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Strategies of Adaptation: Post-Socialist Transformations of Romanian Women's Football in the 1990s

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of women's football in Romania during the 1990s was marked by significant socio-economic transformations following the fall of socialism. The abrupt transition to a capitalist economy dismantled the state-supported sports infrastructure, creating profound challenges for women's football. The players adapted to these conditions, utilizing strategies such as securing informal economic arrangements, leveraging social networks, and navigating resource limitations to sustain their careers. Oral histories, interviews with players and coaches, personal archives, and media reports provide insights into how football became an occupational identity. In this process, women negotiated systemic barriers, developing a collective identity while asserting agency within a male-dominated societal framework. The experiences of these athletes offer a deeper understanding of gender, work, and sports in post-socialist Eastern Europe, showcasing how football served as both a site of struggle and a platform for empowerment during a time of societal upheaval.

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Women's football in Romania gained official recognition in 1990, shortly after the fall of the socialist regime, which marked one of Eastern Europe's most turbulent transformations. The legacy of socialist policies, which encouraged mass participation and women's emancipation through sports, helped sustain the formal development of women's football in the first years after the December Revolution. Numerous women workers' teams had been competing in organized local tournaments throughout Romania for decades. Despite its popularity among industrial workers, football was deemed a masculine domain, and women's participation in sports was both ideologically encouraged and structurally constrained within state-imposed gender norms. Along with the post-socialist shift in governance ideology came the desire to align with broader European trends of increasing visibility and organization in women's sports.¹ In the first years after its recognition, women's football gained momentum relying on the inherited infrastructure and active athletes. More than 2,000 players were registered with the Romanian Football Federation (RFF) by 1994.² It took another two decades for the number of registered players to reach that level again.³

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The state's withdrawal from sports and the 'rush to adopt some variant of world capitalism as a basic organizing principle' led to the erosion of football facilities and resources that had once facilitated women's football.⁴ Despite official discourse, cultural and institutional actors continued to perpetuate an ambivalent attitude toward women's access to public life, making football a contradictory space through which gender regimes are constructed. By the decade's end, women's football almost disappeared, with only four teams remaining in the National Championship.

Amidst institutional neglect, privatization of resources, and persistent gender stereotypes, a group of women carved a space for female football players in the local sports landscape. Through adaptive strategies that resulted from a dynamic interplay between individual agency and social roles, football became an occupational identity. While traditional occupational roles faced widespread decline, for these players, football emerged as a means of livelihood and self-definition.⁵ They aligned their sense of self and societal belonging with the roles and activities tied to the practice of this sport. Football offered access to material, social, and symbolic resources that were rapidly disappearing for the ex-industrial working class. It was not merely a leisure activity but a vital form of work, a source of income, and a means of professional identity that fuelled their attachment to this practice. These women became elite athletes playing for the leading teams in the championship and were constantly selected for the national team. While it reproduced certain structural inequalities, football also provided a space for autonomy, resilience, and collective identity. Women challenged the gendered inequalities of the market economy by employing practices that helped them navigate systemic barriers, such as manipulating legal frameworks and working conditions, navigating informal economic practices, leveraging social networks, and relying on community support. The players' experiences encompass how these strategies were forged and served in their pursuit, not only as a source of material survival but also as a vehicle for agency and self-determination amid systemic marginalization. Oral histories and personal archives of players and coaches active during the 1990s, along with media accounts, are used to reveal how players navigated the disintegration of socialist sporting infrastructures and the inequities of market-driven reforms.⁶

The main research method draws on the experiences of a group of elite players as they represent the red thread that ties the fragmented developments in women's football during the decade. Two generations of women footballers dominated the 1990s. The first generation started playing when they enrolled in the workforce around the age of 18 to 20 during the 1980s when sporting activities were mandatory in Romanian factories. The players of the emergent generation of the 1990s discovered organized football by accident or were recruited by coaches of existing teams at a younger age, many while still in high school. To address these transformations, thirteen semi-structured interviews with players and coaches who were active during that decade have been carried out.⁷ The interviews had a dual role as oral histories and life stories to collectively reconstruct the historical narrative of women's football in Romania whilst also focusing on the comprehensive, longitudinal trajectories of the individual subjects. The accounts focused on sporting biographies, daily life, social perceptions of gender, the organization of football and social networks. These categories were used to create a comparative analysis of the construction of attachment, perception impediments, and

strategies of adaptation. Another source of data is their personal archives: photographs, videotape recordings of the games, and newspaper scrapings they kept from the local media.⁸ These resources served both as tangible evidence of the era's sporting landscape and as instruments used during the interviews to elicit memories of the moments they documented. In addition, all printed articles on women's football from 1990 to 2000 that were published in the leading national sports newspaper in Romania, *Gazeta Sporturilor* [Sports Gazette], were examined.⁹ The tone, frequency, and thematic focus of media coverage reveal the role of sports journalism in both reflecting and shaping the marginalization, challenges, and occasional triumphs of women's football within Romania's evolving cultural and institutional framework.

The methodology, rooted in oral histories, life story interviews, personal archives, and media analysis, stems from the significant lack of archival sources in the main institutions responsible for the administration and management of football. The Romanian Football Federation's archives before 2014 have been lost.¹⁰ The current National Sports Agency (former Ministry of Sports) does not have access to its archive as it is in a legal battle with the company contracted for its digitization. Thus, the players' voices are essential not only for understanding the local development of the phenomenon but also because they become guardians of their presence as athletes in the Romanian sporting landscape. 'There were thousands of us playing football, but it is like no one knows we ever existed', said one former player. The focus on individual subjectivities brings to the surface in-depth accounts of how women entering and participating in football construct and attach 'their own values and meaning' in the post-socialist context.¹¹ Oral histories bridge the gap between lived realities and institutional policies, offering a deeper understanding of how gender, labour, and sports intersected in the post-socialist Eastern European context. Unlike oral histories that emphasize collective memory, life story interviews delve into individual experiences, capturing how broader socio-economic and cultural shifts are internalized and navigated on a personal level.

The effects of institutional policies, market forces, and cultural attitudes on the dynamics of women's football in the post-socialist Eastern European context have received limited interest in academic research. Existing studies have revealed the decline of this sports phenomenon across the region during the 1990s.¹² As Jean Williams and Rob Hess note, historical neglect and trivialization of women's contributions to sports, compounded by institutional and societal biases, have long impeded the recognition and support of female athletes globally.¹³ Romanian women's football has hardly been of interest to scholars.¹⁴ Nevertheless, multiple studies have examined the first decade of post-socialism, focusing on the effects of political and economic transformations on different social strata.¹⁵ The players' experiences bring new perspectives on the post-socialist period in Eastern Europe by revealing the links between gender, football, and the new capitalist realities of the 1990s in Romania.

The Legacy of Socialist Women's Football

The formal recognition of women's football in 1990 gained momentum following decades of unofficial growth of the phenomenon among women working in the industrial sector. This development mirrored tendencies across socialist states in

Eastern Europe, which followed the Soviet model employing sport as a national and international propaganda tool.¹⁶ The state regulated sport as an amateur activity, free of charge, and available for everyone.¹⁷ To ensure mass participation, the socialist state made huge investments in infrastructure and facilities in educational institutions, public places, and workplaces and made sports compulsory in schools. The unions from all sectors of activity allocated a quota from the workers' mandatory membership fees to sports activities.¹⁸ Nevertheless, while socialist ideology promoted women's emancipation through labour and physical culture, institutional practices often undermined these aims by reinforcing patriarchal controls over women's bodies and public presence. Within this context, women's football emerged because but also in spite of the state intervention driven by worker initiatives and informal organizing.

