

CROSSING THE LINE:

Representation of Women in the National Football Museum



CASE STUDY

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Crossing the Line: Representation of Women in the National Football Museum – A Case Study

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Abstract

The following case study explores Manchester's National Football Museum and its representation of women's football with its new "Cross the Line" exhibition that opened in July 2022. The exhibition coincides with the historic win of England in the Women's Euro cup, a win that demonstrated the importance of women's football. In this case study we explore the narratives that the museum depicts about women's football and the ways in which it invites the public to engage with this narrative (aligning with INVENT's bottom-up approach). We conducted an observation in the museum in August 2022, analyzed articles and reviews written about the new exhibitions and examined the museum's Twitter account. We argue that the National Football Museum is successful in its representation and diversity. The museum is active in telling stories of excellence and ambition among those who are normally disregarded in English football, such as women, and invites eager visitors to comment on their impressions.

Keywords: Diversity, Football, National Football Museum, Women's Football

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1. Introduction

On 31st of July 2022, the Lionesses, England women's national team, "brought it home"; the Lionesses won Women's Euro 2022. It was England's first Euro Cup win since 1966. The 2022 championship was a highly popular event, with audiences tuning in in masses to each game. The final became the most watched women's football match in the history of the UK, with 174 million viewers on the BBC channel and an addition of 5.9 million on digital platforms (McCaskill 2022).

Coincidentally with the Women's Euro Cup, The National Football Museum in Manchester opened a new temporary exhibition in July 2022 (running until the end of the year). The exhibition, called "Crossing the Line: The story of Women's Football," explores the history of the game in early 1900s, follows its 50-year ban, and celebrates its recent resurgence. Thanks to the success of the national English women's team, the exhibition received attention from the media and audiences alike and raised the importance of the participation of women in sports in general and in football specifically (Brett, 2022; Davidson, 2022; Sergeant, 2022). The exhibition is presented in two parts. The first is shown from July 2022 until the end of the summer and focuses on the history of women's football. The second part, which will be included in the museum only later in the year, will focus on the present, and celebrate the 2022 win of the Lionesses.

In the following case study, we examine Manchester's National Football Museum and the narrative it constructs and exhibits on women's football in both its temporary and permanent exhibitions. Through observations conducted in the museum, we argue that the case of the National Football Museum is a one of successful representation and diversity. Aligning with its values and aims, the museum actively and explicitly includes exhibitions that portray sexism, racism and homophobia in football, as well as tells stories of excellence and ambition among those who are normally disregarded in English football such as women, people of color, the LGBT+ community and the disabled.

2. Methodology

For the following case study, we espoused the method of participant observation (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1998; Goulding, 2000; Platt, 1983). The museum was visited on 20th of August 2022. During my visit I took more than 70 pictures of artifacts, posters and plaques, transcribed audio aides that were included in some of the exhibitions and made notes of flyers and maps that were handed out at the museum. For further information about the museum and its exhibits, the Museum's website and Twitter account were examined in-depth along with online news articles.

The analysis focuses on three floors out of four in the museum. The ground floor featured a temporary exhibition called “The Fan Girl,” which presents women in football in a positive and empowering fashion. The second floor includes the permanent exhibitions of football throughout the years. The exhibitions in this floor offer a diversity of images, narratives and individuals in terms of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disabilities. The fourth floor is dedicated to the temporary exhibition, “Crossing the Line.” Due to time limitations, this case study only examines the first part of the exhibition and will not include its second run that will be introduced later in the year. The third floor, which primarily offers interactive games, is beyond the scope of this study and is therefore not included in the analysis.

3. Background

The National Football Museum was established in 1995 in Preston, England. The idea for the museum was first introduced by Bryan Gray, Chairman of PNE (Preston North End Football Club) and Harry Langton, the founder of the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) Museum Collection. After Preston was chosen as the permanent home for Langton’s FIFA collection, it served as a catalyst for establishing the museum in the city in 1995. The National Football Museum was first established as a limited company and turned into a registered charity later that year.

Initially, the museum operated thanks to funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund that was awarded in 1997. Nevertheless, funding was an ongoing concern throughout the museum’s Preston run. Gradually, more and more voices were raised from within the organization in regard to transferring the museum to a venue that would attract more visitors (“Football museum jobs under threat”, 2005). In 2009, the museum’s trustees sought an alternative city to host the museum and contacted Manchester City Council.

