

# The Experiences of Selected Professional Women Rugby and Soccer Players, and Sport Administrators during COVID-19

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## Abstract

Professional rugby and soccer for women in South Africa is still in the early stages of development. Therefore, these codes of sport for women are vulnerable to external influences such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on the experiences that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on selected professional women's rugby and soccer players and sport administrators. The theoretical approach that is adopted by this study is change theory whose central tenets are based on the work of Kurt Lewin (1947), considered the founding father of change management, and primarily focuses on approaching change management through the concepts of *unfreeze*, *change*, *refreeze*. The chapter also uses the work of Batras, Duff and Smith (2014) who offer a complementary theoretical perspective to Lewin and Rogers' (2003) concept of organisational change. Data for the study was collected from players and administrators. The sample consisted of female players (n=6)<sup>1</sup> and two administrators (n=2) one for each sporting code. The total sample consisted of eight respondents. The data collection tools used were open-ended questionnaires (due to social distancing measures) which were separately designed for each category of respondents and a Twitter poll on whether COVID-19 had a negative impact on women's sport. The Twitter poll was

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only six questionnaires for players were administered for the two sporting codes.

quantitatively analysed. The data from the open-ended questionnaires was qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis and linked to change theory in terms of the experiences of the participants in the face of a pandemic which has changed their normal way of playing and administering the different codes of sport. The findings of the study illuminate the financial impact on players who have contracts; the multiple psychological effect on players and the unpreparedness of administrators of women's rugby and soccer to handle the uncertainties related to a pandemic of this nature. The study recommends the need for change and innovation for professional players and administrators in their approaches to these two codes of sports during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the need for contingency planning measures drawing from the theoretical strands of change theory thinking: *unfreeze, change, refreeze*.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; women's soccer; women's rugby, change theory

## 1 Introduction

COVID-19 has been described as the 'latest threat to global health' (Fauci, Lane & Redfield 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020) defines COVID-19 as a severe acute respiratory syndrome which is highly infectious through human (and animal) interaction. Parnell *et al.* (2020:1) cite the global reach of the virus, stating that 'the pandemic has no regard for geography'. Whilst COVID-19 is a threat to global health, it has had unprecedented effects on every facet of society. Sport has been severely disrupted at all levels. 'The significant impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has extended to sport with the cessation of nearly all professional and non-professional events globally' (Ramagole, Van Rensberg, Pillay, Viviers, Zondi & Patricios 2020:1). This sudden closure of the sporting world has come as a shock to soccer and rugby players, sports organisations, sports journalists and other stakeholders in sporting circles (Mann, Clift, Boykoff & Bekker 2020; Toresdahl & Asif 2020). This has led to sports-related organisations scrambling to find solutions to the problems encountered with the cessation of sporting activities. Parnell, Widdop, Bond & Wilson (2020:1) indicate that a 'learning lesson from this crisis, must ensure sport managers and practitioners are better prepared in sport and society for similar events in the future'.

Sport in South Africa, like the rest of the world, has suffered from the cessation in matches and tournaments. This has had a ripple effect on the sporting fraternity, affecting soccer and rugby players and administrators alike. ‘South Africans participating in many codes of amateur and elite sport had scheduled events cancelled or postponed and their ability to train was limited’ (Ramagole *et al.* 2020:1). Lockdown restrictions applied to all soccer and rugby players, including female players.

The two codes of sport that this chapter examines are women’s rugby and soccer. The rationale for choosing women soccer and rugby players is due to the professionalization of these two codes of sport in South Africa. Although these two codes of sport are played by both men and women, it was interesting to focus on women since many female players have not as yet secured contracts and this places them in a uniquely vulnerable situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The scope of the study includes female soccer and rugby players from different clubs. Their participation in the study is in the context of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic as professional players of that particular code of sport. Like most codes of sport (with the exception of netball) in which females participate in South Africa, there is a wide inequality gap between males and females (Ogunniyi 2015). A good example are the respondents in this study who were professional female players at national level in both soccer and rugby but they were not in possession of contracts. Other authors (Clarkson, Culvin, Pope & Parry 2020; Corsini, Biscotti, Eirale & Volpi 2020) have reported on the impact of COVID-19 on female professional players and the likelihood that the impact will be long-lasting given the fragile nature of the players’ financial well-being. These findings imply that the COVID-19 pandemic will be around for some time to come and that female soccer and rugby players and sports organisations will need to change and adapt to this ‘new normal’. The study therefore addressed the following main research question: what are the experiences of selected professional women rugby and soccer players and sport administrators during COVID-19?