The Romanian socialist state had an ambivalent attitude towards women in general and, implicitly, their participation in sports. On one side, it leveraged sports to dissolve class differences, prejudice, and reactionary attitudes, foster ideal socialist citizens, and internationally showcase the success of the socialist-state. On the other hand, it restricted access to certain social categories of the population, such as women. Though regulations formally guaranteed women the right to engage in any sport, men who dominated the power hierarchies often informally thwarted their access to such 'improper' activities as football. Women were a 'contradictory presence' on the football field, which disrupted traditional gender roles.¹⁹ The pursuit of women's emancipation through sports was kept within the limits of serving specific national ideological purposes. The socialist regimes' rhetoric promoted and celebrated the image of the 'working-class heroine' – wife, mother, and political activist. Women were encouraged to engage in physical activities as a way of becoming active in public life and as a way of achieving equality with men. Conversely, the state also prevented the concession of certain jobs, political roles, and specific physical activities to women. Official recognition was lacking, and the regime took measures to maintain gender hierarchies, including the cancellation of couplings with men's games and friendly international competitions during the 1970s.²⁰

Women footballers represented both the successful enactment of socialist policies and a challenge to patriarchal norms. Greene, Ackers, and Black define occupational identity as a socially and historically embedded construct shaped by the interplay between workplace practices, gendered segregation, and broader societal norms.²¹ This identity emerges not only from the roles people perform at work but also from how these roles are socially constructed, maintained, and resisted within specific cultural and organizational contexts. The resistance to breaking down occupational segregation reflects the embeddedness of these historical norms. The factory floor camaraderie described by Frances Pine – mutual support, skill-sharing, and the transformation of workplaces into social spaces – found echoes in the collective strategies of post-socialist female athletes.²² Despite systemic exclusion, these athletes turned football into a site of resilience, redefining their agency and self-worth.

Although a tightly controlled state-directed project that tended to create 'uniformity and not equality', several women's initiatives to establish a presence in the football stand as a successful manifestation of their agency.²³ Many factory workers started practicing sports like handball, basketball, or track and field, following state and factory directives. Some of these women shifted to football following top-down party

directives to establish worker women's teams. Despite its obligatory nature, women developed an attachment to this activity. Job security enabled them to participate. Football was perceived both as a reality and a diversion from the realities of living under communism. It offered the players a privileged status within the factory (as they would often leave the production line to go training) and their local community, where they became symbols of the factory's prestige. Several oral and press accounts reveal football as a ground for the development of women's empowerment, defying state-imposed limitations. For instance, the creation of the first women's football team at Rapid Bucharest, a popular sports club, stemmed from a woman basketball player's effort to recruit other athletes to the sport and negotiate the club's permission to compete against other women's teams.²⁴ Similarly, a group of handball players formed a football team and persuaded the men's football team leadership to allow them to train within their club and compete locally.²⁵ These acts of women's agency have set the grounds for future developments of women's football in Romania.

The implementation of these ideological pursuits was not uniform throughout the former socialist states. During the 1970s, as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) could not ignore the rise in popularity of women's football and shifted toward its formal recognition, countries like Hungary and Yugoslavia officially acknowledged it.²⁶ In a 1985 UEFA survey, Hungary reported 280 players and six clubs, Czechoslovakia 800 players and 22 clubs, and Yugoslavia 3,000 players and 20 clubs.²⁷ Meanwhile, Romania, alongside Bulgaria, Albania, and the USSR, denied having any football teams. Nevertheless, players' testimonies and personal archives, confirmed by former officials' statements after the regime change, attest that women were, in fact, playing football in various local competitions during the 1980s.²⁸ Although the state refused to legitimize it, during this time, all sources indicate a rise in the number of organized competitions and teams.

People really liked women's football, and I was delighted to have such a large audience, with so many supporters, mostly men, because they are the ones who watch football. You can't imagine! I will never forget these people! They didn't come only for the home games but also to the away games, just like supporters do for the men's teams.²⁹

Memories of packed stadiums – such as these recalled by Lucia, a former ICIM Braşov player, and by I. Mihăilescu, a former technical secretary at the Municipal Football Commission, who accounted in *Gazeta Sporturilor* in 1990 that despite institutional resistance, early women's matches drew 'full stands', contradicts the past regime's historical denials.³⁰ These perspectives collectively reveal how official narratives of socialist gender progress often obscured the realities of exclusion. Yet, the fall of the regime did not resolve these tensions – it restructured them. The ideological rupture of 1989 redefined the mechanisms of exclusion, no longer rooted in centralized control but in economic liberalization and institutional neglect.

In post-socialist Romania, women's football gained formal recognition but remained structurally marginalized. The paradoxical dynamics of the socialist period – inclusion through rhetoric, exclusion through practice – persisted under altered forms. Women were now visible on the field but excluded from meaningful participation by the logics of the market. The adaptive strategies and communal attachments developed under

socialism resurfaced in this new context as football once again became a space for reclaiming visibility, negotiating labour, and asserting agency in the absence of state support.

Post-Socialist Transformations of Women's Football

The post-socialist transformation of Romania's political economy in the 1990s radically restructured gendered labour relations, destabilizing the occupational identities that had been central to individuals during the socialist era. These shifts had profound consequences not only for women's work broadly, but also for their participation in sport. These structural transformations set the stage for the formal institutionalization of women's football in Romania, even as they simultaneously reinforced exclusionary gender norms and eroded the very supports that had once enabled mass women's participation.

The decade was marked by significant social, political, and economic transformations as the country shifted from a state-socialist regime to a capitalist democracy. Research done within the ethnographic context in former socialist countries during this time describes the implementation of a variant of capitalism characterized by acceleration and extreme speed. This period, described by Verdery as a 'collision of two differently constituted temporal orders,' saw the swift implementation of capitalist principles, resulting in what Kideckel refers to as 'neo-capitalism'.³¹ Unlike Western models, Eastern Europe's shift was marked by a rush to adopt capitalism, creating profound socio-economic disruptions. The post-socialist implementation of democratic ideals and capitalist reforms largely privileged male actors and excluded women from political and economic decision-making, leading to the reconstitution of a masculine public sphere and what some scholars have termed a 'masculinist democracy'.³² These changes obliterated and reshaped individual and collective identities, leading to a 'restratification of society'.³³ Workers, once central figures of socialist policies, lost their status and access to resources. Unemployment, job insecurity, and wage decline significantly altered the class structure and exacerbated social inequality. These transformations not only excluded women from full public participation but also ruptured their association with industrial labour, thus creating the conditions for women's football to emerge as a new site of identity.

The collision with capitalist realities has obliterated and fundamentally reshaped individual and collective identities. Many advancements achieved for women's emancipation during the state-socialism era faced regression amid the economic struggle of the 1990s. Privatization and the withdrawal of state support pushed many women into informal work characterized by low, undeclared wages and a lack of protection, benefits, and stability. The deregulation of the economy, combined with the reduction of state support for childcare, health, and education, profoundly impacted women's roles within the public-private dichotomy. Cultural practices of marginalization towards women were perpetuated and even exacerbated after the fall of the regime. The division between public and private spheres was reformulated to emphasize traditional gender roles, associating women with domestic and household activities while men navigated more freely within the public domain.³⁴ This shift and the higher female unemployment rate effectively excluded them from full public participation.

Women's football, a worker's sport under state socialism and part of the mass sports ideology, was particularly affected by these changes. While the loss of occupational identity has shaped a 'discourse of estrangement' that defined the new social stratification, the narrative of post-socialist women football players emerges as one of attachment to an activity that provides both physical and emotional gratification.³⁵ Guy Standing explains gendered attitudes towards adversities by considering that 'women were made more resilient by their need to adjust to difficulties in the Soviet era, whereas men were accustomed to a rather passive role during that period.'³⁶ This attitude continued to be cultivated through permanent adaptation to socio-economic exclusions and challenges throughout the 1990s.

In 1990, a process of decentralization began in Romania, and state politics and sports were seemingly separated. Rapidly, the state's involvement in regulating and funding sports would diminish considerably. The RFF rhetorically denounced the former regime's actions that hindered women's participation in football and implemented progressive measures. Women's football received formal acknowledgement from the newly founded Ministry of Sports just a few months after the December Revolution of 1989, on September 5, 1990. Building to that moment, on March 8, a committee convened at the Romanian Football Federation to initiate preparations for the first official tournament – Cupa Libertatea [the Liberty Cup] – which took place several months afterwards. By the end of the year, Romania had a National Championship of 42 teams organized in two leagues, and a national team was selected out of almost 200 players.³⁷ The success of these initiatives was rooted in the socialist state legacy, as the teams and competitions relied on the existing infrastructure and resources.

Formally considered a milestone in the history of women's football in Romania, the official recognition of the game responded to the political agenda of repudiating former institutional traditions and alignment with Western tendencies.³⁸ Although the decision generated a series of organizational changes, it did not necessarily reform the practices and attitudes within and towards women's participation in football. The overnight ideological shift and institutional restructuring gave rise to new 'principles by which stratification was ordered and justified' but would fail to eradicate exclusionary practices.³⁹ Women's football's dependency on the state was very soon replaced by dependency on the market economy. By the end of the year, officials clearly stated the profit-driven path towards which the RFF had steered: 'We have given [women's football] the initial spark, but we will have to break even with the investments we have made', said Albert Kassai, General Secretary of RFF.⁴⁰ State funding was drastically reduced in sports, and in the case of women's football, it was cut almost completely in the following years.

