



FOOTBALL FOR EVERYONE

**“They say football’s  
for all, but it’s not  
anymore”**

The lived reality of the  
English and Scottish FAs  
new trans exclusion policy  
for women’s football



**“They say football’s for all, but it’s not anymore”:**

The lived reality of the English and Scottish FAs new trans exclusion policy for women’s football

**Commissioning partners:**

Pride Sports, Football v Transphobia / Football v Homophobia

**Author:**

Dr Jack López *IMpact INclusion Consultancy*

**Version:**

Draft v0.1

**Date:**

1st March 2026

**AI Disclaimer:**

AI (large language models) have been used at various stages of this report including for transcription of recorded interviews, thematic analysis, production of infographics and report templates. All wording and quotes are original and intellectual property of the author and/or participants interviewed.

Accross interviews, the policy is experienced not as a technical eligibility change, but as a profound disruption of identity, community and wellbeing. Many participants described being present without participation: still close to football spaces and relationships but structurally sidelined from the competitive and social core of the game.

# Executive summary

This rapid lived-experience research explores the impact of the English and Scottish FA’s policy change, which now completely excludes transgender women from playing in women’s football. The focus is FA-regulated grassroots contexts (including walking football). This report centres the voices of trans women directly affected and identifies what ‘good support’ and harm reduction could look like for grassroots leagues, clubs, sports charities and policymakers.

Across interviews, the policy is experienced not as a technical eligibility change, but as a profound disruption of identity, community and wellbeing. Many participants described being present without participation: still close to football spaces and relationships but structurally sidelined from the competitive and social core of the game.

## Key messages

- For participants women’s football functions as **community, identity, routine and (for some) vital mental health support.**
- Being allowed to train but not play matches produces a “half-experience” that is **emotionally exhausting and often unsustainable.**
- FA “alternatives” (mixed/other leagues, coaching/refereeing, therapy) were widely experienced as **consolation rather than inclusion.**
- Participants reported heightened safety risks linked to visibility, including fears of **outing, doxxing and targeted online harassment.**
- Participants want honesty, transparency and meaningful consultation—**not inclusion branding without inclusion in practice.**

# The Cost of Exclusion:

Shared Experiences of Trans Women Footballers Under the FA Ban

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL

### Football as a Vital Coping Mechanism

Primary therapy for managing C-PTSD, depression, and suicidal thoughts, allowing some to stop antidepressants (P7, P8, P9).

### 'A FEELING OF 'FORCED RETIREMENT'

- *Players described the ban as a "brick wall" or a "half-experience,"* leading to a sense of permanent benching (P1, P2, P8).

### Immediate Mental Health Relapse:

Loss of sport triggered severe distress, including relapses into addictive behaviors to cope with the "complete breakdown" of social outlets (P3, P7, P9).

## INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE & COMMUNICATION

### 'Cold' and 'Anonymous' Communication

Exclusion often communicated through uncaring, automated emails from the FA lacking context or empathy (P2, P3, P4, P8).



### Identity Erasure by Clubs

Clubs responded by deleting players from historical photos and failing to acknowledge athletic achievements like top-scorer awards (P4).

### Decisions Without Consultation:

Ban driven by board members and lawyers, not FAs own EDI teams or affected players (P2, P3, P9).

## REJECTION OF 'CONSOLATION PRIZES'

### Segregation vs. Inclusion

FA-proposed "mixed leagues" and "third spaces" are viewed as patronizing segregation rather than genuine inclusion (P3, P8, P9).

### 'A KICK IN THE TEETH'

- Suggesting players move into refereeing or coaching is an insult that devalues their athletic skills and forces them to be spectators of their own exclusion (P2, P3, P7).

### The Failure of Non-Affiliated Play:

Existing non-FA leagues offer inconsistent standards and a "hollow" experience compared to FA-affiliated football (P3, P9).

## PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT

### Disruption of Career Trajectories

The ban halted progress for players nearing promotion to top-tier squads or leadership roles like vice-captaincy (P2, P4).

### Emigration as a Last Resort

Impact is severe enough that some actively consider moving to countries like Canada or Australia to regain the right to play and access safer healthcare (P1, P5).



## SAFETY AND ADVOCACY RISKS

### The Danger of Public Advocacy

Players who spoke out faced targeted doxxing, including sharing of "deadnames" and old photos to harass them (P3, P9).