The National Football Museum reopened in Manchester in 2012. After the reopening, the museum enjoyed high volumes of visitors, with 350,000 visitors per year, the goal it had initially set for itself. By 2017, the museum reached 500,000 visitors (Keegan, 2013). According to the Manchester City Council Report for Resolution 2021, the museum serves as a unique asset to Manchester, a city that has set up itself as a popular visitor destination for football fans around the world. According to the report, the museum “contributes to the Manchester’s appeal as a liveable city and attractive visitor destination whilst also promoting active lifestyles” (p. 8).

The museum’s current funding sources are a combination of public and private funds. The main public funding source of the museum is Manchester City Council. The “Crossing the Line” exhibition, however, was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (Brett, 2022). Moreover, the museum transitioned into a charging model in 2019 and is also sustained through ticket sales (entrance is still free for Manchester residents).

According to its website, the museum’s vision is to “be known as a leading national museum, engaging one million visitors through our doors, digitally and by visiting our local communities and schools” The museum has four declared values: (1) creative and inspiring – using our imaginations to enthuse all visitors; (2) authentic and honest – tell real stories with

integrity; (3) inclusive and respectful – being friendly and approachable; and (4) passionate and fun – instilling passion and enjoyment for football (footnote 7). The museum also declares its four aims: (1) to become a center of excellence for football heritage through fully representative exhibitions, collections and research; (2) Build an award-winning inclusive programme of community and public engagement activities; (3) Achieve an annual diversified revenue of £5M; (4) Operate a good practice model for our physical and human resources.

As stated in the City Council report, the museum is committed to “embracing diversity in everything they do” (p. 12). In particular, the museum strives to ensure that its collections are fully representative and is working towards a 50-50 representation of women’s and men’s football. As explained in the report, women in football are “Prioritized because of the significant imbalance historically” (p. 13).

4. Research Question

In light of the National Football Museum’s motivation to include a diverse range of exhibitions and representations, especially of women in football, we ask: What narratives does the museum depict about women’s football and how does it invite the public to engage with this narrative? In order to answer our question, we conducted an observation at the museum in August 2022. The findings of this observation are depicted in the following section.

5. Description of Emancipatory Practices in The National Football Museum

When entering the National Football Museum, the first exhibition the visitor encounters is “This is Fan Girl.” The exhibition portrays the operation and experiences of women who are part of an online and offline community of football fans that tackles sexist portrayals of women in football. According to scholars, women who are associated with football in England have endured discrimination and stigma throughout the years (Clarkson, Culvin, Pope and Parry, 2022; Pope, 2018). Thus, “This is Fan Girl” exhibition is meant to celebrate “just how far football culture has developed in recent years, and how far we’ve come from that one-sided representation” (Figure 1).²

The exhibition includes different illustrations of the ways in which women of all ages and ethnicities come together and feel inspired by football in England. One example, for instance, addresses the impact of the British movie, “Bend it Like Beckham” (2002). The movie focuses on a women’s football team and young British Indian woman’s journey to become a successful football player. When examining representations of women’s football in the media, Bell (2012) argued that exposure to football can inspire young girls and women to engage with the sports themselves. The case of “Bend it Like Beckham” is a suitable example for Bell’s claim. As depicted in Figure 2, young women of marginalized ethnicities and religions.

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² All figures can be found at the end of this document.

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When entering the second floor of the museum, the exhibition begins with the following statement: "The National Football Museum is not just about the elite men's game. We share stories about all levels of the beautiful game to highlight how football is for all." The museum's mission to incorporate a diverse portrayal of football in England is made explicit to the audiences immediately. Following up this statement, the museum's second floor, which contains its permanent exhibitions, seamlessly incorporates stories of women, the LGBT+ community, ethnic minorities and disabled individuals. One example is the "feel the difference" showcase, which invites the visitors to touch and examine football gear that was used throughout the years (Figure 3). This showcase might appear as insignificant at first, but it is an exemplar of the museum's mission as it brings women's and men's gear together without differentiating between the two.