While men's football experienced its most prolific period in terms of international success, following the elite clubs' drive of the 1980s, women's football had very few prospects for financial support or profitability.⁴¹ The opportunities created by the football governing body became corrupt and subordinated to the free market drivers. Following internal power struggles that, to the day, still include unsolved accusations of corruption and FIFA fund embezzlement, in 1991, as a new-born legal entity, the RFF appointed 'The Godfather' at the head of the institution, a position he held for 24 years.⁴² His leadership is considered by recent members of the Commission of Women's Football and RFF staff members as one of the main contributing factors to

the late development of this sport.⁴³ He did nothing or undermined women's football by increasing participation fees and discouraging the existing clubs. 'He ruined us in the 1990s', a former women's coach recalls with remorse.⁴⁴ The main sources of income in football – sponsorships, TV broadcasting rights, players' transfers, or ticket selling – were not viable options. National media exposure was minimal. The women's championship had no broadcasting deals, and there were prospects for player transfers for profits.⁴⁵ Parliament's delay in voting on the sponsorship law made it impossible to find support from private economic agents.⁴⁶ Women's football gained formal recognition but almost no support from the state or other institutions.

The media is one of the main instruments through which the visibility and support for women's football have been limited by the new democratic leadership, which shifted toward capitalist principles. In 1990, the actions taken by the RFF caught the attention of the national sports media. However, in the following years, the pursuit of market-oriented goals by institutions and privatized media led to women's football falling into oblivion. For instance, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, the leading sports newspaper in Romania, covered 19 stories about women's football in 1990. In the following years, this number fell sharply to an average of just three mentions per year. By 1998, women's football had virtually disappeared from the national media due to a lack of notable performances and the overall decline of the sport.

Such disregarding attitudes continued restricting women's participation in the public domain, reinforcing gender hierarchies. Men's dominance of the public sphere and institutions 'reinforced the masculinist constructions of sport'.⁴⁷ As Petracovschi and Chin⁴⁸ noted, by the time the communist regime fell in Romania, the dominant social rhetoric had already begun transitioning towards emphasizing aesthetic, feminine beauty rather than athletic prowess. The new paradigm of the market economy further marginalized women's sports by promoting a narrow, commercialized view of femininity that often excludes athletic attributes, thus undermining efforts to promote and develop female athletics, including football. Media portrayals of female athletes were often patronizing and resided in 'benevolent sexism': 'watching the game [...] it's hard to say that women and football are in opposition'.⁴⁹ Women were praised for their 'sobriety, modesty, and ambition' and for 'not quitting'.⁵⁰ Their performance was often compared to that of their male counterparts and sometimes infantilized: 'The game left the impression of a child learning to walk [...] with rare glimpses of gritty steps'.⁵¹ Women's successes were attributed directly to men (coaches, managers, sponsors) or indirectly, as their involvement was seen as motivated by and as attempts to keep up with men's achievements: 'A performance of Romanian women's football at its best, with technical qualities that would make men envious and which raised the public's excitement'.⁵² Male and female journalists who internalized their colleagues' perceptions assessed gender performance and expectations: 'We wait with great interest and curiosity for the appearance of girls on the stadiums in clean, well-suited, and elegant equipment, beautiful and stylish'.⁵³ Masculine traits were selectively appreciated. Grit, determination, and resilience were desirable, but not aggression. An article covering a game with many injured players concluded: 'This is an unpleasant aspect, embarrassing for the members of the fairer sex'.⁵⁴ Women had to thrive exceptionally but also adhere to gender norms to obtain media coverage. With no TV broadcasting and national media coverage, women's football only achieved local popularity,

regardless of whether it was state-regulated or run by a decentralized administration. It never became acknowledged at a national level. In 1986 in Braşov, everyone knew about the women's team, but this was not the case in other cities. Liliana, who later became one of the best national team players, was 'stunned' to discover women playing football. No one in her hometown 'ever heard of such a thing'. Gabi, who later became the goal-getter of the inaugural edition of UEFA Women's Cup in 2001, found it 'ridiculous' when a coach who saw her playing handball called her at football practice and laughed. Several players 'stumbled' onto football through informal dissemination of information – 'from a friend' or through accidental visibility of local games when they were played on men's fields due to a lack of options. Despite local popularity in certain areas, the lack of national recognition and media support hindered the growth and development of women's football in Romania.

Institutional changes were framed as progress, yet they failed to address the persistent structural barriers to participation. Instead of sustained investment, women's teams faced rapidly diminishing state support and increasing dependence on short-term, unstable resources. Official rhetoric distanced itself from the socialist past, but the marginal status of women's football remained intact. While women were granted formal visibility in football, the conditions necessary for their meaningful participation were steadily eroded. Football began to shift from being a state-supported activity to a precarious pursuit – one in which women would increasingly rely on informal strategies to sustain their role as athletes and workers.

Privatization of Women's Football

Women's football in the early post-socialist years continued to be heavily reliant on the activity of the state companies, factories, and plants. The factory teams that emerged in the 1980s dominated the first official competitions. Old and new teams pertained to factories or companies, some of which were still owned by the state, some were in the process of privatization, and some were already privatized. Most players were employed in the production line, and their football practice was morally and financially supported by the workers. However, the instability produced by reckless privatizations and the outcome of economic decline were reflected in the precarious situation of the women's championship.

The emergence and disappearance of teams at a fast speed became a defining trait of the period. By 1994, the number of teams in the second division had already dropped to 21, and only 800 players remained active.⁵⁵ The industrial club teams were disbanded along with the factories to which they belonged. Newly emerged teams were short-lived due to the lack of returns on investments. In many cases, the new owners found more economic gains from restricting activity and selling the plants and factories' material resources to the point of bankruptcy than from investing for profit.⁵⁶ Not even champion teams were exempt from this. ICIM Braşov, the Industrial Construction and Assembly Company, and CFR Craiova, the Railway Company team, were the leaders of the first half of the decade's competitions. Like other factories, the local privatization practices led to the dismantling of ICIM Braşov. Similarly, the Railway Company went through fundamental restructuring. Contributions from the workers' wages disappeared within a few years after 1990 due to budget cuts

and layoffs. In 1991, Metalul Onești's club president 'confessed with honest joy that their team's sponsors are the employees of the privatized company Utilaj Tehnologic Onești along with the general manager.'⁵⁷ Within a few years, the team made it from the Second League to the top three First League teams. However, the sporting achievements were not sufficient to continue investing in the team, and by 1994 they were absent from the competition. As industrial clubs disappeared and new owners prioritized profit over community, women's teams were left vulnerable to financial volatility, administrative neglect, and eventual collapse. Sport's purpose was redefined from a state-supported project to a vehicle for private gain. The rapid and opaque transfer process of economic ownership of sports structures led to a violent form of entrepreneurship manifested through unilateral team restructuring and players' dismissal, the redirection of club resources based on private business interests rather than sporting priorities, and the arbitrary dissolution of formerly state-supported teams.⁵⁸ These actions resulted in the erosion of the sporting infrastructure and women's football activity. Winning the title did not turn out to be profitable as a long-term investment as players requested – if not bonuses, at least better training conditions. The clubs' management supported participation in the championship. Private owners paid the costs of salaries, food, accommodation for the relocated players, accommodation and travel expenses for away games, or organizing the home games. ICIM Brașov was the champion of the 1990–1991 and 1992–1993 national competitions. As budget restrictions were imposed by the factory and inflation was rising, despite the team's success and their strong attachment manifested through their presence in large numbers at their games, ICIM Brașov workers requested to stop deducting the sports tax from their wages. The factory could not afford to keep them so the whole team transferred to a private tire company in the same city. They won the championship for two more years as Fartec Brașov (1993–1994 and 1994–1995). Nevertheless, Lucia, a former player, recalls how things unfolded similarly for the 'new' leading team of women's football: 'We won the championship, went on vacation, and when we returned, they gave us the layoff decision.'⁵⁹ Champion teams found themselves in the paradoxical circumstances of being dismantled in spite but also because of their success. The RFF did not offer material support or incentives, and no potential significant sponsors showed interest in a sport that had no visibility. 'The Federation did not show any interest. I think one year they sent us a medal [for the champion title] by post', says Gabi, a three-time champion.⁶⁰ All the 1990s leaders (ICIM Brașov, CFR Craiova, Fartec Brașov, Interindustrial Oradea, Motorul Oradea, Conpet Ploiești)⁶¹ were considered economic burdens and were dissolved, most of them right after winning the title. The number of teams dropped severely, leading to the abolition of the Second League by 1995. The championship continued shrinking, and within the next ten years, very few teams emerged. Only six teams began the 1999–2000 competition, and just four were able to finish.

