

The demographic evolution of the principal women's football leagues (2017-2021)

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1. Introduction

The popular interest generated from the 2000s onwards by large events between women's national football teams has strongly stimulated investment also on a club level. In Europe, notably, more and more of the most competitive men's teams took keenly to setting up strongly performing women's squads.

The economic growth of women's football has led to several changes in the configuration of their labour market. This report studies the changes occurred during the past five years (four for Spain) in ten of the principal competitions worldwide from the aspect of the players' age, the percentage of expatriate footballers in teams, as well as that of full international players.

The sample is made up of players present at least once on the bench during matches played over the season. For the COVID 2020 year, the American NWSL was replaced by an autumn tournament. With regard to the current 2021 season, the values refer to the situation on the 7th June. Since 2017, the average number of players per squad has increased steadily with the exception of a slight drop in 2020.

Figure 1: average number of players per club, ten principal women's leagues (2017-2021)

[2017]	season 2016/17 or 2017	24.24	
[2018]	season 2017/18 or 2018	24.98	
[2019]	season 2018/19 or 2019	25.39	
[2020]	season 2019/20 or 2020	24.98	
[2021]	season 2020/21 or 2021	25.78	

2. Age evolution

Corollary to the professionalisation of women's football, the players' average age on the pitch (calculated on the 1st January of each year) has risen continually over the past five seasons: from 24.3 in June 2017 to 25.3 in June 2021. The evolution towards more experienced footballers was particularly notable in two well-structured leagues: the American NWSL (+2.1 years of age) and the English Women's Super League (+1.9 years of age). By championship, in 2021, the values vary between 22.0 years of age in the Dutch Eredivisie and 27.8 in the American NWSL.

In June 2021, six out of the eight teams with the oldest players on the pitch were from the United States. The highest value was measured for Orlando Pride: 29.5 years of age on average. Conversely, five Dutch teams were the youngest of the 115 surveyed. The footballers in the least experienced team, VV Alkmaar, had an average age of just 19.5. This result reflects the position of the Netherlands as a stepping-stone for young talents.

Figure 2: average age on the pitch, ten principal women's leagues (2017-2021)

[2017]	season 2016/17 or 2017	24.3	
[2018]	season 2017/18 or 2018	24.6	
[2019]	season 2018/19 or 2019	24.8	
[2020]	season 2019/20 or 2020	24.9	
[2021]	season 2020/21 or 2021	25.3	

Figure 3: average age on the pitch, by league (2021)




















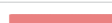








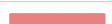
[NED]	Eredivisie Women	22.0	
[NOR]	Toppserien	23.4	
[GER]	Frauen Bundesliga	24.3	
[AUS]	W-League	24.3	
[SWE]	Damallsvenskan	25.4	
[ITA]	Serie A Women	25.5	
[FRA]	Féminine Division 1	25.7	
[ESP]	Primera División Femenina	25.8	
[ENG]	Women's Super League	26.1	
[USA]	NWSL	27.8	