Another way in which the second floor's exhibition merges different identities with social background is through incorporating intersectional (Crenshaw, 1990) representations. For instance, the exhibition includes a photo taken of Nigerian-born female football player, executive and commentator, Eniola Aluko. In the plaque next to Eniola's photo there is a quote by Felicia Pennant the editor-in-chief of the zine SEASON, an online platform dedicated to marginalized women in sports. In the quote, Pennant describes Eniola as "refreshingly honest about being a black woman in sport and why her Lionesses career came to an end." Pennant continues and argues that Aluko's engagement with football in England "helps normalize the visibility of [these] inspiring women." With the image of Eniola, the museum illustrates two narratives: the first is a story of discrimination, and the second is on the importance of representation. The fact that the quote chosen for the plaque is one made an editor of a grassroots online platform also demonstrate the museum's bottom-up approach in incorporating the voices of football spectators.

Even though most of the exhibitions on the second floor depict women's and men's football in conjunction, one exhibition is especially dedicated to highlighting an important historical figure in women's football: Lily Parr (Figure 4). Parr (1905-1978) was an active football player between 1917 and 1921. She is considered a pioneer in women's football in England and the first female footballer superstar. The exhibition dedicated to Lily Parr details her biography alongside English history (World War I and the ban of women's football), and the impact of Lily's career on female footballers today. The exhibition includes an audio recording called, "Lily Parr Made Space for Us." In the two-minute recording, women and girls who work or play football share how Parr inspired and affected their life trajectories. As one woman in the recording declares: "She paved the path for women playing today." It is important to mention that the saying "Lily Parr Made Space for Us" is also presented in a

banner in the museum's entrance (Figure 5). The banner, written by hand, includes words and sayings associated with Parr, such as "rebel," "empowering," and "stand up for women's footy."

The Lily Parr's story and the pioneering of women's football told in the permanent exhibition are expanded upon through the temporary exhibition in floor four, called "Crossing the Lines: The Story of Women's Football." The exhibition details the history of women's football in England since early 1900s and the beginning of WWI, in which women's football was a relatively popular sport (Dunn and Welford, 2015). In 1921, however, women's football was banned in England, as the sport was deemed "unsuitable for females and ought not be encouraged" (Figure 6).

One of the most eye-catching items in the exhibition is a big wall which features a quote from the Football Association's decision to ban women's football (Figure 6), a ban that was lifted only 50 years later. On the other side of the wall, visitors are encouraged to leave hand-written notes with their thoughts about women's football, the historic ban that they endured and their recent triumph. The notes, which are based on handwriting alone, appear to have been written by children and adults alike, include uplifting messages, women empowerment and praises for the Lionesses (Figures 7 and 8), such as: "When the men can't finish a job... send the women in! Well done, Lionesses, it came home!" or, "You tell my girl she can't play, she'll show you that she can!"

The museum invites the visitors to take an active part in the exhibition is by asking them to express their opinions through prompting questions. On a few screens across the exhibition, questions appear such as, "What is the thing you love the most about football?", "Favorite position to play and why?" and "What about the game drives you mad?" On several posters visitors are also asked: "If you have a story to tell us about your experience of UEFA [Union of European Football Association] Women's Euro 2022, we'd love to hear it!" Audiences are invited to film and submit their responses on social media (Twitter or Instagram) or the museum's email. Some responses could be integrated in the exhibition in the near future.

Having described the three main floors of the National Football Museum, we delve into the meaning and the importance of the exhibitions it presents and the ways in which the narrative they tell aligns with the museum's values and aims.

6. Analysis and Impact

To examine the impact and importance of the National Football Museum and the "Crossing the Line" exhibition we took several approaches. First, we compared between the museum's values and aims and the exhibitions the museum offers. Then, we explored the museum's social media account, primarily on Twitter, and the kind of tweets the museum and its followers posted. Lastly, we also looked into reviews written about the museum and its current exhibitions on news media.

When examining the museum's values and aims, we argue that the museum's exhibitions align with the museum's agenda. For instance, among its values, the museum

holds inclusivity as one of its tenets. Similarly, one of its aims is “to become a center of excellence for football heritage through fully representative exhibitions, collections and research.” Indeed, when visited in August 2022, the National Football Museum had a substantial number of exhibitions that represented women, people of color and the LGBT+ community in a positive light. Women’s football in particular was celebrated due to its recent success and the lamentation over years of rejection and stigmatization it endured. As mentioned earlier, the museum also offers an intersectional lens by presenting how dual marginalization occurs, but how such identities could also be empowered and empowering, as in the case of Eniola Aluko.