Privatization did not merely reduce institutional support; instead, it dismantled the material and symbolic infrastructure that had enabled football to function as a viable form of occupational identity. Without long-term investment, formal employment, or consistent support, football clubs became temporary and unstable, mirroring the broader precarity of women's labour in the post-socialist era. Yet rather than renouncing altogether, few athletes adapted to these conditions, determined to maintain

football as a meaningful form of work, identity, and community despite the increasing impediments.

Strategies of Adaptation to Football as an Occupational Identity

Emerging as an occupational identity against the backdrop of socio-economic upheaval and the pervasive collapse of traditional employment opportunities, football offered both material sustenance and a platform for self-definition. The contraction of industrial production made more women than men redundant in the post-socialist workforce.⁶² Fewer job opportunities were available, and women were marginalized due to employers' discriminatory practices. Women were perceived as unreliable, less qualified workers. Experienced players no longer had the steady industrial jobs that enabled them to practice football until 1989. If employment was found, old and new players had no leverage to negotiate their schedules to continue practicing. Thus, many players quit football. Sports – in this case, football – and work had been interdependent for decades during state socialism. Ceaușescu himself 'did not believe in the distinction between leisure and work'.⁶³ Women's football players' skills started being 'revalued and reinterpreted in the new economic context' and were now assets for 'getting by'.⁶⁴

During the early 1990s, while some industrial sites continued production, players from the leading team ICIM Brașov maintained a dual identity as athletes and workers. Their employment as workers closely tied them to their workplaces, where their roles as footballers continued to contribute to the symbolic capital of the factories they represented. Even though they were officially paid for blue-collar jobs, they were often excused from their formal tasks and were rewarded with bonuses for game victories. Football, practiced daily after work hours and integrated into the rhythms of their labouring lives, became both a necessity and a form of empowerment. As one ICIM player recalls, underscoring the seamless integration of their professional and athletic commitments: 'In the morning, we went to work, in the afternoon, to training. You did everything: cooking, laundry, and ironing. No one came to do it for you. You ran from work to the stadium, then home. We did everything, but family life was on the pitch. There was no family life at home'.⁶⁵ Women footballers gained a dual sense of self-esteem from their indispensability as players and their ability to overcome difficult situations to continue playing. Ideas of women as 'brave victims'⁶⁶ have been constructed in the socialist framework of gender differences. Receiving money to play football was an exceptional fact in women's football. Players on teams that belonged to small plants or still functioning cooperatives faced far more limited support. Their teams relied on small funding. Camelia, a player from Iași, recounted the tough reality of balancing football with demanding work schedules, often working night shifts to make time for training sessions. 'We had four or five trainings every week, and even though we were not paid and had minimal facilities, we asked for even more because we wanted to be better'. She refused a contract from ICIM and decided to continue as captain of her local team, where she felt 'indispensable'.⁶⁷

During the second half of the decade, women were obliged to find alternative sources of compensation. Football became more dependent on informal legal and economic practices. As the socialist state-built infrastructure continued to decline,

resources for women's football were sporadically available, leading to short-term investments in teams with hopes for quick profits. New team owners navigated these uncertain times by manipulating legal frameworks and working conditions. Women's football had no prospect of being professionalized. Financially, players often found themselves in precarious positions, compensated through informal arrangements. They were formally employed by companies that owned teams in positions unrelated to football. Nonetheless, these arrangements typically included performance-based unofficial bonuses, which helped alleviate some financial concerns. For the leading teams' players of the first half of the decade, victory bonuses were not a rare acquaintance as the championship had twelve competitors. The situation changed starting with the 1996–1997 season when only six teams began the competition. The moment marked the downfall trajectory of the women's game. New informal payment practices emerged. Private individuals – public officials acting in an informal or personal capacity or non-state actors – sometimes stepped in financially when clubs lacked the budget. Their stated motivations were local pride, personal ties to the club or players, or a broader interest in sports. The social capital acquired by the players was sometimes transformed into economic capital through informal practices. Liliana and one of her colleagues found a solution by being financially supported by the personal funds of the city's mayor.⁶⁸ The team's main sponsor – the Fartec Plant – cut the budget, and the players stopped receiving salaries or any financial compensation. Liliana and her colleagues had been local football stars for almost a decade, being almost indisputable national and regional champions. As they had a significant contribution to the symbolic capital of the city, the mayor offered to sponsor the continuation of their sporting activity. Mela also leveraged her personal rapport with management to negotiate unofficial payments and secure better remuneration. Her involvement in the club's triumphs, such as winning championships, not only brought her prestige but also translated into financial rewards like performance bonuses. She capitalized on this relationship by ensuring she was perceived as indispensable to the team's success, which made management willing to pay out of his pocket, allowing her to purchase an apartment.⁶⁹

The development of a resource-sharing culture among players and improvised solutions for access to resources ensured the continuance of participation in football. The marginalization of women in football by restricting their access to resources was an inherited practice across political regimes. The conditions in which women played football became more challenging. Many games were played with insufficient team members, games were held in dual-use grounds (used for both rugby and football), and muddy pitches made games look more like 'mud fights'.⁷⁰ Matches were lost because the host teams could not cover the costs for referees. Lacking the funds for competing in away games, the players travelled by night train so they would not pay for accommodation or by improvised means of transportation. In one instance, Gabi's coach 'found a truck with two benches and some hay. We travelled like that for 400 km, but didn't care. We really wanted to be at the game.'⁷¹ They created strong bonds with one another during comfortable or harsh travel conditions. 'Socializing is what we did most of the time. We had no phones or computers. We couldn't wait to see each other', says Dana, the player with the most national team selections.⁷² Having access to few resources (facilities, gear, and infrastructure) and almost no financial

benefits, women internalized overcoming these obstacles as part of 'the pleasure of playing football'.⁷³ Greene's study reveals how women workers accepted lower-paying, less prestigious jobs, in part due to internalized societal expectations.⁷⁴ Even when structural changes such as equal pay policies are introduced, cultural and social dynamics often sustain occupational segregation.

Altering or sharing equipment had been a long-standing practice as women's teams were denied access to proper equipment or resources. By the time ICIM Braşov's women's team won their first official title in 1991, they no longer depended on the men's team to bring the public to the stadium, thanks to their own performances. Despite this, women's championship matches were still scheduled at 9am, before the men's games. The final match of the 1991 season, which decided the women's championship's first title, saw a packed stadium. Lucia, a former player, had borrowed her football boots from a men's team player who wore her size.

Our game went into overtime. The boys were already warming up in the hall. I ran from the locker rooms barefoot while loosening up the laces and he was waiting barefoot in the hall, ready to enter the game. And I made it back in time to give him the boots. That's how it was in those days. We were all friends. It didn't matter that they were training on grass and we were training on cement. We had good relationships.⁷⁵

Lucia's story shows that while women were expected to adapt, sacrifice, and accommodate within a system that structurally prioritized men, the scarcity of resources also fostered informal solidarities. However, the material deprivation that linked people together 'in common suffering' across class and gender during the last decade of communism started being eroded by the retraction of the welfare state and an instalment of a permanent state of insecurity.⁷⁶ Privatization was not a uniform process, and some clubs managed to offer proper conditions to the players for short periods. The champion team's players attended training camps, received rewards and bonuses, and were taken out to celebratory dinners. Favouring women's teams created tensions between them and the men's team. Even though the latter lacked results, cultural expectations about the distribution of resources were to prioritize men's football. Eventually, the prospect of profits from selling male players prevailed, and women's teams were dismantled. Such practices reinforce cultural narratives that define what is 'appropriate' for men and women.