### Hostile Environments on the Pitch

Prior to the ban, players reported patterns verbal abuse from fans and biased officiating for shether experissiion with harshen play (P7, P9).



# Introduction

## 1.1 Context

On **1 May 2025**, the Football Association (FA) announced that transgender women would no longer be able to play in women's football in England, with the policy implemented from **1 June 2025**. The statement referenced the UK Supreme Court judgment issued on **16 April 2025** concerning the meaning of "sex" in the Equality Act 2010. The Scottish FA announced a similar position for competitive girls' and women's football from the start of the new **2025/26** season. This report focuses on **FA-regulated grassroots** contexts.

## 1.2 Purpose and objectives

This report documents the lived experience of women affected by the FA trans exclusion policy change, foregrounding the practical and personal impacts since its announcement. Written for grassroots leagues and clubs, sports charities and policymakers, it identifies what good support and harm reduction can look like in the current context.

## 1.3 Research questions

1. What practical and personal impacts are trans women experiencing as a result of exclusion from FA-regulated women's grassroots football?

2. How is the FA decision being implemented and experienced across different FA-regulated grassroots contexts, and what barriers or risks arise?
3. What strategies are trans women using to cope with or navigate exclusion, and what are the consequences for safety, wellbeing, community connection and continued participation in football?
4. What does 'good support' and harm reduction look like now for grassroots leagues, clubs, sports charities and policymakers, and what actionable changes are most feasible and impactful?

## 1.4 How to read this report

Findings are organised into seven themes developed from interview material. Each theme includes a plain-language summary, illustrative anonymised quotes, and practical implications for support and harm reduction. A short afterword provides wider research context for readers who want it, but the centre of gravity of this report is lived experience.

# Method

This was a rapid qualitative project designed to foreground lived experience. Interviews were conducted online, using a flexible conversation guide to support participant-led storytelling while ensuring core topics were covered.

## 2.1 What we did

Invited trans women (18+) impacted by exclusion from FA-regulated women's grassroots football in England (including walking football).

Conducted online interviews (around 60–90 minutes). With consent, interviews were audio-recorded to support accurate reporting.

Analysed interview material to identify recurring patterns and themes, selecting anonymised quotes to illustrate key points where safe to do so.

## 2.2 Who took part

This report includes quotes from nine participant voices. Because grassroots women's and inclusive football communities can be small and identifiable, this report avoids naming clubs, leagues or locations and uses minimal descriptors.

## 2.3 Ethics, safeguarding and anonymity

Participation was voluntary with informed consent. Participants could skip questions, pause or stop at any time, and withdraw their contribution up to 25 February 2026 (before publishing/proofing). Given heightened risks of outing and online harassment, anonymity was treated as a safety measure: identifying details have been removed or generalised, and quotes are used only where judged safe in context.

## 2.4 Limitations

This is a rapid, small-sample qualitative study. Findings offer depth of insight rather than population-level prevalence. Participants self-selected and may not represent all trans women affected by the policy; however, the consistency of themes across interviews strengthens confidence in the patterns described.

# Findings

## Themes from interviews

Across interviews, participants described exclusion as a multi-layered loss: match participation, identity as a footballer, community belonging, routine and safety. Themes are interconnected and should be read as overlapping realities rather than separate issues.

### Theme 1: Benched – presence without participation

### Theme 2: Football as vital life-support

### Theme 3: 'Solutions' that feel like consolation or forced retirement

### Theme 4: Institutional governance – erasure and reputation management

### Theme 5: Safety, advocacy and the risks of visibility

### Theme 6: A message to the FA (legacy, evidence, integrity)

## Theme 1: Benched – presence without participation

Participants repeatedly described a “half-experience”: still welcome to train or socialise but barred from FA-affiliated matches. Training without competition was experienced as hollow and emotionally taxing—keeping people close to what they have lost without the possibility of full participation. Several participants also described being pushed to the sidelines socially and symbolically, including feeling erased from team narratives and celebrations. The England FA ban came into place just as the season was ending for many teams bringing about mixed feelings for those playing their literal last game of the season and foreseeable future. Some banned players were given the option to continue training with their teams and/or coaching positions. This factor brought about many mixed feelings and frustrations.