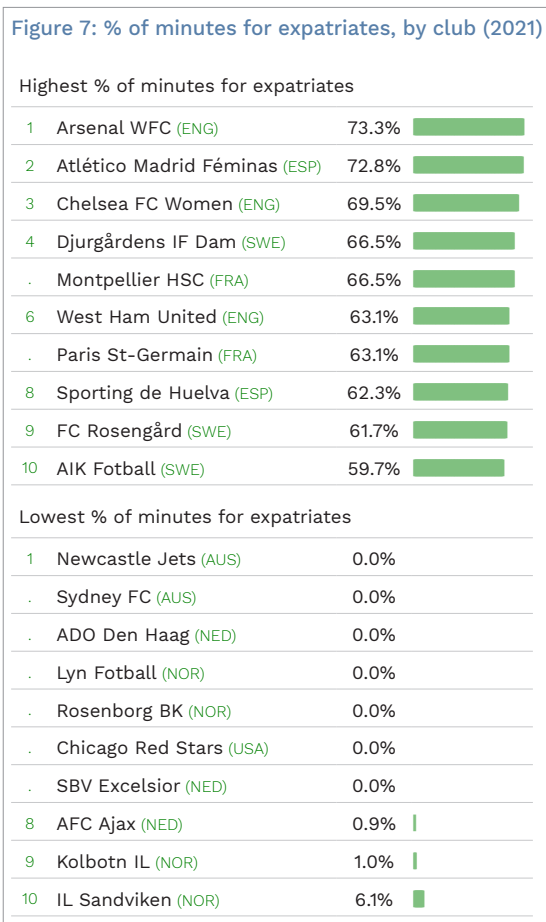
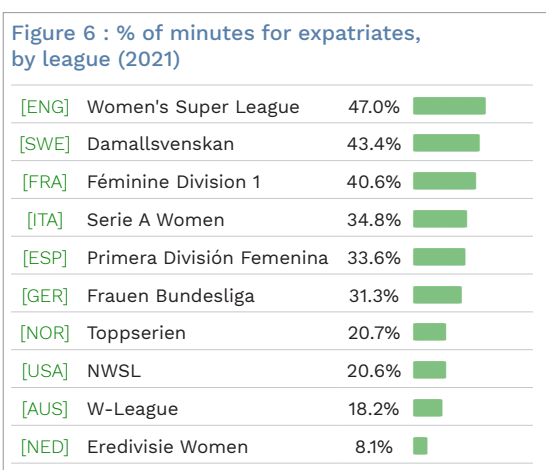
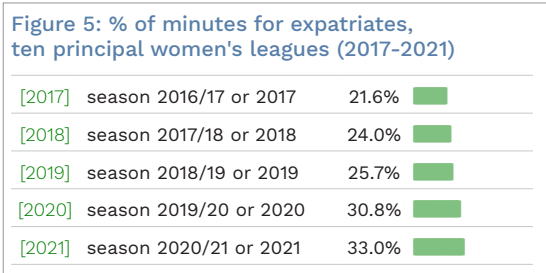
Figure 4: average age on the pitch, by club (2021)

Youngest teams (years)			
1	VV Alkmaar (NED)	19.5	
2	SC Heerenveen (NED)	21.1	
3	PEC Zwolle (NED)	21.3	
4	SBV Excelsior (NED)	21.6	
5	ADO Den Haag (NED)	21.9	
6	Lyn Fotball (NOR)	22.0	
7	SGS Essen 19/68 (GER)	22.1	
8	Kolbotn IL (NOR)	22.2	
9	1. FFC Turbine Potsdam (GER)	22.6	
.	Klepp IL (NOR)	22.6	
Oldest teams (years)			
1	Orlando Pride (USA)	29.5	
2	NJ/NY Gotham FC (USA)	28.9	
3	AC Milan (ITA)	28.6	
.	FC Rosengård (SWE)	28.6	
.	OL Reign (USA)	28.6	
6	Portland Thorns FC (USA)	28.5	
7	Kansas City (USA)	28.3	
8	North Carolina Courage (USA)	28.1	
9	UDG Tenerife (ESP)	27.6	
10	Vittsjö GIK (SWE)	27.5	

3. Evolution of expatriates

















The economic development of women's club football has had as a corollary the increase in the international mobility of players. The growth in the percentage of expatriate footballers, those who grew up in a different association than that of their employer club, is an expression of this process. From 21.6% in June 2017, the percentage of expatriates increased to 33.0% in June 2021. This internationalisation was particularly strong in the English Women's Super League (+19.6%). By league, in 2021, the level of expatriates ranges from just 8.1% in the Dutch Eredivisie Women to 47.0% in the Women's Super League.

Many of the most competitive teams are made up of a majority of players who have grown up in a national association different from that of the club they represent. This is notably the case for Arsenal WFC and Atlético de Madrid Féminas, where expatriate footballers played over 70% of match time. This figure was over 50% in 20 of the 115 clubs studied. The lowest percentage was recorded for seven teams (0.0%).



With regard expatriates, the United States stand out as the main origin. With 87 footballers abroad, they are more than twice as numerous as the second most represented foreign origin, Sweden (39). American citizens are present in all the leagues studied, with a maximum of 20 players both in Spain and in France. In total, 70 associations had at least one expatriate present in one of the ten championships analysed.