The motivation to implement diversity and representation in the museum was also acknowledged by journalists. For instance, in an article for *Manchester’s Finest*, Emma Davidson (2022) writes in length about “The Fan Girl” exhibition. Davidson supportively comments, “They’ve captured the true spirit and diversity of women’s football in the exhibition – community, pride and family. It’s an exploration of the importance of sport in childhood, as well as having strong role models to aspire to” (n.p).

Another set of values and aims that was accomplished by the museum is engaging the public and “instilling passion and enjoyment for football,” goals that were successfully accomplished with the “Crossing the Line” exhibition. The wall that was included in the exhibition, filled with hand-written comments, is a testament to the museum’s success. The wall included many comments by the public, children and adults alike, who chose to express their appreciation of the current national female football team, as well as the teams that paved the way for future generations. Going over the Museum’s Twitter account reveals the popularity of the wall as many tweets that were posted by the museum itself and its visitors include pictures of the wall. Moreover, from examining Twitter posts from recent months, it is apparent that the wall had to be cleared out a few times as comments kept piling up, thus exemplifying audience’s continuous excitement to engage with the content exhibited in the museum. Wilf Frith (2022), writing for the magazine “She Kicks,” also highlighted the museum’s motivation to engage with its visitors: “The Museum is asking visitors to #CrossTheLine, contributing their thoughts and sharing their stories within the exhibition itself and via social media” (n.p).

Exploring media coverage, public engagement and the alignment of the exhibitions with the museum’s values and aims reveal the importance of diverse representation in football and beyond. Through its inclusive exhibitions the museum achieves the goal of encouraging and inviting everyone, from all walks of life, to fall in love with football. Moreover, the stories told by the museum also demonstrate how football is much more than a sport; it is a platform through which audiences can learn about marginalization and exclusions, as well as the formation of a community and a sense of belonging.

7. Conclusions

In this case study we chose to explore Manchester’s National Football Museum and pay a particular focus to the ways in which it represents women, with its current temporary

exhibition, “Crossing the Line.” This case study is timely and relevant due to the win of England’s women’s team in the 2022 Euro cup, which solidified their stardom status and served as proof for the importance of women’s football in England and beyond. In this case study we asked about the kinds of narratives are communicated by the museum and its exhibitions about women’s football and the implications of these narratives on the audience. In order to answer our question, we conducted observations in the museum in August 2022. The field notes and my experiences visiting the museum were accompanied in the analysis with the examination of news articles written about the museum’s current exhibitions and the museum’s Twitter account.

We argued that the National Football Museum is a success story of emancipatory practices due to the reflection of its explicit motivation to incorporate diverse stories and figures in the world of football in its current exhibitions. Every corner of the museum represents often marginalized identities in football by celebrating their excellence, but also shedding light on their hardships. In this manner, the museum fulfils the aims it has set up for itself. The museum is also a good demonstration of the employing a bottom-up approach (aligning with INVENT’s agenda). Across its exhibitions, the museum invites the visitors to actively engage with the narratives presented and to share their own reflection and experiences.

When examining the museum, we also consider its past hardship in raising funds and attracting audiences. As stated earlier, the museum was transferred from Preston to Manchester in the hopes of attracting more visitors, and also shifted into a private funding scheme in the form of ticket sales in recent years. In the effort to appeal to many, it is understandable, but also risky when the museum promotes diversity and inclusion. On the one hand, the telling of versatile stories about football could attract more visitors, who might not be interested in football initially and inspire them engage with the sport more closely. At the same time, there might also be a jeopardy of being considered “too politically correct” by more conservative football fans who are not interested in the inclusion of women and other minorities in their beloved sport (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 1998; Cleland, Pope and Williams, 2020). The increasing number of visitors in the museum in recent years perhaps serves as a good indication that diversity is accepted and celebrated by the general public.

To conclude, The National Football Museum depicts a timely portrayal not only of English football, but of English society as a whole. It presents the different and versatile voices, communities and identities that take part in the country’s complex social and cultural makeup. It describes the rifts, discord, sexism and racism that frequently arise on the football field and beyond, but also encourages viewers to celebrate marginalized identities and make space for everyone to enjoy the sport.