Official national team shirts were both symbols of women's success and emblems of the institutional disregarding attitude toward women's football in Romania. Their official equipment was what the men's team no longer used. It was oversized and caused a lot of problems during games. The first one they received was made of cotton, but it got soaking wet while playing, which hindered their performance. The t-shirts had large cleavages and sleeves, and the players had to sew them so they would not unintentionally overexpose their bodies during the games. Their shorts seemed 'like skirts', and their boots often disintegrated on the pitch. Women had to adapt the material world of men's football to their needs. The use of second-hand men's equipment stands as a visual representation of how the RFF treated women as 'second-hand athletes'. It forced the team to find improvised solutions that challenged the standards of international competitions. Having a limited number of shirts, they sometimes used adhesive bandages or nail polish to change a player's numbers. On

one occasion, when the referee demanded they change their equipment because it had gotten muddy, the players had to wash it and dry it during the break, as they had no replacements. The financial problems the national team players faced sometimes unfolded right on the pitch. In an official game against the Netherlands, during the Qualifiers for Euro 1993 (Netherlands – Romania 1-1) one of the Romanian players' boots tore apart. After the game, the opposing team manager took them all to the Masita store (their sponsor) and gave them full equipment. He got new boots only for the player who tore hers, which made the other players envious that the same had not happened to them.⁷⁷ These situations reflected Romania's structural unpreparedness to participate in the wider context of women's football while revealing that the international football scene was unaware of the local problems of women's football.

Players' equipment became an instrument through which men in positions of power assert their control over women's bodies and maintain gender hierarchies within the practice of football. It is a fetishized object of the male sexual gaze - 'come on! Exchange your t-shirts!' It is also an impediment to their athletic performance, through which structural gender inequalities are perpetuated by the RFF. Women appropriated the t-shirts as symbols of their sporting identity and achievements, which contributed to their social status in their local communities. As one player describes it: 'When we got selected for the national team, they gave us t-shirts and training clothes. We washed them and dried them on a wire on the balcony so they could be seen from ten blocks away.'⁷⁸ To the local public, the shirts did not showcase the problems embedded in them. They symbolized that 'one of their own' had become an elite player in a popular local sport.

The national team's participation in international competitions revealed to what extent Romania lacked resources like stadium facilities, gear, prizes, and even food budgets. After a successful start in training tournaments, when the team began attending higher-stakes competitions and faced stronger teams, the disparities were reflected in their results. In 1991, the Romanian team participated in an international tournament in Varna, Bulgaria, alongside teams from the United States, Sweden, and Norway. The players were asked not to expose their under-budgeted activity to adversaries, but it became obvious when they went to lunch and had to share pizzas because they had a small budget for food. Later, during the 1997 Women's Euro qualifiers, the match against Sweden was the first time they had played a night game. The team was not accustomed to the 'blinding stadium lights' and lost 8-0.⁷⁹ They also faced breathing difficulties due to low oxygen levels, which the Swedish players solved with inhalers. The clash with modern football made them aware of the limitations of their football practice and prospects. This caused additional forms of pressure besides the ones imposed by the competition itself. The players considered that there was 'no shame' in this, but rather, it enhanced their perception that their activity was no more than compulsory compliance of the federation with international directives: 'We were the last ones on their agenda because we "had" to exist. It was so clear from their attitude that they were pressured by FIFA.'⁸⁰

The players' mobility was emblematic of broader workforce trends where employees could be hired and fired without explanation. These strategies often heighten the stress and pressure of precarity.⁸¹ Players were forced to become more mobile in

order to continue their practice. As the teams were being dissolved, they began 'jumping from one lifeboat to another'. Gabi went through three teams dismantling: one after her first team (Voința Brăila) was promoted to the first league and two others after winning the national title (Fartec and Conpet). She and her teammates played 'wherever they could'. They would say: 'Maybe something will show up. And something always did'.⁸² The sudden disappearances compelled them to sort out a form of collective 'group hopping' solution to continue their football activity. Gabi and two other teammates commuted to a city that was four hundred kilometres away. They often only went to the games and trained independently in their hometown. Players who were not this flexible due to family responsibilities or because they pursued alternatives to their sporting lives ended up abandoning football. Nevertheless, in some cases, the social networks created through their sporting lives enabled their access to the labour market. After both teams with which she had won the title were dismantled, Lucia, who had a family, went to play for a second-league team close to her hometown so that she could still be part of the national team. Her former manager felt he owed her for the prestige she brought to the factory and managed to find her a job as a rent collector and then as a coach for a little league team. A football team's managers in Romania offered Cristina a job as a physical education teacher to pursue her transfer from Fenerbahçe to their team.

National team players found mutual assistance and emotional support to counteract the abusive behaviours of their coaches. Experiences of verbal degradation, physical punishments, and a lack of respect and empathy are met in all the players' accounts at one point. Insults such as: 'You kick the ball like a cow milks itself into a bucket' undermined their confidence and fostered a demoralizing training environment.⁸³ Lucia, former ICIM and national team player, recounted being slapped, kicked, and subjected to workouts as punishment: 'They [former coaches] would slap us, kick us, and then make us run 10 laps around the stadium on cement. Our legs hurt so much it drove us to madness, and then they'd still make us train on the gravel, sliding and getting covered in blood'.⁸⁴ Disciplinary violence was normalized as a training method and reinforced hierarchical power structures that left players physically exposed and emotionally unprotected. These behaviours not only inflicted physical and emotional harm but also created a culture of fear and compliance, which many players were forced to endure due to their passion for the sport and the absence of institutional protections during that period. Besides their intrinsic drive, they relied heavily on each other for encouragement during difficult times. They created strong bonds with one another during comfortable or harsh conditions.

I felt that with him [the coach] being a man and us being girls, there should have been a little more common sense. There wasn't. And people without common sense, I do not accept them in any form. Mainly because he offended us a lot and often shouted. And we all protested. Our behaviour at training was like we were forced, we acted with disgust and disinterest.⁸⁵

Such accounts of disrespectful and, at times, aggressive treatment women players received expose the entrenched power imbalances and gendered hierarchies that structured women's experiences during this transitional period. Rather than isolated acts of disrespect, the verbal aggression and dismissiveness Dana recalls reflect a

broader culture of masculine dominance, in which emotional detachment and authoritarianism were normalized coaching styles. Her critique of the lack of mutual respect and emotional awareness underscores how such environments systematically marginalized female athletes, not only through material neglect but also through affective disregard. Dana's ability to endure this hostile environment was not rooted in institutional support but in the solidarity cultivated among teammates. Through informal networks of mutual care and emotional reciprocity, women athletes constructed protective spaces in which shared experiences could be voiced and collectively processed. These relational dynamics functioned as an affective infrastructure – a buffer against the emotional and psychological toll of gendered marginalization in sport. Such strategies echo women workers' experiences before privatization came into effect.⁸⁶ During the socialist regime, the factory floor served as more than just a site of labour. It became a vibrant social space where women forged deep connections that extended beyond the confines of work. Relations among workers were characterized by mutual help and support, both emotionally and economically. These continuities between sporting and industrial spaces highlight how women adapted inherited models of collective survival to navigate new regimes of exclusion and instability

By the mid-1990s, the economic decline made future prospects in Romania insecure in all fields of activity. It is due to this that many players considered fleeing the national team and staying in one of the countries they went to for the away games. As legal emigration was hardly accessible to the general population, athletes saw international competitions not only as a stage for performance but also as a rare opening for economic survival and personal autonomy. On several occasions, the Romanian migrants the players met in the countries they visited offered them assistance in case they decided to remain there. Several players accepted and chose not to come back after a game away. One of them was Liliana, who, along with one of her colleagues, decided to remain in Israel. Following the proposal of a Romanian who had settled in Israel, they left the hotel where the team was staying.

How could I stay? I am Lili. I am playing for the National Team. I have the title 'maestro of sports'. 'How could I stay here and work?' I asked. And then he started telling me about the salaries there, of 1,000, 2,000 dollars per month. That's when I started paying attention. We threw the bags out the hotel window and left through the front door. We stayed there for eight years.⁸⁷

They threw their bags out the hotel window and left through the front door. Their papers and identity cards were left behind by the team staff. Liliana stayed in Israel for eight years continuing her career at Maccabi Tel Aviv. Liliana and her teammate's choice to remain abroad after a national team's match was not a political defection in the Cold War sense⁸⁸ but to seek a viable livelihood and economic opportunities. These individual decisions echo broader post-socialist patterns of athlete mobility across Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The liberalization of borders and the simultaneous economic marginalization of athletes created a fertile ground for talent outflows.⁸⁹ These situations highlight how football became a crucial means of navigating economic uncertainties and pursuing new possibilities beyond Romania's borders. Women, along with other players, overcame the impediments that appeared throughout their careers. For many players, participating in football was not only a way to

express their talent but also a potential escape from the limited prospects in Romania. This highlights both the allure of financial stability and the difficult decisions athletes faced, balancing their careers and national pride against personal well-being and economic survival.