## **2 Change Theory**

Kurt Lewin (1947) is regarded by many as the founder or father of Change Theory (Cummings, Bridgman & Brown 2016). His original theory has been adapted over the years by other change theorists. In fact, Cummings *et al.* (2016:33) put forward the argument that ‘change as three steps’ model,

commonly referred to as CATS, was never really developed by Lewin, 'it took form after his death'. This model which researchers attribute to Lewin examines the concept of change taking place in the following manner: unfreeze → change → refreeze; as Schein (2010:199) asserts 'The fundamental assumptions underlying *any* change in a human system are derived originally from Kurt Lewin (1947)'. In the development of theories as complex as Change Theory, there have been criticisms over the years of Lewin's original work, which has led to later theorists building on his initial concepts. For example, Cummings *et al.* (2016) assert that Lewin did not write the word 'refreezing' anywhere in his work; he used the word 'freezing'. The word 'refreezing' can be traced back to 1950 in a conference paper that one of his students produced (Cummings *et al.* 2016). Another criticism by Kanter, Stein & Jick (1992:10) links the model to being 'wildly inappropriate' which is a 'quantly linear and static conception'. Others like Child (2005) point out that the world of today is very complex and therefore the concept of 'refreezing' is too rigid. However, Lewin's Change Theory did form the basis for other later theorists to build on his original conception of this theory.

Batras, Duff and Smith (2014) present some of the key perspectives from various change theorists which have some bearing on the experiences of soccer and rugby players and sport administrators during this time of change that COVID-19 has brought about. Batras *et al.* (2014:234) sum up Lewin's (1947) contribution to change as follows:

The status quo is the product of a number of forces in the social environment that govern individual's behaviour at a given point in time. As such casual relations can be analysed. Change initiatives need to destabilize the status quo, implement the alternative and restabilize the environment. The implementation process involves research and performs a learning function.

This view, if applied to the experiences of soccer and rugby players and sport administrators during COVID-19, may not necessarily represent the complexities of the changes taking place. This group experienced numerous destabilising changes brought about by COVID-19. The implication is that they implement the alternative in order to re-stabilize the environment. In this context the alternative is still in the process of being developed. Later change theorists like Rogers (2003) added aspects of organisational change and its

relationship to individuals in terms of innovation; ‘an organization’s propensity for innovation relates to structural factors within the organization, characteristics of individuals and external factors in the environment’ (Batras *et al.* 2014:234). This concept of change resonates well with an external factor in the environment like a health pandemic (COVID-19). Another concept in organisational change introduced by Schein (2010) is the culture of groups and an organisation. Batras *et al.* (2014: 234) sum up Schein’s (2010) contribution as follows: ‘Culture can be observed and studied through the behaviour of groups and their beliefs, values and assumptions. The culture of a group determines its actions’. The particular view of change that involves the culture of individuals and organisations also has relevance to this study in that people involved in sport are influenced by their personal culture and that of the organisations where they work. The changes required as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic are both immediate and long-term. This implies that there needs to be planning and coping strategies in place which Sniehotta, Schwarzer, Scholz and Schuz (2005:567) refer to as ‘action planning and coping planning’ for long-term lifestyle change.

### **3 COVID-19 and Sport**

COVID-19 has changed the way the world exists in 2020, with most countries being either in some form of lockdown or restricted movement. ‘South Africa, like other countries around the world, has used a lockdown strategy to address the initial phases of the COVID-19 epidemic’ (Patricios, Saggars, Van Zuydam & Gelbart 2020:1). The effect of COVID-19 on sport and in particular on female soccer and rugby only began taking effect when the hard lockdown came into effect in March 2020. This meant that literature in this area is only emerging now. This emerging literature is not confined to specific codes of sport. What follows here is a selection of empirical studies that have been conducted; obviously these are limited as they do not expressly cover professional female soccer and rugby.

