

Worldwide demographic analysis of women's football

Drs Raffaele Poli, Loic Ravenel and Roger Besson

Introduction

Women's football steadily grows and the process of professionalisation is continuing. Although still comparatively less available than for men, data on the demographic profile of female players is now more accessible for women. This report analyses the composition of 223 teams from 19 leagues around the world: 14 European and 5 non-European.

The data presented refers to the 2023/24 or 2024 seasons, depending on the competition calendar. The sample includes all footballers in the first team squad of clubs in the leagues surveyed, regardless of their playing time. The analysis focuses on age and the presence of expatriate players, i.e. footballers who play outside the association where they grew up, that they left for footballing reasons.

Figure 1 : sample of the study (May 2024)

Clubs	Clubs	Players	/club
 A-League Women (AUS)	12	295	24.6
 Brasileiro Feminino (BRA)	16	442	27.6
 Kvindeliga (DEN)	8	226	28.3
 Women's Super League (ENG)	12	333	27.8
 Kansallinen Liiga (FIN)	10	218	21.8
 Féminine Division 1 (FRA)	12	352	29.3
 Frauen Bundesliga (GER)	12	324	27.0
 Úrvalsdeild Women (ISL)	10	214	21.4
 Serie A Women (ITA)	10	298	29.8
 WE League (JPN)	12	323	26.9
 Eredivisie Women (NED)	12	317	26.4
 Toppserien (NOR)	10	226	22.6
 Superliga Women (RUS)	13	262	20.2
 Women's Premier League (KSA)	8	215	26.9
 SWPL 1 (SCO)	12	336	28.0
 Primera División Femenina (ESP)	16	447	27.9
 Damallsvenskan (SWE)	14	307	21.9
 Super League Women (SUI)	10	271	27.1
 NWSL (USA)	14	342	24.4
Total 19 leagues	223	5'682	25.5

Age analysis

The age analysis takes into account the playing time of each footballer. The data presented therefore represent values measured "on the pitch". Across the 19 leagues analysed, the average age of line-ups fielded was 25.2 years. Northern European clubs are the most likely to use young female players, while two non-European leagues are the oldest: the Brasileiro Feminino and the NWLS in the United States.

The Finnish Kansallinen Liiga is the only competition studied where the 22-25 age group is not the most represented on the pitch. In total, footballers in this age group played 41% of the minutes, compared with 25% for players aged 26-29. Young footballers (aged 21 or under) were also used more than experienced ones (aged 30 or over), with significant differences between leagues.

Figure 2: average age on the pitch, per league

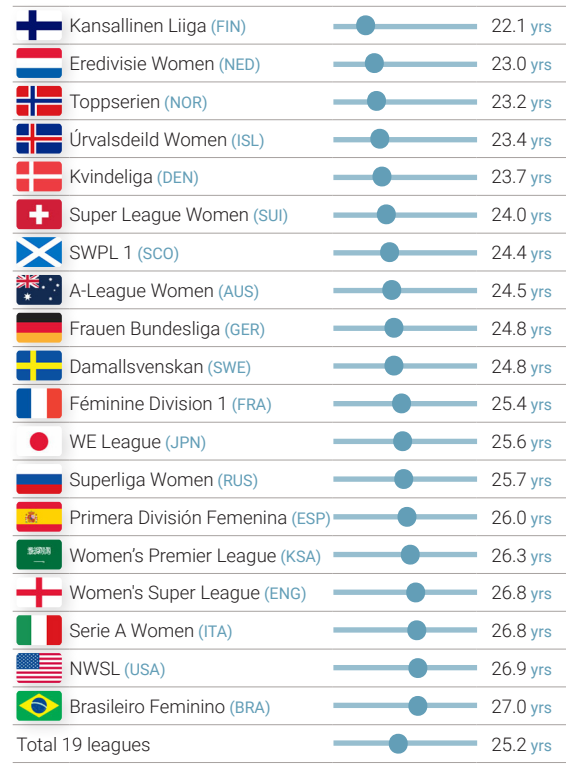
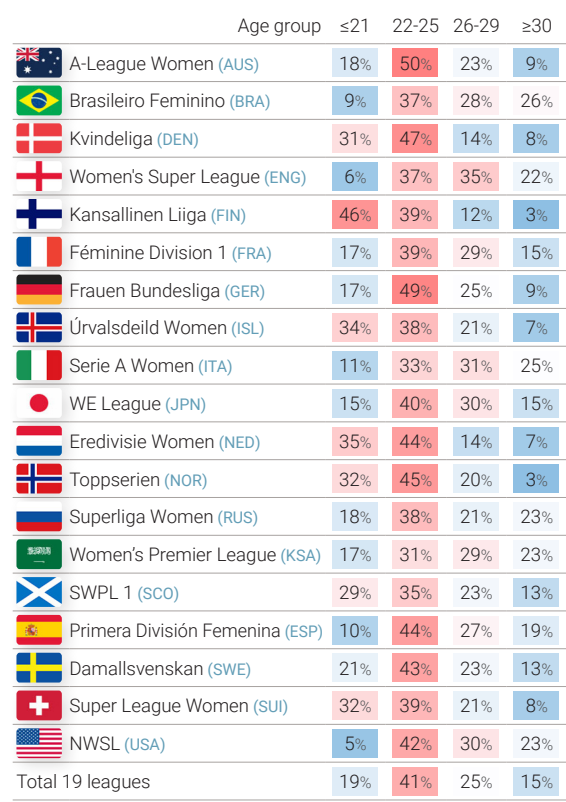