*I think for me personally, it would be really hard going to the training sessions, listening to all the tactics and stuff they can play at the game, what they did wrong in a previous game. I just feel like they're not part of the team, really. I mean, they can try as much as they want to be supportive, and that's great. But there's only so much they can do with the ban and everything. I just wouldn't feel part of the actual team.*

*I'm a decent goalkeeper. I've trained a lot to be where I am, you know, but then all my accomplishments feel like they've just been pushed to one side and at the end of season, not one trans player was celebrated for their achievements in our leagues.*

*I felt really sad at the end... And they're a great bunch of people. It just hurts that I can't play this season, you know, and I think as the autumn went on, it got more difficult because, you know, I'm only getting half the experience, training with them, but I'm not playing with them.*

### What participants shared

*Just before the ban I received a letter from the FA saying you've met all our requirements, because you've had your surgery, you know, you don't need to take your blood tests anymore, because we know the situation... and literally, I was on such a high at that point. I was just going and playing and enjoying my football, and then the [FA] email arrived, you know, it's an anonymous email, and it just crashes my world, I mean, I literally, I burst out crying, I hadn't cried like that for a long time...*

*They said there's no point for you training with your teams anymore. You can if you want, but it also became a bit more of a downer, playing, you know, training with them, not being able to be part of it... So then I just went to coaching and then the coaching just fell off as well... I just stopped going to any of the training sessions. I just felt left out.*

## Theme 2: Football as vital life-support

For many participants, football functions as a primary coping mechanism: routine, connection, embodiment, and relief from distress. Several described significant declines in mental health after exclusion, including relapse into harmful coping behaviours and a sense of losing a critical “safety net”. Participants challenged the idea that therapy offers could replace football, describing play itself as therapeutic. Isolation from women's teams since the ban has greatly affected the women interviewed.

### What participants shared

*Football is my therapy. It's a place where I can go out and be myself... Try and convince me doing something that has been so good for me, something that has improved my mental and physical health...giving that up is something good for me. Try and persuade me of that*

*It felt like this safety net had been taken away*

*I played my last game with [my team] and we won the league! And it was just an amazing feeling that day. And to go from that to this was, I mean, the email itself was offering these 6 sessions of therapy. And for me, football IS my therapy.*

*Playing the actual game is the only moments where my mind is quiet... since the ban... it's pushed me back into addictive behaviours with drinking*

*It feels like just a step backwards, not just from not being allowed to play sports, but it feels like a step backwards from making us feel valid and wanted. Like, oh, you can't play for us, we don't want anything to do with you as a person... once the ban came in and I started moving a little bit away, there was just barely any contact with anyone.*

## Theme 3: ‘Solutions’ that feel like consolation or forced retirement

Participants were clear that proposed alternatives - non-affiliated football, mixed/queer leagues, refereeing or coaching - did not meet what they valued about the game. These were described as consolation and experienced as forced role-change: being told to remain around football while accepting removal as a team player. Whilst many women already play in mixed or inclusive teams, they have done so either for social reasons or through lack of option since the ban. Participants challenged the idea that non-affiliated, mixed-gender or queer-only “third spaces” are sufficient replacements for FA-regulated football. Lower competition quality or mismatched formats made these spaces feel hollow and reinforced segregation. Being barred from playing “alongside” friends in one context while playing against them elsewhere was described as absurd and demoralising. In addition mixed/inclusive teams tend to be city based, therefore leaving those who live outside of cities who cannot travel, with nowhere to play.

*Because there’s not that many of trans players playing... We’re all at grassroots... And there’s never been a real big issue... So why didn’t it go to maybe a vote to grassroots teams and players if they want trans players to be part of it before making that decision?*

*[the ban] is cutting off so many people who can’t, you know, travel into London or Leeds or Birmingham or Manchester for these alternatives*

### What participants shared

*They offered counselling sessions... [and said] you can stay in football, like become a referee or a coach. But for someone who actually plays football and I get my enjoyment through playing the game, there’s like a little bit of a kick in the [teeth]*

*That’s pretty much telling you to retire... I wanted to play.*

*I’m still playing non-FA football, which actually shows how daft this ban is. Because I play in the Sevens League on Tuesday nights against very much the same players I’m banned from playing with. It’s absolutely insane.*

## Theme 4: Institutional governance – erasure and reputation

Participants described betrayal and distrust towards institutions, perceiving decisions as driven by legal/reputational risk rather than care. Some described literal erasure within clubs (removed from photos; not acknowledged). Communication (generic emails) was experienced as cold and uncaring, especially alongside inclusion branding like “Football for All”.