In many countries, ‘sporting calendars, competitions, even practices are suspended’ (Begović 2020:1). International sport has also been affected, in particular the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and UEFA Euros competition have been postponed to 2021 (Begović 2020; Gallego, Nishiura, Sah & Rodriguez-Morales 2020; Mann *et al.* 2020; Toresdahl & Asif 2020). The danger of fans spreading a contagious virus is very real as given in the example of the soccer

match between Atalanta (from Italy) and Valencia (from Spain) in February 2020; ‘experts assume that the 45 792 fans attending this UEFA Champions League exchanged the virus and contributed to the massive outbreak of the virus in Italy and Spain’ (Gilat & Cole 2020:175).

Sporting events and leagues involve not only professional soccer and rugby players; sporting organisations and administrators are equally affected by cancellations caused by COVID-19. It is argued that ‘The current COVID-19 crisis spotlights the need to create and codify a rigorous system of checks and balances that ensures greater accountability on the part of mega-event organisers, while ensuring that the athlete’s voice is heard’ (Mann *et al.* 2020). Various considerations have been touted for professional soccer and rugby players who have to perform in a COVID-19 environment. Toresdahl and Asif (2020) identify some of these considerations as the prevention of COVID-19 in soccer and rugby players, testing players with suspected COVID-19 and the management of soccer and rugby players with COVID-19. Interestingly, mental health support is one of the ways they suggest to manage professional athletes such as soccer and rugby players:

Suspending seasons and cancelling competitions can cause significant grief, stress, anxiety, frustration, and sadness for an athlete. The psychological impact of COVID-19 on a competitive athlete is potentiated by the removal of his or her social support network and normal training routine, which for some is a critical component of managing depression or anxiety. Sports medicine providers should anticipate the need for additional mental health support for athletes (Toresdahl & Asif 2020:223).

Player well-being, as described by Clarkson *et al.* (2020), is thus seen as a critical factor during the COVID-19 pandemic. FIFPro (2020) reports that the number of footballers reporting symptoms of depression has doubled since the sport shut down.

Evidence about the long-term impact of the virus on sport is only now emerging (Evans, Blackwell, Dolan, Fahlén, Hoekman, Lenneis, McNarry, Smith & Wilcock 2020). Evans *et al.* (2020) advocate an agenda for research into the sociology of sport which should include questions like: What role will sport, exercise and physical activity play in the future? Will the organisational structure of sport change in response to the pandemic? Will the inequalities

highlighted by the pandemic begin to be addressed? How will the lives of athletes and other participants in sport change? Will the virus result in the further exclusion or stigmatisation of ‘risky’ and marginalised groups? These questions have a bearing on this study as female professional soccer and rugby players and sport administrators are the very people these questions address.

### **3.1 Impact of COVID-19 on Sport in South Africa**

Sport in South Africa and many other countries have been equally impacted by the virus as both professional and non-professional sport came to a halt (Hughes, Saw, Perera, Mooney, Wallett, Cooke, Coatsworth & Broderick 2020; Ramagole *et al.* 2020). The South African government has been responding to the COVID-19 disease with strict precautions, which has had a significant impact on society, businesses and citizens (Begović 2020; Ramagole *et al.* 2020). According to Ramagole *et al.* (2020:1), ‘the participation of South African athletes in many codes of amateur and elite sport in scheduled events was cancelled or postponed, and their ability to train was limited’. South Africa was placed under ‘hard’ level 5 lockdown for five weeks; however, as the lockdown regulations eased in the weeks from May to June 2020, the resumption of sport was contemplated by several South African associations (Ramagole *et al.* 2020). Initially, strict times were put in place for exercise (6am-9am); this was later changed to being able to exercise at any time of the day as long as it was not in a group (Janse van Rensburg, Pillay, Hendricks & Blanco 2020). These regulations had a significant impact on athletes as fitness levels dipped and their mental health worsened due to the ‘forced training restriction’ (Ramagole *et al.* 2020:2). The regulations included the government regulation concerning the wearing of masks in public places. For athletes, like soccer and rugby players, who exercise at high intensity, Janse van Rensburg *et al.* (2020) caution that face masks can pose possible medical risks. Regulations have eased with training sessions being held under strict conditions at the end of 2020 (September - December), however there has been no confirmation when women’s soccer and rugby matches will resume in 2021.

