way to earn a respectable living from the sport, she also uses Bourdieu's concept of Doxa to situate this desire to leave within a longer historical context of symbolic violence enacted towards women as a repercussion of racist eugenic ideologies. Sports labour migration scholars need to do more of this type of work if we want to make our presence felt beyond or subfield.

So would I recommend 'Women, Soccer and Transnational Migration', and if so, to who? This book is a must read for sports labour migration scholars, and I can see myself returning to it in the future. It maps out the state of the art within this particular field, while also providing insights on how to challenge prevailing conceptual and theoretical approaches that are perhaps no longer fit for purpose. Notwithstanding some of my misgivings above, I would also encourage those working in migrations studies to consider reading this book also. This is because while I may have wanted it to be bolder in its attempts to contribute to migration studies beyond the context of sport, at the very least it will encourage readers to question their assumptions about what it means to be a highly skilled migrant in today's society.

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### **About the author:**

James Esson is a lecturer in Human Geography at Loughborough University. He was educated at Newcastle University and the University of Oxford, and gained his doctorate from University College London (UCL). James has published several articles on the irregular migration of West African youth within the football industry based on funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council. You can follow him on Twitter at @dr\_jesson.