Figure 8: principal origins of expatriates, ten principal women's leagues (2021)

Country	Confed.	Number
 USA	CONCACAF	87
 Sweden	UEFA	39
 Canada	CONCACAF	37
 Germany	UEFA	36
 Denmark	UEFA	35
 Netherlands	UEFA	33
 Australia	AFC	30
 Finland	UEFA	30
 Brazil	CONMEBOL	29
 Switzerland	UEFA	25
 France	UEFA	25
 Iceland	UEFA	25
 England	UEFA	24
 Norway	UEFA	24
 Scotland	UEFA	21
 Austria	UEFA	21

4. Evolution of full internationals

The stronger expatriate presence goes hand in hand with an increase in the percentage of players with national A-team caps. The percentage of minutes by full internationals has increased from 39.9% in 2017 to 45.9% in 2021. During last season, internationals played more than half of the minutes in three championships: the English Women's Super League (66.2%), the American NWSL (52.9%) and the French Féminine Division 1 (50.7%).

With 23 of the June 2021 squad members having experience in a national A-team selection, the Germans of Wolfsburg hold the record for the most internationals. Five other teams have at least 20 full internationals: Chelsea FC, Club Atlético de Madrid, FC Bayern München, Olympique Lyonnais and Arsenal WFC. This list shows the considerable impact of the big men's clubs on the evolution of women's football.

Figure 9: % of minutes for full internationals, ten principal women's leagues (2017-2021)

[2017]	season 2016/17 or 2017	39.9%	
[2018]	season 2017/18 or 2018	41.4%	
[2019]	season 2018/19 or 2019	43.5%	
[2020]	season 2019/20 or 2020	45.8%	
[2021]	season 2020/21 or 2021	45.9%	

Figure 10: % of minutes for full internationals, by league (2021)

[ENG]	Women's Super League	66.2%	
[USA]	NWSL	52.9%	
[FRA]	Féminine Division 1	50.7%	
[GER]	Frauen Bundesliga	48.7%	
[SWE]	Damallsvenskan	48.3%	
[ITA]	Serie A Women	47.9%	
[ESP]	Primera División Femenina	43.0%	
[AUS]	W-League	28.1%	
[NOR]	Toppserien	26.7%	
[NED]	Eredivisie Women	17.9%	

Figure 11: number of full internationals, by club (2021)

1	VfL Wolfsburg (GER)	23	
2	Atlético Madrid Fémimas (ESP)	22	
3	Bayern München (GER)	21	
4	Chelsea FC Women (ENG)	21	
5	Arsenal WFC (ENG)	20	
.	Olympique Lyonnais (FRA)	20	
7	Juventus FC (ITA)	19	
.	FC Barcelona (ESP)	19	
.	Manchester City WFC (ENG)	19	
10	Paris Saint Germain (FRA)	18	
.	Manchester United WFC (ENG)	18	
12	Everton WFC (ENG)	17	
.	AS Roma (ITA)	17	
14	Reading WFC (ENG)	15	
.	West Ham United (ENG)	15	
.	North Carolina Courage (USA)	15	
.	Montpellier HSC (FRA)	15	
.	AC Milan (ITA)	15	
.	BK Häcken (SWE)	15	
.	Levante UD (ESP)	15	

5. Conclusion

The growing influence of the major men's clubs in the sphere of women's football has brought about profound structural changes in the latter. The fresh capital invested has notably stimulated the international mobility of women footballers. In the ten leagues studied, the percentage of expatriates has increased from 21.6% in 2017 to a record 33.0% in 2021.

The development of women's football in Europe has encouraged more and more players from the United States to emigrate. In 2021, with 87 citizens abroad in the championships studied, the United States were by far the most represented expatriate origin, ahead of Sweden (39 players) and Canada (37 players).

The increasing dominance of the traditionally men's clubs in women's football is also a phenomenon highlighted by the study. It is clearly visible when looking through the rankings of the teams with the greatest number of full internationals. In the first 15 places of this table are 14 teams whose male counterparts play in one of the five major European championships (the big-5). This trend will certainly continue in the coming years.