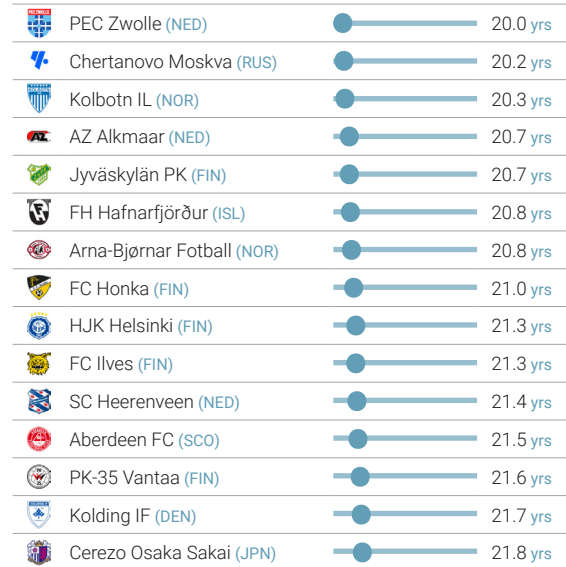
Figure 3: percentage of minutes, per age group



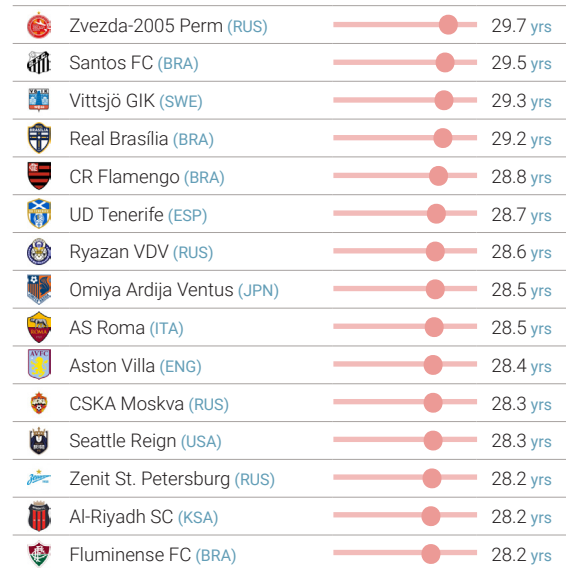
By club, the average age on the pitch ranges from 29.7 years for Russian side Zvezda Perm to 20.0 for the Dutch of PEC Zwolle. Three Brazilian clubs are among the five oldest (Santos, Real Brasília and Flamengo), reflecting the reluctance of teams in this country to give young players a chance. In contrast, four Finnish clubs feature among the ten youngest, reflecting a strong desire to promote up-and-coming talent.

Figure 4: average age on the pitch

(a) Youngest teams



(b) Oldest teams



Expatriate analysis

As with the men, the number of women playing outside the association where they grew up continues to rise. In total, in May 2024, there were no fewer than 1,320 expatriate footballers in the 19 leagues analysed, representing 23.2% of squads. The 12 clubs from the English Women's Super League had a record of 181 players who grew up in a foreign association in their ranks (15.1 per club).

Overall, expatriates played 28.4% of the minutes, with great differences between competitions. Footballers imported from abroad played a majority of the minutes in England's Women's Super League (61.3%) and Italy's Serie A (50.7%). The percentage measured in the Saudi Women's Premier League is also remarkable (37.8%). In contrast, expatriate women are very rarely seen in Japan, Finland, the Netherlands or Brazil.

Figure 5: number of expatriates, per league

	Number	Per club
Women's Super League (ENG)	181	15.1
Primera División Femenina (ESP)	126	7.9
Serie A Women (ITA)	124	12.4
Féminine Division 1 (FRA)	110	9.2
Frauen Bundesliga (GER)	101	8.4
Damallsvenskan (SWE)	95	6.8
NWSL (USA)	80	5.7
Super League Women (SUI)	75	7.5
Kvindeliga (DEN)	69	8.6
Women's Premier League (KSA)	63	7.9
SWPL 1 (SCO)	63	5.3
A-League Women (AUS)	62	5.2
Superliga Women (RUS)	54	4.2
Brasileiro Feminino (BRA)	46	2.9
Úrvalsdeild Women (ISL)	33	3.3
Eredivisie Women (NED)	25	2.1
Toppserien (NOR)	24	2.4
Kansallinen Liiga (FIN)	12	1.2
WE League (JPN)	8	0.7