### **3.2 Impact of COVID-19 and Female Rugby and Soccer**

For many of the female soccer and rugby players in South Africa, not playing matches equalled not receiving an income, which added a financial strain on

these players and their families. An example of this is the recent news that the Premier Soccer League (PSL) was set to continue matches behind closed doors while the South African Football Association (SAFA) National Women's League was cancelled, with a champion being named. In England, where professional or competitive women's soccer (also referred to as football) is quite well established, there are concerns being raised about the status of women's soccer (Clarkson *et al.* 2020:2):

The financial consequences of postponed games and reductions in broadcasting revenue will be significant in men's football; however, there are questions being raised around the extent to which this will be passed on to elite women's clubs, many of which are economically fragile.

They (Clarkson *et al.* 2020) go on to examine other aspects of women's football that will be impacted, such as: organizational and economic repercussions, player contracts, migration and investment, and player well-being. As the resumption of sport behind closed doors approaches, mass gatherings will still be prohibited (Parnell *et al.* 2020). The intention of prohibiting spectators from watching live sport is to restrict the spread of COVID-19 (Gilat & Cole 2020). Contact training sessions in small groups have been allowed for athletes but clubs must follow stringent precautions and set hygiene rules (Janse van Rensburg *et al.* 2020; Ramagole *et al.* 2020). Mohr, *et al.* (2020) and Parnell *et al.* (2020:5) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the way the sport industry operates, further stating that at elite or recreational level, the rethinking and role of sport will ultimately 'continue to play an important role in society in the future'.

## **4 Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Sample**

A population is regarded as a group of class subjects, variables, concepts, or phenomena that may be sampled for a study (Oliver 2004). While in some cases research is achieved through the investigation of the entire group, this study used a sample population which is a result of the selection of a subsection representative of the population (Oliver 2004:27). Purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method, was used in this study. This



sampling method is used in special situations where the sampling is done with a specific purpose in mind (Maree & Pietersen 2007:178). In this case, the purposive sampling technique was used to identify key informants who are involved in South African women's rugby and soccer. These include soccer and rugby players and sport administrators. The sample consisted of players (n=6) and one administrator from each of the two selected sporting codes (soccer and rugby) (n=2). The total sample for this study consisted of (n=8) entities comprising eight participants. Qualitative research lends itself to smaller sample sizes, depending on the data collection method being employed (Neuman 2011). For example, it is common practice that focus groups comprise 6-12 participants (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell 2005). Case studies can have even smaller samples, especially when an individual or institution is being studied in depth (Mohajan 2019). In the case of this study, eight participants contributed to the study, from the three different categories of sport stakeholders. For the Twitter poll, snowball sampling was used (Parker, Scott & Geddes 2019), through sharing and retweets.

#### **4.2 Data Collection and Analysis**

The main data collection tool used was open-ended questionnaires (Mohajan 2019) which were separately designed for each category of respondents. A Twitter poll was also used to reach a wider audience (Aspers & Corte 2019). During COVID-19, the data collection tools selected had to be in line with the regulations related to no personal contact with participants. The data was collected using online methods and instruments. There was no physical contact with any of the participants. The open-ended questionnaires with the consent forms were emailed to participants and they were also returned via email. The Twitter poll was conducted online and targeted the opinions of women involved in sport. Social media is an avenue that has been successfully used during the COVID-19 pandemic to ascertain the views of female players.

'Analysis is the interplay between researchers and data' (Corbin & Strauss 2015:13). In the case of this research, qualitative thematic analysis (Eatough & Smith 2017) was adopted to categorise the responses from the selected questionnaires into different thematic areas in order to examine the experiences of COVID-19 on players and administrators in women's rugby and soccer in South Africa. In using qualitative thematic analysis, the open-ended questionnaires were transcribed and common thematic threads were

identified. This is a method used for the systematic search of themes within qualitative data (Eatough & Smith 2017). According to Williams and Moser (2019:45) ‘coding methods employ processes that reveal themes embedded in the data, in turn suggesting thematic directionality toward categorizing data through which meaning can be negotiated, codified, and presented’, which in this case, related to the financial impact and psychological effects, among others. The Twitter poll was used to obtain a glimpse into how COVID-19 has impacted women’s sport. This was analysed quantitatively based on the percentage for the two questions asked.

