

## 2. Power of Football

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In late April 2016, the Japan Football Association announced that Ms. Asako Takakura will take the reins of Japan's national women's team. I very much look forward to seeing her management skills as the team will play under her leadership from June.

'The new manager could have been a foreigner or a man', said Kozo Tajima, Chairman of the JFA. "But we picked Ms. Takakura because she has the best chance of making *Nadeshiko Japan* a winning team, as attested by her excellent track record'.<sup>1</sup> The news that the most suitable person was selected as a leader, breaking with tradition, was as refreshing as the fresh green of spring.

From the global perspective, women's football also symbolises the economic and political empowerment of women. Although a sports-related topic was already featured in the previous article, I would like to touch upon this issue as the significance and historical background are rarely discussed in Japan.

In the olden days, women were not at liberty to play football. As illustrated in *Bend It Like Beckham* (a movie produced in 2002), the English Football Association in 1921 forbade women from playing for any of the clubs affiliated with the Association, on the grounds that women should not be encouraged to play football as the sport was not fit for them. That ban lasted for five decades until it was finally abandoned in 1971.<sup>2</sup>

Women were considered as unfit for football for several main reasons: it was disgraceful for a woman to chase a ball with her hair flying and thighs uncovered; and football was immoral for women and bad for their health. The heroine of the movie also

faces this social barrier as she grows up in fear. Thus, playing football without restraint helps women to overcome prejudice. It shows the importance of women actively enjoying sports like men do, and fulfilling their potential. Aiming for organisational and operational changes from a brand-new perspective, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) announced in May 2016 the appointment of a woman as its new Secretary General: Fatma Samoura is a Senegalese national with broad experience, including at the United Nations.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to a woman leading a women's team, there are also women with proven ability in leading a men's team. Japan's national men's rugby team had won only one game in seven World Cup tournaments until the autumn of 2015, when it won three games in the Rugby World Cup held in England. We witnessed a particularly thrilling game as Japan edged past South Africa. Kaori Araki, who served as a 'psychology coach' to the national team from July 2012, reportedly helped its sudden success, as players trusted her guidance and advice, focusing on practice and holding their own throughout the games.

Thus, the vision of unique players working with excellent leaders reveals that great achievements and emotional ties come from teamwork and a collaborative playing style. The resurgence of the national women's football team from its elimination in the preliminaries for the Rio Olympics would help drive women's economic and political empowerment and reconstruction in the aftermath of the Kumamoto Earthquake.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jfa.jp/news/00009648/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thefa.com/womens-girls-football/history>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fifa.com/about-fifa/news/y=2016/m=5/news=fatma-samoua-diouf-samoura-appointed-fifa-secretary-general-2790885.html>