### What participants shared

*It feels like they don’t want to have any link with trans players... I’ve been deleted from the [team] pictures... Another team, they’ve won the league. Their top scorer, who’s trans, isn’t in any of the photos*

*[T]he FA themselves, they said that they were forced to. So how about saying “we were forced to, we don’t want to do this. We actually think the FA is for all and we should stand up for trans people” ...*

*You can’t get sued for that, can you?*

*[A contact said] there might be some [FA] funding available, whether you’d want to take that or not, and it’s like, it’s a difficult one, because on one hand, I can see, yeah, they’re trying to clean up the mess they’ve made, but the other side is like, you’ve done this to us, like, why are we going to take money from you to make you feel better about it?*

*[T]he FA are not trying to do what is best for trans people. They’re trying to do something that saves their own.*

*I think it’s like, you know, they have like the campaigns like Rainbow Laces, all these campaigns, and they try to be inclusive, and they say football’s for all, but it’s not anymore*

## Theme 5: Safety, advocacy and the risks of visibility

Participants described heightened safety risks linked to visibility, including being outed online and fear of doxxing. Advocacy was important but emotionally costly, especially when exposure led to harassment. Some women described why playing in cis men's contexts felt unsafe or unworkable. When asked if there were issues with discrimination prior to the ban, women recounted a few incidents from either referees or opposing teams yet also described how their own teams always supported them. Since the ban some women described feeling more visible and more at risk because often bias media coverage encourages perpetrator impunity.

*I was trying to use my experiences of my discrimination within, like, higher level football to try and create a safe space for trans people in lower level football*

*I don't have the privilege to be able to stay silent on something. So what I've done is lent into it... And that's caused great detriment to myself in some ways*

*we asked the ref to leave the game [after transphobic remarks] ... both clubs lodged a complaint, and it was really a lovely mark of inclusion, but yeah, that was the referee, so I would say that felt quite particular. I think he was sent on a course*

### What participants shared

*I think the twitter account [outing all trans players] ... they'd gone through YouTube, listened to interviews and stuff, and then, I guess, clocked my voice, and then put me up there*

*People are like oh they're going to play men's football and it's like I'd probably get my legs broken you know, I'm not gonna do that*

## Theme 6: A message to the FA (legacy, evidence, integrity)

Participants were asked what they would say to the FA decision-makers were they given the opportunity. Accounts moved from personal grief to direct critique: how decisions are made, whose evidence counts, and what legacy is being created. They drew parallels with historical exclusions in football, asked for transparency about evidence, and challenged continued use of "Football for All" language under exclusion. Many highlighted lack of meaningful consultation and the need for accountability.

*You banned women back in... 1921... You've done the same mistake again. Reverse it while you've got time to leave with some dignity. Like, what side of history do you want to be on?*

*I just kind of would like to know their evidence of why they've done it... for me, for example, I've never injured anyone. Or like, I wouldn't say I was quicker or stronger than anyone. It's like, I just don't get it*

*Why are you destroying the opportunity for someone to play football alongside her friends? I don't play for money. I don't play for the glory...*

*Why was the decision rushed out so quickly and why was no one asked at the grassroots level... why didn't it go to maybe a vote to grassroots teams and players if they want trans players to be part of it?*

*Listen to actual scientists on this. Reverse the ban, and let us get back to running things as we should do*

*Someone tell me a reason why we're banned... it's nothing to do with anything that makes any sense other than politics*

*I don't think they care. I'm one person... it's not enough of us to cause them any bother. I don't think they give a [damn]*

### What participants shared

# Closing remarks

This report shows that exclusion from women's grassroots football is experienced as more than a rule change. For participants, it reshapes identity, belonging, routine and safety. The voices in this report highlight a need for honest governance, meaningful consultation, and practical harm reduction—especially for those who remain in football spaces and face heightened risks through visibility.

## 4.1 Summary of recommendations in the interim

### For grassroots leagues and clubs

- Use anonymity-by-default practices for public content and internal comms; do not name or “hint” at identities.
- Create clear protocols for harassment, outing risks and safeguarding (online and in-person).
- Communicate changes compassionately and consistently; avoid generic messaging that feels dismissive or bureaucratic.
- Protect players' contributions in club culture and history; do not erase achievements to manage backlash

### For sports charities and support organisations

- Offer peer-led spaces for connection and processing loss, alongside clinical signposting where needed.
- Support safe participation pathways that are meaningful (not tokenistic) and designed with trans players.
- Provide practical resources for clubs/leagues: language guidance, harassment response, safeguarding templates.