## **5 Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the study are discussed here, respondents of each category are represented as Res. Res refers to respondents with the corresponding participant’s number to uphold anonymity and confidentially (Res 1 to Res 8). Res 1 to Res 6 are the soccer and rugby players; and Res 7 and 8 refer to the administrators. The broad findings of the study were grouped into themes for each category of participants as follows: players - financial impact on players who have contracts; psychological effects on players (mental well-being, self-esteem, fear/ uncertainty of future); administrators - unpreparedness to handle the uncertainties related to a pandemic of this nature.

### **5.1 Professional Soccer and Rugby Players**

The data revealed two major thematic areas in relation to the impact that COVID-19 had on professional soccer and rugby female players: the financial impact on players and the psychological effects on players. These are now discussed. The data from the Twitter poll highlighted the negative impact of COVID-19 on women’s sport and was aimed at women in sport. The Twitter poll conducted revealed that respondents overwhelmingly supported the statement that women’s sport was negatively impacted by COVID-19. The statement read: ‘Has COVID-19 had an impact women’s sport’. This was a snapshot poll where a question is asked and the response is either Yes or No. Based on the responses, a quantitative figure was generated which contributed to the data on the impact of COVID-19. The result of the Twitter poll was as follows: 91% indicated ‘negative impact’ and 9% indicated ‘no impact’. The poll received a total of 65 votes, 18 retweets and 7 likes.

### *5.1.1 Financial Impact on Players*

There was evidence of a financial strain on female rugby and soccer players, with little or no game time for a period of four months. Res 4 stated: '*No national team [Banyana Banyana] games means no income*'. The income received of playing matches helped sustain the players, as Res 1 explained: '*As female rugby players, we are still developing ... this means that if we don't play then we don't get an income*'. This income dried up due to the pandemic and South Africa being under lockdown (Parnell *et al.* 2020). Only some female soccer and rugby players are afforded the opportunity to sign contracts with their federations/associations, most do not have contracts unlike their male counterparts (Clarkson *et al.* 2020). The lack of available funds in federations such as the South African Football Association (SAFA) and the South African Rugby Union (SARU) for female rugby and soccer players have meant that these players have had to turn to the South African government for assistance in order to apply for social grants (Hene, Bassett & Andrews 2011).

Another financial impact is the loss of jobs by family members during the pandemic, which puts further pressure on players as they become the sole breadwinners in their households. Res 3 explained: '*The financial impact is huge because my mother lost her job, we now depend on one source of income and it's hard to adjust to that especially because I am no longer playing soccer and we are a big family*'. The dynamics of culture and how change is perceived in the situation cannot be ignored (Schein 2010). It is hard to adjust, especially in an environment where extended families are dependent on the player's income. Female-headed households where the only source of income is from games played, suffer. Female players have the burden of providing for the entire family when a disaster such as COVID-19 strikes. The main findings related to the financial impact of COVID-19 may be summarised as follows: selected female soccer and rugby players had contracts, the rest could not secure earnings because they are paid according to the matches played; the female players who participated were often the breadwinners or sole income earners for their families and they had financial obligations to their extended family as well; financial support from other avenues such as the government for players, was in the form of a once-off payment which was inadequate.

### *5.1.2 Psychological Effects on Players*

The psychological effects of COVID-19 are far reaching and only becoming

evident as the pandemic unfolds worldwide (Clarkson *et al.* 2020; Toresdahl & Asif 2020). For players, the psychological effects included their mental well-being, self-esteem, fear/uncertainty of the future and assistance from respective federations. These are discussed in the sections below:

### **Mental Well-being**

The mental well-being of female rugby and soccer players during this pandemic has severely been tested (Clarkson *et al.* 2020; Ramagole *et al.* 2020; Toresdahl & Asif 2020). Mental strength and resilience is one of the traits that female soccer and rugby players rely on to compete at a professional level. The sporting field is a place of escape for most soccer and rugby players and not being able to participate in any sporting activities has impacted their mental well-being (Ramagole *et al.* 2020). Res 2 indicated that *'I find the rugby field as an environment where I can be able to express my feelings and be able to talk about my challenges and problems, it is very hard now as I feel like the environment I am in, home, is not the same as being on the field'*. Day to day living through a pandemic can be a shock to the mental well-being of players and this also brings about a lack of motivation to train for some. However, other players did try to remain positive and keep focused on their return to their sport, like Res 6 who stated: *'This is a test of our character and how disciplined we are as athletes, working behind closed doors when no one sees us'*.