Figure 6: percentage of minutes by expatriates, per league

Women's Super League (ENG)	61.3%
Serie A Women (ITA)	50.7%
Women's Premier League (KSA)	37.8%
Damallsvenskan (SWE)	37.4%
Féminine Division 1 (FRA)	35.6%
Super League Women (SUI)	33.3%
Kvindeliga (DEN)	31.8%
Primera División Femenina (ESP)	31.7%
Frauen Bundesliga (GER)	30.7%
A-League Women (AUS)	29.0%
NWSL (USA)	26.8%
Úrvalsdeild Women (ISL)	23.2%
SWPL 1 (SCO)	20.9%
Superliga Women (RUS)	19.8%
Toppserien (NOR)	13.8%
Brasileiro Feminino (BRA)	9.8%
Eredivisie Women (NED)	7.8%
Kansallinen Liiga (FIN)	7.8%
WE League (JPN)	0.8%
Total 19 leagues	28.4%

Expatriate women played the majority of league minutes in 32 of the 223 clubs surveyed. The highest figures were recorded for two English teams (Everton and West Ham United), followed by two Swiss clubs (Basel and Servette Chênois). Ten different leagues are represented among the teams in which footballers imported from abroad played more than 50% of the total minutes.

US players are by far the most present abroad (159 in 17 of the 19 leagues covered), followed by the Canadians and the Swedes (60 in both cases, in 13 different leagues for the former and 11 for the latter). In all, no fewer than 97 national associations are represented among the expatriates, which bears witness to a process of globalisation that is well under way.

Figure 7 : Highest percentage of minutes by expatriates, per club

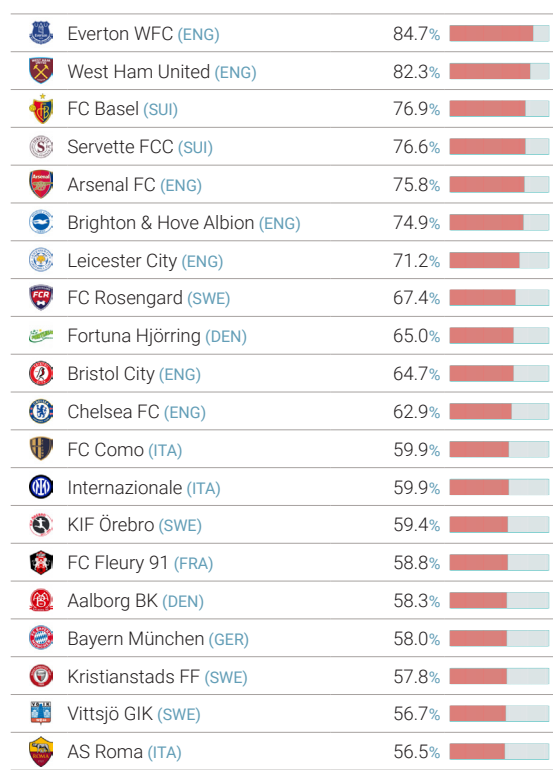
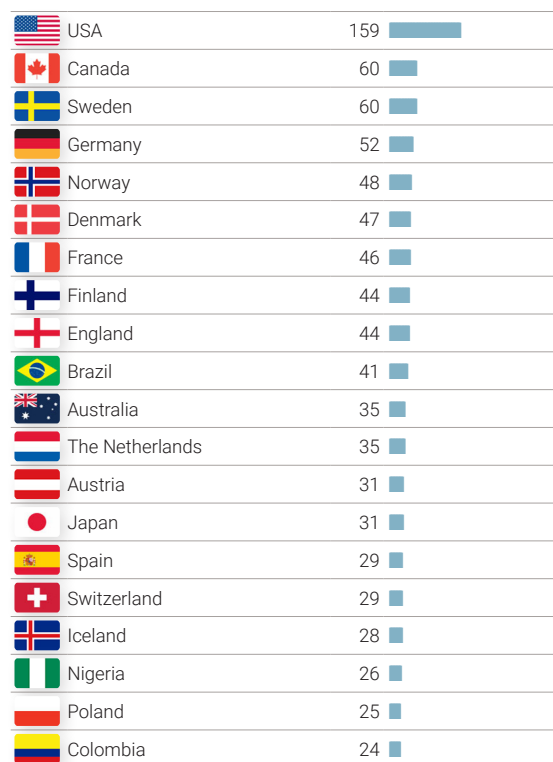


Figure 8: main expatriate origins, 19 leagues



Conclusion

The global development of women's football continues apace, as evidenced by the increase in the international flow of players. However, there are still major differences between leagues. Clubs in financially stronger competitions tend to rely on more experienced players, as well as more footballers imported from abroad.

This is particularly the case in the England's Women's Super League, where teams played with footballers aged 28.8 on average (the third highest figure among the 19 leagues covered), and where expatriates played 61.3% of the total minutes (the highest figure overall). Italy's Serie A follows a similar pattern, as does the USA's NWSL in terms of age (26.9 years), but with much lower figures for expatriates (26.8% of minutes).

In terms of the main origins of expatriates, with 159 women footballers playing abroad in the leagues studied, the United States confirms its leadership in this field. Canadians and Swedes are also migrating in large numbers (60 expatriates in both cases). The wide range of origins involved (97 nationalities) bears witness to the geographical expansion of women's football.