### For policymakers / sector leaders

- Increase transparency: publish evidence base and decision rationale in accessible language.
- Create meaningful consultation routes with affected grassroots players and community stakeholders.
- Resource any future participation categories so they have genuine sporting value, safety and geographic accessibility.

## Acknowledgements

With thanks to the women who shared their experiences, and to Pride Sports and Football v Transphobia/Football v Homophobia for supporting the project's delivery and learning.

# Afterword: What does international research say about trans inclusion in sport?

This report is intentionally grounded in lived experience. For readers who want wider context, this afterword summarises a small set of international research that has shaped how many sports organisations have approached inclusion and eligibility.

Across the literature, common barriers to participation for trans people include exclusion, discrimination, fear of being judged or outed, and practical obstacles in gendered sport environments. Research also highlights that sport can provide significant wellbeing and community benefits, and that policies have often been contested and unevenly evidence-based (Jones et al., 2017; Hargie et al., 2017; Bailey et al., 2024). The IOC's 2021 Framework and related commentary emphasise non-discrimination and proportionate, evidence-informed approaches, noting the need for sport-specific research (Martowicz et al., 2023).

Evidence on trans women athletes who take testosterone-suppressing, feminising gender-affirming hormone therapy (GAHT) suggests that haemoglobin/haematocrit typically decreases relatively quickly, while changes in lean mass and strength tend to be more gradual and variable. Performance outcomes may differ by task and sport, and the overall evidence base remains limited—especially for trained athletes—supporting calls for better-quality, sport-specific longitudinal research (Harper et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2024). A recent systematic review examining over 52 global studies concluded while transgender women exhibited higher lean mass than cisgender women, their physical fitness was comparable. Current evidence is mostly low certainty and has heterogenous quality but does not support theories of inherent athletic advantages for transgender women over cisgender (Sieczkowska et al., 2026).

# References

Bailey, S., Trevitt, B., Zwickl, S., Bourne, A., Callander, D., & Lyu, L., et al. (2024). Participation, barriers, facilitators and bullying experiences of trans people in sport and fitness: Findings from a national community survey of trans people in Australia. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 58(23), 1434–1440. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2023-107852>

Cheung, A. S., Zwickl, S., Miller, K., Nolan, B. J., Wong, A. F. Q., Jones, P., & Eynon, N. (2024). The impact of gender-affirming hormone therapy on physical performance. *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 109(2), e455–e465. <https://doi.org/10.1210/clinem/dgad414>

Hargie, O. D. W., Mitchell, D., & Somerville, I. J. A. (2017). ‘People have a knack of making you feel excluded if they catch on to your difference’: Transgender experiences of exclusion in sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 52(2), 223–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690215583283>

Harper, J., O’Donnell, E., Sorouri Khorashad, B., McDermott, H., & Witcomb, G. L. (2021). How does hormone transition in transgender women change body composition, muscle strength and haemoglobin? Systematic review with a focus on the implications for sport participation. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 55(15), 865–872. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2020-103106>

Jones, B. A., Arcelus, J., Bouman, W. P., & Haycraft, E. (2017). Sport and transgender people: A systematic review of the literature relating to sport participation and competitive sport policies. *Sports Medicine*, 47(4), 701–716. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-016-0621-y>

Martowicz, M., Budgett, R., Pape, M., Mascagni, K., Engebretsen, L., Dienstbach-Wech, L., Pitsiladis, Y. P., Pigozzi, F., & Erdener, U. (2023). Position statement: IOC framework on fairness, inclusion and non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sex variations. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 57(1), 26–32. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2022-106386>

Roberts, T. A., Smalley, J., & Ahrendt, D. (2021). Effect of gender affirming hormones on athletic performance in transwomen and transmen: Implications for sporting organisations and legislators. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 55(11), 577–583. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2020-102329>

Sieczkowska, S. M., Mazzolani, B. C., Coimbra, D. R., Longobardi, I., Casale, A. R., Pompilio, J. D. F. V. M., ... & Gualano, B. (2026). Body composition and physical fitness in transgender versus cisgender individuals: a systematic review with meta-analysis. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2025-110239>



FOOTBALL FOR EVERYONE