Another issue that both female rugby and soccer players cited was the rise of gender-based violence (GBV) in the country during lockdown and this also instilled fear in the soccer and rugby players for their own safety and that of others (Eng, 2010). Some of the comments from the players in this regard included: *'I live in a community where I see gender-based violence on a daily basis – it has increased significantly during the lockdown'* (Res 3); *'My partner lost his job during the lockdown and he became a different man, moody, argumentative, blaming me for minor issues'* (Res 5); *'My sister was assaulted by her partner during the lockdown; it was so bad and the entire family became involved and traumatised'* (Res 6). These experiences of the female soccer and rugby players indicate that the level and extent of GBV escalated during the lockdown impacting on the players' mental well-being. Women soccer and rugby players have clearly been affected emotionally with one player explaining the extent of her trauma, *'Emotionally the pandemic has been draining, I'm always worried when going out. I'm scared as I was never ready*

for something like this. *The first few weeks of COVID-19 were difficult for me as I couldn't cope and couldn't see how we were going to get pass this'* (Res 5). This statement emphasizes elements of emotional well-being such as fear and anxiety and the effect it has on players. Another factor is the player's ability to cope with COVID-19, not only the virus but with related factors like fear for what the future holds. Players' comments on the negative effects of COVID-19 on their mental well-being is an indication that the virus has had an impact on both the physiological and psychological well-being of female soccer and rugby players. Clearly, the effects of COVID-19 on the mental well-being of the female soccer and rugby players is still unfolding as the pandemic tightens its grip worldwide.

### **Self-esteem**

It has been found that the level of self-esteem of the female rugby and soccer players have been low due to the lack of fitness training (Ramagole *et al.* 2020). The players rely on sport scientists to help them keep fit however during the pandemic, no direct contact has been unfolding as there are no training sessions with fellow teammates. Res 3 discussed the impact on fitness and weight and inevitably on self-image, *'There has been an impact on my fitness, training alone is not easy because sometimes you don't even know if you are doing the right thing and as a female we struggle with weight gain and this affects my self-image'*. Other aspects of self-esteem experienced by female players include feelings of inadequacy, a loss of self-respect, despair, loss of pride and shame. The ability to provide for one's loved ones gives the players a sense of pride and the inability to do this creates a sense of shame. This was reflected in the data provided by the respondents: *'As a female breadwinner, I provide income for my family and no play equals no money and I feel inadequate like I am of no value to them'* (Res 1); *'I feel so empty and desperate – like a useless female who people shame – she is no good, she is useless'* (Res 4).

It is reported that guidance and direction is often lost when training programmes are sent out and players are unable to follow them with precision (Mohr *et al.* 2020). In the current study, female soccer and rugby players indicated that their responsibilities made it difficult for them to follow training programmes. For example, the programme required certain types of training at certain times and this could not be followed (Res 2 – *'I had to be with my baby and could not run; as a result, I felt like I was failing my baby and being a*

*failure as woman – added to that I was letting down my team by not training as hard as I needed to’*). This uncertainty in the resumption of soccer and rugby for females is reflected by Res 4: *‘The sporting calendar has been put on hold for nearly 3 months and this is affecting the fitness of players. It is difficult for the club to keep track of players who are following the programme and those who are not’*. With both sporting codes postponing/cancelling various events, players are left with no certainty that matches will take place any time soon (Ramagole *et al.* 2020; Hene, Bassett & Andrews 2011). According to Res 1, *‘They (SAFA) could have notified the teams in advance about the cancellation of the league, so that teams can prepare their players and their mindsets, instead we saw the news on television or social networks’*. Irregular updates and communication from management has also negatively impacted the female players. In the face of changes occurring with respect to managing the various codes of sport, Rogers (2003) advocates that communication is a key to managing change in this context. Res 6 indicated that *‘Since the start of lockdown there was nothing said only recently (July) did SAFA announce on the news that our season has ended due to the pandemic’*. This indicates that communication was a problem area, both the timing and frequency.