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Figures

Figure 1: This is Fan Girl

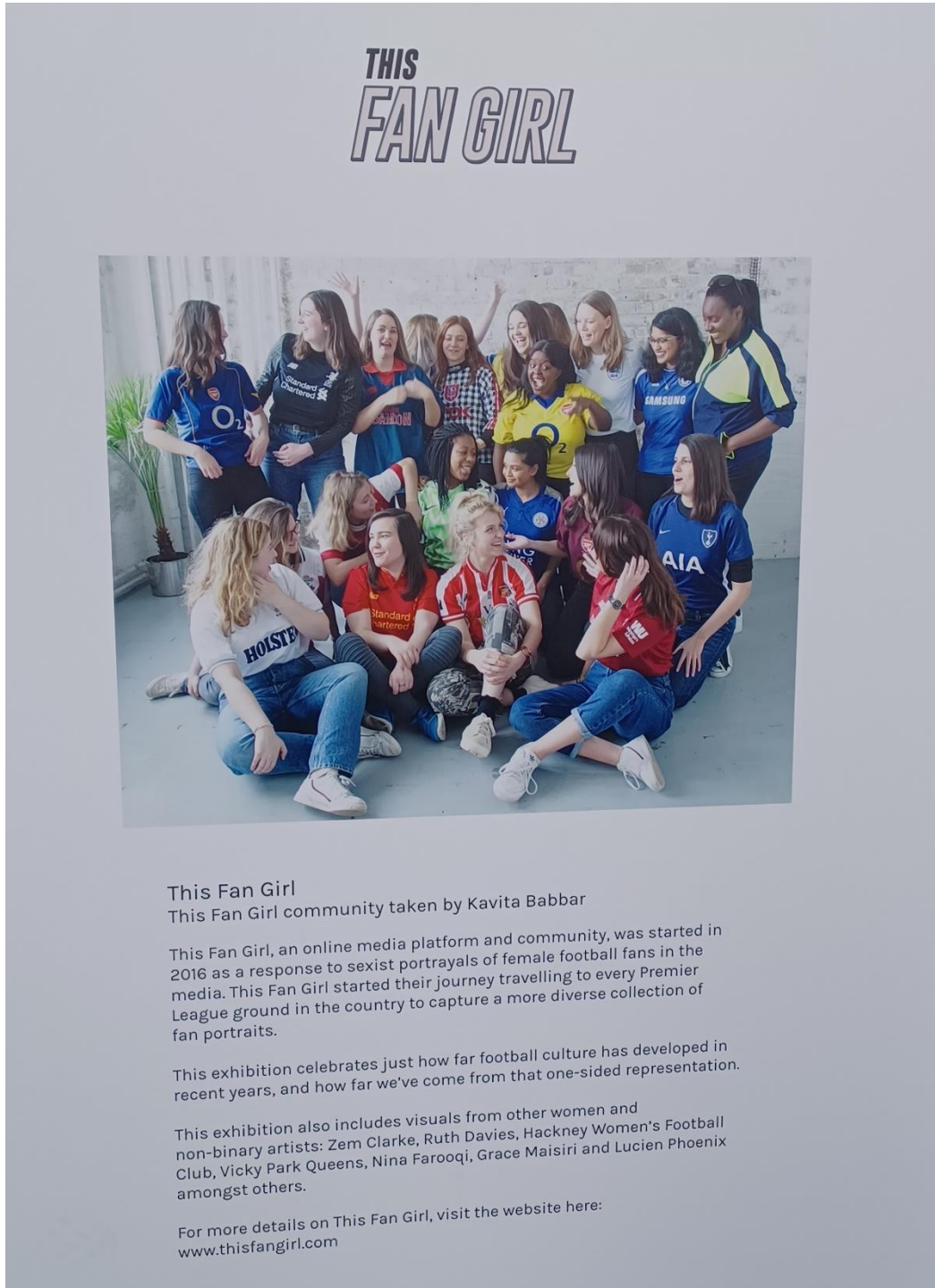


Figure 2: Bend it Like Beckham

THIS FAN GIRL



The impact of Bend It Like Beckham

Bhavna, Co-founder of She's Got Skills

Zahra, Vicky Park Queens coach and player

"The speech her dad gives about the challenges with racism he encountered when playing cricket was so empowering. Especially not wanting Jesminder to go through the same mistakes he made (by not saying anything and suffering on the inside) and encouraging her to go to America to play professionally. That still bring tears to my eyes." Bhavna