Driving Forces of Attachment to Football

Football became a form of work, not as a traditional form of employment as implemented by the socialist state but more in terms of the newly imported neoliberal discourse of opportunity. It offered players access to material, social, and symbolic resources, which were rapidly becoming unavailable to the former dominant working class. All players have been part of that social strata, either as employees or, in the case of younger ones, part of working-class families. The advantages and status this social class had during socialism were obliterated by privatization. Football offered the possibility of income, social status and mobility, social networks and support, and participation in public life. These related benefits had been until the 1990s tied to the workplace. They were essential in shaping people's sense of self, community standing, and identity.

Despite the numerous challenges and turbulence of shifting economic and social landscapes women football players navigated during the 1990s, a profound attachment to football emerged and shaped their life narratives. Football became a social space that fostered unique types of reciprocity and cooperation where communal ties and shared experiences forged a new form of social cohesion among female footballers. This network was instrumental in navigating the uncertainties of the post-socialist economic landscape, where traditional forms of support were eroded. The solidarity found within these teams thus served as a vital resource, offering emotional and practical support that extended beyond the boundaries of the sport. Their discourses transcend the mere act of playing the sport, embedding meanings related to resilience and empowerment, as well as community and identity. The players were actively participating in shaping a new social reality. Football thus served as both a literal and metaphorical playground for challenging traditional gender norms and redefining what was possible for women in the public and private spheres.

While in the national media, the topic of women's football barely 'blinked on the radar', local media played an important role in the construction of the players' perception of self and their status in the community.⁹⁰ Local newspapers of the 1990s often covered stories about the games and the players' evolution. This had a strong influence on strengthening the community around local football in general and women's football in particular. The stories emphasized the relationship between women's performance and local pride. Women's football was portrayed as an important part of local identity, and the players became heroines and symbols of their communities and cities. Lucia still feels pride when remembering how people stopped her on the street and said: Even now, people stop me in the street and say: 'You are No. 2 from ICIM! Aren't you Luci from ICIM? I used to come to your games!'⁹¹

Football was an important means through which they gained local symbolic capital. People knew and respected them. Mela also remembers how she was recognized in the streets and valued by her neighbourhood entourage, who saw her as 'their

champion'. However, in Bucharest, a much larger city with five industrial platforms and the host of the most important men's football clubs in Romania, women's football did not enjoy the same level of popularity. The factory communities dissolved fast in the post-socialist years, and the games were attended by only a few spectators, mostly friends and family. During deindustrialization in smaller cities like Braşov, Craiova, and Oradea, where people's lives revolved around the plants they had worked for, football remained one of the last activities of the old factories' lives. Despite the harsh economic situation and the closing down of much of the industrial activity, people continued coming to the games. This inertia, which lasted until the late 1990s, fuelled the players' motivation and was a form of creating meaning. Despite her international experience, Gabi says that Braşov is where she 'knew what it meant to have your own fans, to have them come just to see you play and support your team'. Old material assets owned by the factories also contributed to keeping the fan community alive. 'The buses that used to bring workers to the plant were used to transport supporters to the games away. There were 7,000–8,000 supporters that came to the games against Craiova. Those years were decisive for how my life evolved.'⁹²

One of the main driving forces of the players was their activity within the national team. For a short while, the RFF covered the expenses to support participation in international competitions for the first squad of women's football. The intense activity of the early 1990s is reflected by the large number of elite players' selections. To this day, the top ten players in terms of game selections are occupied by the first generation. Between 1990 and 1993, the national team played 35 games by participating in several international competitions and unofficial games. During 1990 and 1991, they won three friendly tournaments. They seldomly received financial compensation, but the national team offered better training conditions, mobility opportunities, cultural experiences, access to performing in stadiums with facilities that were not available in Romania, and social networks. These related forms of capital gave the players a privileged social status within the context of 1990s Romania. International exposure challenged the societal perception of women in football. Players observed that in countries like Norway and Sweden, young girls participated in football without stigma, whereas in Romania, there was still scepticism about women playing the sport: 'We saw young girls practising football in a fully organized system, and it was so different from home, where people still said, 'Football isn't for women.'⁹³ This helped Lucia appreciate the global progressiveness in gender inclusion in sports and fuelled her advocacy for better conditions back home.

After decades of mobility restrictions, the prospect of visiting other countries was still an opportunity that the general population could only dream of. Although the borders were no longer closed, free movement was highly limited by international regulations and the lack of economic resources. The practice of illegally fleeing the country spread as there were no longer risks of extreme repercussions. People went to work in Western countries either by unlawfully crossing the border or by staying there without legal permits. The opportunity of international mobility was perceived as 'something very special' that 'changed their mentality'. Dana Pufulete also highlights how such experiences instilled a sense of unity and determination, particularly in overcoming challenges like inadequate equipment. She notes that their 'desire to play surpassed the lack of proper balls or gear; we would

glue our shoes at the cobbler and continue.’⁹⁴ Beyond the field, these opportunities enhanced their confidence and recognition, as they were celebrated by fans and respected within their communities. Their presence was enthusiastically received by the communities of Romanian migrants who had fled the country during Ceausescu’s regime or by locals who were drawn by the exceptionality of their story as residents of a former state-socialist country. Moreover, this experience forged deep bonds among teammates from various regions, creating a homogeneous team despite initial rivalries, as noted by Rodica, former national team captain: ‘Our scope was not to play better individually but to play better as a team and bring more points to our team.’⁹⁵

The persistence of these players in football, despite deteriorating conditions, cannot be explained solely through material incentives or institutional opportunity. It was sustained through emotional bonds, shared history, and the sense that football offered something enduring in a time of profound social rupture. For some of them, the symbolic capital accumulated back then still affects their present-day activities. It opened pathways for long-term careers in sports, from coaching to administrative roles, by exposing them to high standards of professionalism and inspiring mentorship from renowned coaches. Lucia, who coaches junior boys’ teams, says that some parents bring their children to her team because they remember her when she was a local star. They keep in touch with each other, but almost none with football.

The Legacy of Romanian Post-Socialist Women’s Football

The shift to a capitalist economy resulted in significant socio-economic disruptions that profoundly affected women’s football in Romania. The deregulation of the economy, privatization, and retraction of state support eroded the sport’s infrastructure and financial stability. Dependency on factory teams, combined with limited sponsorship opportunities and minimal media coverage, hindered growth. By the end of the 1990s, many teams had disbanded, leaving only a few struggling to survive. To navigate this challenging era, women footballers employed a range of strategies to sustain their participation. As state-built infrastructure declined, players turned to informal economic practices, securing fictitious jobs that allowed them to maintain employment while focusing on football. They relied on performance-based bonuses, negotiated support from local sponsors, and leveraged relationships with former managers who helped find jobs or organize team transfers. Collective mobility became another essential strategy, as players adopted ‘team hopping’ as a group practice, relocating to new teams and commuting long distances to continue competing.

Participation in international competitions offered vital opportunities, including better training conditions, cultural exposure, and social prestige. These experiences enhanced players’ resilience and attachment to football, providing a sense of progress and motivation. Resource-sharing and mutual support within teams further sustained their efforts, fostering strong bonds and collective solidarity that helped them overcome logistical and financial challenges. Football became a critical occupational identity, providing not only material sustenance but also a sense of agency and self-worth in a male-dominated public sphere. Women created symbolic spaces of empowerment and autonomy, using the sport to challenge traditional gender roles. While national

media coverage of women's football in post-socialist Romania remained limited and largely absent from mainstream narratives, local media occasionally provided moments of recognition that played a formative role in shaping how women footballers were seen – and how they saw themselves. These regional representations were uneven and often contingent, but they contributed to the construction of football as a legitimate form of occupational identity for women, particularly in contexts where club affiliation, training, and athletic discipline were embedded in local economies and community structures. In this sense, local media visibility – however fleeting – offered a space where women's athletic labour could be framed as purposeful, skilled, and socially meaningful work, even as national structures failed to institutionalize or sustain that recognition.

Notes

1. The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Women's Championship began in 1984 but gained prominence in the 1990s. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Women's World Cup had its inaugural tournament in 1991, following the success of the Women's World Invitational Tournament held in China in 1988. While the first edition occurred just after 1990, preparations and qualifications would have been underway during that year.
2. Ioan Motroc, *Fotbalul Feminin. Probleme de selecție, antrenament și joc* [Women's football. Selection, training and game issues] (Bucharest: Rodos, 1995).
3. According to the Romanian Football Federation, Activity Report 2014-2017, July 12, 2018, 64–65, <https://www.frf.ro/publicatii/raport-2014-2017/> (accessed November 1, 2024).
4. David Kideckel's analysis of the rapid shift to capitalism in 1990s Romania also helps contextualize the destabilization of sports infrastructure during this period. See David Kideckel, 'The unmaking of an East-Central European working class', in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Practices in Eurasia*, ed. Chris Hann (London: Routledge, 2002), 115.
5. Defining football as an occupational identity is based on Vladimir B. Skorikov and Fred W. Vondracek understanding of the concept: 'occupational identity, also alluded to as vocational, work, professional, or career identity, refers to the conscious awareness of oneself as a worker'. Vladimir B. Skorikov and Fred W. Vondracek, 'Occupational Identity', in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York City: Springer, 2010), 693.
6. None of the sources used in this research (interviews and press articles) indicate that women held coaching positions in Romanian women's football during the 1990s. All women's football team coaches were men, many of whom had prior experience coaching men's teams. During the 1980s, factory and party leadership appointed them to coach women's teams as part of workplace sports initiatives propaganda. Some of these coaches continued in their roles into the 1990s, while others transitioned from men's football driven by the illusion of future investments from the RFF and private actors. The dominance of male coaches in women's football paralleled the larger post-socialist labour landscape, where women were often excluded from leadership roles, reinforcing the idea that authority in sports should be exercised by men.
7. Three players who started playing during the 1980s, two male coaches who began coaching during the 1980s, and eight players who began playing during the 1990s have been interviewed.
8. 34 newspaper article scrapings have been identified in the personal archives of the players, most presenting match results and short chronicles. Some have been cut out without the date or name of the newspaper.
9. 43 newspaper articles that mention women's football have been identified.

10. The RFF claims that all the archives before 2014 disappeared when the leadership changed after 24 years.
11. Several studies have focused on individual experiences in Western Europe. See Kari Fasting, Trond Svela Sand, and Hilde Rørvik Nordstrand, 'One of the Few: The Experiences of Female Elite-Level Coaches in Norwegian Football', *Soccer & Society* 20, no. 3 (2017): 454–70; Sheila Scraton, Kari Fasting, Gertrud Pfister, and Ana Bunuel, 'Is It Still a Man's Game?: The Experiences of Top-Level European Women Footballers', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 34, no. 2 (1999): 99–111. The concept of women players constructing and attaching 'their own values and meaning' originates from Scraton et al.'s study of top-level European women footballers. Applying this formulation to analysis of post-socialist Eastern Europe reveal similar processes of meaning-making emerging in a distinct structural and historical context. See Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, and Bunuel, 'Is It Still a Man's Game?', 99.
12. Magdalena Zmuda Palka and Marie Stephanie Abouna, 'The Sociohistorical Challenges to the Development of Women's Football in Poland,' *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 40, no. 13 (2023): 1216–38; Dunja Antunovic, 'Beyond the World Cup: Women's Football in Central-Eastern Europe', in *FIFA Women's World Cup: Media, Fandom, and Soccer's Biggest Stage*, ed. Molly Yanity and Danielle Sarver Coombs (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 225–46.
13. Jean Williams and Rob Hess, 'Women, Football and History: International Perspectives', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, no. 18 (2015): 2115–22.
14. The only consistent study previously done on women's football in Romania was by Irina Costache, 'Femininity at play: a case study on a Romanian women's football team' (Master diss., Central European University, 2007). She based her thesis on 20 days of ethnographic fieldwork of a women's football team in Romania. She discussed the relationship between women and work, women and sports, and theories of the body, all within a feminist framework.
15. The post-socialist transformations in Romania have been studied in an ethnographic context. See Katherine Verdery in *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); David Kideckel, *Getting-by in Post-Socialist Romania: Labor, Body and Working Class Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). Both adhere to the concept of transformation rather than transition from socialism to capitalism. Their theories see the developments of the 1990s in Romania as characterized by the accelerated implementation of a particular form of capitalism that had a very negative impact on the working class. Similar studies in other former socialist countries that align with this view include: Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative Historical Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jacqui True, 'Gendering post-socialist transitions', in *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances*, ed. Marianne H. Marrchand and Anne Sisson Runyan (London: Routledge, 2000), 79–96.
16. James Riordan, *Sport, Politics and Communism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).
17. Reet Howell, 'The USSR: Sport and Politics Intertwined', *Comparative Education* 11, no. 2 (1975): 137–45.
18. Andrei Tudor Mihail and Andrei Răzvan Voinea, *Communist Football and Urban History in Bucharest* (Neuchâtel: Centre International d'Étude du sport, 2023).
19. Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (New York City: Free Press, 1994).
20. Between 1971 and 1972, Bucharest hosted a local championship won by Venus Bucharest, the Textile and Confection factory team, and an international tournament in the summer of 1972. In the latter, teams from Belgrade and Budapest were invited to participate. The cancelation of further editions surfaced after the events of 1989 in the national press: 'Fotbalul Feminin va Intra În Legalitate' [Women's football will become legal], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, March 18, 1990.

21. Anne-Marie Greene, Peter Ackers, and John Black, 'Going Against the Historical Grain: Perspectives on Gendered Occupational Identity and Resistance to the Breakdown of Occupational Segregation in Two Manufacturing Firms', *Gender, Work & Organization* 9, no. 3 (2002): 266–85.
22. Frances Pine, 'Retreat to the Household? Gendered Domains in Postsocialist Poland', in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Practices in Eurasia*, ed. Chris Hann (London: Routledge, 2002), 95–113.
23. Andrea Gál, 'Social Status of Hungarian (Sports) Women Before and After the 1989-1990 Political System Change', *European Journal for Sport and Society* 5, no. 2 (2008): 199.
24. Marilena Bara, 'Fotbal Cu F de La Femeie' [Eng. Football with an F from Female], *Povestivisinii.Wordpress.Com* (blog), December 7, 2012, <https://povestivisinii.wordpress.com/2012/12/07/fotbal-cu-f-de-la-femeie/> (November 2, 2024).
25. Unirea Tricolor Club was the Bucharest buses depot team.
26. Dunja Antunovic, 'Beyond the World Cup: Women's Football in Central-Eastern Europe', in *2019 FIFA Women's World Cup: Media, Fandom, and Soccer's Biggest Stage*, ed. Molly Yanity and Danielle Sarver Coombs (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 225–46.
27. Jean Williams, 'Women's Football, Europe and Professionalization 1971-2011' (Research Report, De Montfort University Leicester, International Centre for Sports History and Culture De Montfort University, 2011), https://uefaacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/20110622_Williams-Jean_Final-Report.pdf.
28. In the article, former football officials offer details of women's football competitions during state socialism. 'Fotbalul Feminin Ia Startul La 22 Aprilie' [Women's football starts on April 22], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, March 20, 1990.
29. Interview with Liliana Şanta, October 2020, by author. Notes in possession of the author.
30. 'Fotbalul Feminin va Intra În Legalitate' [Women's football will become legal], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, March 16, 1990.
31. Verdery characterizes the post-socialist transition as a 'collision of two differently constituted temporal orders' – a moment when the state-socialist logics of collectivism and planning clashed abruptly with the individualized, market-driven temporality of capitalism. See Verdery, *What Was Socialism*, 37. Building on this, Kideckel defines 'neo-capitalism' as 'a social system that reworks basic capitalist principles in new, even more, inequalitarian ways than the Western model from which it derives'. See Kideckel, 'The Unmaking of an East-Central European Working Class', 115.
32. True uses the concept of a 'masculine public sphere' to describe how in the Czech Republic despite the rhetoric of democratization, the restructuring of political and economic life privileged male actors and excluded women from decision-making spaces, effectively re-masculinizing the public domain. True, 'Gendering Post-Socialist Transitions', 79–96. In her work on the relocation of female activities in post-socialist Łódź, Poland, Frances Pine confirms the earlier claims that a 'masculinist democracy' has been established in Eastern European countries. Pine, 'Retreat to the Household?'
33. Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 56.
34. *Ibid.*, 48.
35. Tim Strangleman, 'Review of *Getting By in Postsocialist Romania: Labor, The Body, and Working-Class Culture*', *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 321–22.
36. Guy Standing, 'Societal Impoverishment: The Challenge for Russian Social Policy', *Journal of European Social Policy* 8, no. 1 (1998): 33.
37. All interviewed players who participated confirmed the number of women who showed up to the first selections made by the RFF for the national team. Interview with Lucia Cormoş, September 2020, by author; Interview with Camelia Obadă, October 2020, by author; Interview with Liliana; Interview with Luminița Carmen, September 2020, by author. Notes from all interviews in possession of the author.
38. By the late 1980s, UEFA had institutionalized women's football through its official competitions, notably the UEFA Women's Championship (established in 1984), and began integrating women's participation into broader football policy structures. Williams details