"My dream is to have an Asian created space specifically for the girls and women that want to get involved in football. When I was younger, I couldn't find anything out there that made me feel comfortable enough to play - so I want to create that for others." Zahra

Figure 3: Feel the Difference



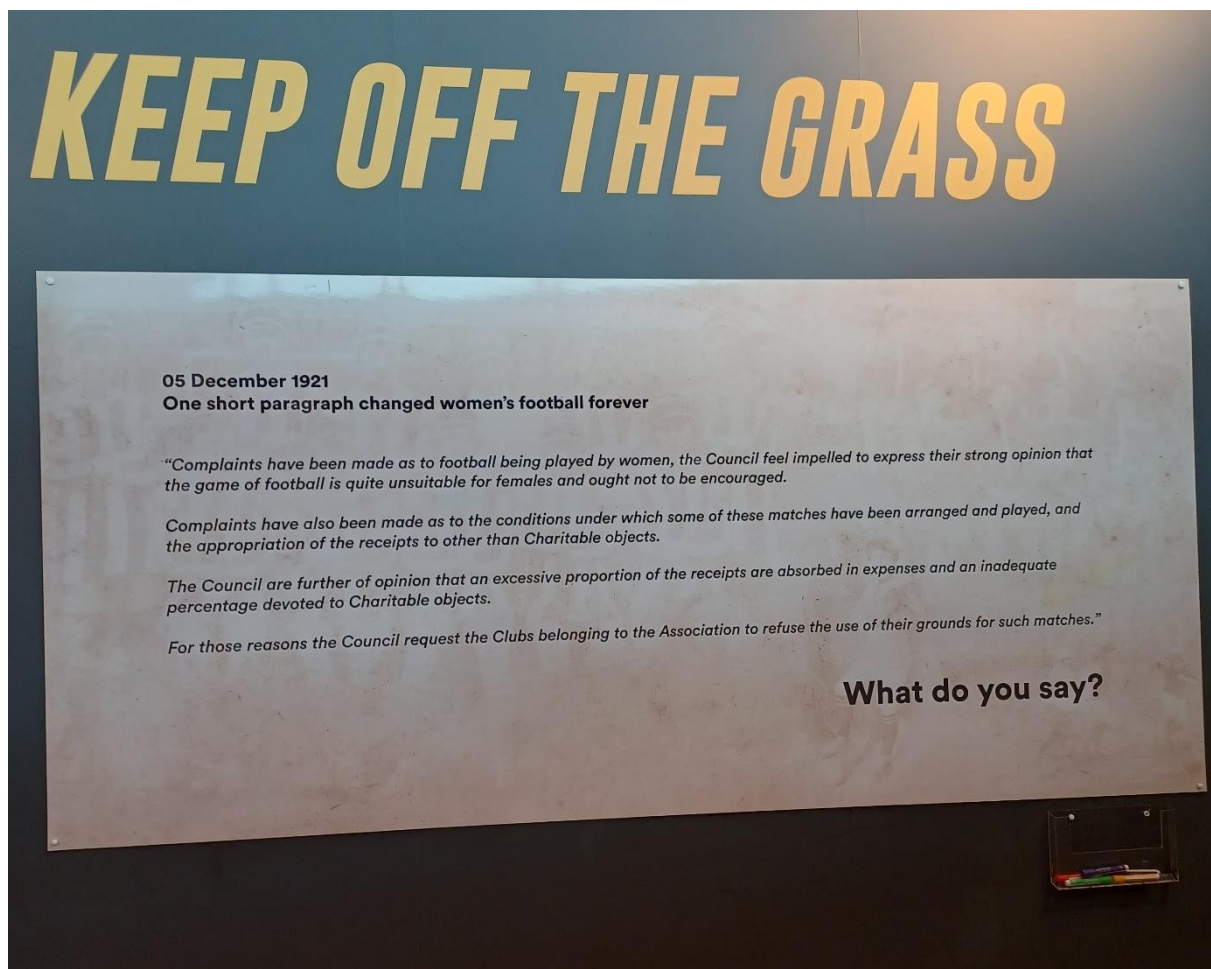
Figure 4: The Lily Parr Exhibition



Figure 5: Lily Parr Made Space for Us



Figure 6: The Ban



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