- how UEFA restructured its women's football governance starting in the mid-1980s, including the creation of women-specific committees, standardized competitions, and gradual integration into UEFA's long-term development and funding schemes. Williams, 'Women's Football, Europe and Professionalization 1971-2011'.
39. Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 56.
 40. 'Surîsul Fetelor Poate Încălzi Inimile...Sponsorilor' [Girls' Smiles Can Warm the Hearts of...Sponsors], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, December 10, 1990.
 41. The Romanian national men's team qualified for all the FIFA World Cup editions during the 1990s, reaching the quarterfinals in 1994.
 42. 'O poveste despre fraude, presiuni politice, interese oculte și o miză concretă! Pădureanu l-a făcut șef pe Sandu în '90' [A story of fraud, political pressure, hidden interests and a concrete stake! Padureanu made Sandu boss in '90], *ProSport*, November 24, 2011, <https://www.prosport.ro/fotbal-intern/liga-1/o-poveste-despre-fraude-presiuni-politice-interese-oculte-si-o-miza-concreta-padureanu-l-a-facut-sef-pe-sandu-in-90-9001588> (accessed January 21, 2024). The nickname 'The Godfather', refers to Mircea Sandu, who was the president of the RFF from 1990 to 2014. He has been sent to trial several times after losing his mandate.
 43. Based on interviews done in 2020 and 2021 with the Women's Football Committee and RFF members. Interview with coach Victor [anonymized following subject's request], August 2020, by author; Interview with Ana [anonymized following subject's request], September 2020, by author. Notes from both interviews in possession of the author.
 44. Interview with Tudose Miron, January 2021, by author. Notes in possession of the author.
 45. The Pro-X TV station bought the first television rights for the national's team games in 2019.
 46. Law no. 32/19.05.1994, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/4058> (accessed June 1, 2024).
 47. Antunovic, 'Beyond the World Cup: Women's Football in Central-Eastern Europe', 233.
 48. Simona Petracovschi and Jessica W. Chin, 'Sports, Physical Practice, and the Female Body, 1980–1989: Women's Emancipation in Romania under Communism', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 36, no. 1 (2019): 35–57.
 49. 'Patru Fete Optimiste' [Four Optimistic Girls], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, October 24, 1990.
 50. 'Fetele Au Jucat (Între Ele) Pe Litoral... Vizînd Participarea, În Perspectivă La C.E.' [The Girls Played (Among Themselves) At The Seaside... Aiming To Participate, In Perspective At the European Championship], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, August 9, 1990; 'Fetele Nu Se Lasă.' [Girls Don't Give Up.], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, April 12, 1990.
 51. 'O... Maradona A I.M.G.B-Ului! Chiar Așa?' [A... Maradona of I.M.G.B! Is that so?], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, November 11, 1990.
 52. 'Spectacol Atractiv La Echipa Națională.' [Attractive show at the national team], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, May 24, 1990.
 53. 'Fotbalul Feminin Ia Startul La 22 Aprilie.' [Women's football starts on April 22.], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, March 20, 1990.
 54. 'Accente. Fotbal Fete Și... Tărgi.' [Accents. Girls soccer and... Stretchers], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, May 16, 1991.
 55. Motroc, *Fotbal Feminin*; Iulian Vilcu and Liviu Buluș, *Fotbalul Feminin in lume și la noi* [Women's football around the world and here] (Bucharest: Pallas, 1994).
 56. Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*
 57. 'Tur de Orizont în Fotbalul Feminin' [Horizon tour in women's football], *Gazeta Sporturilor*, February 14, 1991.
 58. As Jim Riordan illustrates in his analysis of Russian football, the collapse of socialist institutions opened space for what Vadim Volkov terms 'violent entrepreneurship', a form of predatory privatization in which former state actors and new elites seized control of sports structures through coercive, opaque, and often criminal means. The concept describes not physical violence but the disruptive and coercive modes of club ownership and management that emerged in the early 1990s. While the Romanian case diverged in scale and visibility, similar logic shaped the restructuring of women's football. The abrupt

- changes and aggressive practices, while less overtly violent than in the Russian context, still reflect a coercive and destabilizing mode of transition that prioritized profit over players' welfare or institutional continuity. Jim Riordan, 'Football: Nation, City and the Dream. Playing the Game for Russia, Money and Power', *Soccer & Society* 8, no. 4 (2007): 546; Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).
59. Interview with Lucia Cormoș.
 60. Interview with Gabi Enache, October 2020, by author. Notes in possession of the author. She was a three-time National Champion: 1994–1995 with Fartec Brașov, 1998–1999 and 1999–2000 with Conpet Ploiești.
 61. All teams relied on communist built sporting infrastructure and or on the players of the former state factories and companies: ICIM Brașov; CFR; Fartec Brașov – A private tire company that transferred the whole team from ICIM Brașov after being dissolved; Interindustrial Oradea – The team of the Oil Industrial Plant in Oradea; Motorul Oradea – Similar to the situation in Brașov, the team Interindustrial became the team of Motorul Oradea; Conpet Ploiești – The team of the Oil Transportation State Company.
 62. Several studies conducted during the 1990s revealed multiple sources that attest to the precarious situation of Romanian women. According to Nahid Aslanbeigui, Steven Pressman, and Gale Summerfield, *Women in the Age of Economic Transformation: Gender Impact of Reforms in Post-Socialist and Developing Countries* (London: Routledge, 1994), 'of the more than one million persons unemployed in October 1993 (9.2 per cent of the workforce), 55 per cent (575,384) were women (Romania liberă, 19 October 1993)', 53. Kideckel confirms this data. David Kideckel, 'The unmaking of an East- Central European working class', in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Practices in Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2002), 121.
 63. Florin Poenaru, 'Power at Play: Soccer Stadiums and Popular Culture in 1980s Romania', in *Socialist Escapes. Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, ed. Cathleen M. Giustino, Catherine J. Plum, and Alexander Vari (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 239.
 64. Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 58. David Kideckel coined the term 'getting by' for the strategies of resistance of those in positions of 'subalternity'—the Valea Jiului coal miners. Kideckel, 'Getting by in Post-Socialist Romania', 9.
 65. Interview with Lucia Cormoș.
 66. Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 58.
 67. Interview with Camelia Obadă.
 68. Interview with Liliana Șanta.
 69. Interview with Mihaela Burtică, December 2020, by author. Notes in possession of the author.
 70. Interview with Gabriela Enache, January 2021, by author. Notes in possession of the author.
 71. Ibid.
 72. Interview Dana Pufulete.
 73. Interview with Mihaela Năftică, January 2021, by author. Notes in possession of the author.
 74. Greene, Ackers, and Black, 'Going against the historical grain.'
 75. Interview with Lucia Cormoș.
 76. Kideckel, 'The Unmaking of an East- Central European Working Class', 118.
 77. Interview with Lucia Cormoș.
 78. Ibid.
 79. Interview with Dana Pufulete, January 2021, by author. Notes in possession of the author.
 80. Interview with Gabriela Enache.
 81. Gerard A. Weber, "'I Was Both the Man and the Woman": Gender Stratification in Communist and Post-Communist Romania', *Analyze: Journal of Gender & Feminist Studies* 9 (2017): 13.
 82. Interview with Gabriela Enache.
 83. Interview with Dana Pufulete.