### **Fear/ Anxiety/ Uncertainty of the Future**

Women rugby and soccer players have to pursue dual careers, many of them study and play for the national team due to the uncertainty that comes with playing in these sporting codes (Clarkson *et al.* 2020). Res 5 indicated that *‘You need something to fall back on, football alone is not enough to secure a future especially on the ladies’ side’*. As tournaments are cancelled due to the pandemic, players worry for their futures in the sport (Toresdahl & Asif 2020). An example of this is the cancellation of sponsors in the local PSL, should this fate fall on the National Women’s League which is in its debut season, it could herald the end of the professional women’s soccer league in South Africa. Further uncertainty was emphasized by Res 3 *‘If the male teams are struggling, imagine female teams. It will be tough; we hope we will get support from our association (SAFA) and other companies. Our sporting codes in South Africa are not professional, there are only a few female soccer and rugby players who have contracts with their national teams’*. Furthermore, players who have been contacted to further their professional careers abroad have not been able to sign contracts because of the travel ban which does not allow international travel

during the pandemic (Clarkson *et al.* 2020). Res 5 pointed out: *‘With the national team the COSAFA Cup and AWCON has been put on hold and the pandemic has also affected a delay (not only me) in terms of moving to another team to play soccer overseas’*. Female soccer and rugby players who compete nationally attract the attention of overseas clubs and the potential exists for them to be offered lucrative contracts and also for them to become professional players. When these opportunities no longer exist, it causes players to become uncertain for their future careers.

## **5.2 Sport Administrators**

Sportsmen and women do not exist in a vacuum. At the professional level, sport administration is the key driver in all codes of sport. Sport administration covers a vast array of areas that need to function in perfect sync in order for professional sport to exist. Amongst others, these include coaches, trainers, managers, venue and fixture co-ordinators, event administrators and the management of sport organisations. As with sport players, the administration component of rugby and soccer was unprepared to handle the uncertainties related to a pandemic of this nature; they had to adjust to manage the sport and the players (Toresdahl & Asif 2020). This is reflected in the sport administrators’ discussions on the impact of COVID-19 on their sporting code, on themselves personally and the future of the sporting code in the ‘new normal’.

Excerpts from two sports administrators representing the two codes (soccer and rugby) reflect the adaptation that sports administrators had to make:

Res 7 (soccer): *‘Response has been slow and sometimes directionless. The professional side of football has been very progressive like planning for the resumption of football. However, communication should be better to clubs and members. Implementation of virtual programmes/training sessions could have taken place’*.

Res 8 (rugby): *‘It has been business as usual for us since lockdown ... For example, virtual work environment – with all staff working from home; virtual sport code management – focus on high performance sport codes, including both football and rugby as well as wellness*

*initiatives, online training and development (webinars; online training)'.*

The response to COVID-19 by soccer was '*slow and sometimes directionless*' (Res 7), on the other hand, the response from rugby has been '*business as usual*' (Res 8). These two statements show the landscape that each of the sporting codes are currently facing during the pandemic (Gilat & Cole 2020). The action taken by the respective sporting codes shows that the leadership in these structures need to become more inclusive of female players particularly in rugby and soccer (Ramagole *et al.* 2020). It was also noted that sport administrators adapted to this change well by focusing their efforts on online activities. This may be viewed as '*changing and refreezing*' in change theory (Cumings *et al.* 2016) because the normal activities involving sport administrators were reviewed with the introduction of online activities. The online activities are likely to continue for the foreseeable future (refreezing). COVID-19 has forced sport administrators to rethink their approach to codes of sport where female players are involved. Unique attributes of females that might affect the way the sport is played and administered have a crucial role in the change process. This change would need to become the normal in the future (refreezing). A good example in terms of the administration of sport for females is a flexible training schedule that takes into consideration that female players have household responsibilities which include parenting (single); picking and dropping children at school. The change management process may also involve constant *refreezing* during the COVID-19 period until a sense of stability is reached. Nevertheless, some aspects have worked and others need to be reimaged should a pandemic of this nature or a similar situation arise again.

A unique feature of women's sport in South Africa is that sporting codes and structures rely on a countless number of volunteers who promote and try to advance women in sport (individual athletes/teams/coaches), these volunteers are often sport administrators who will be lost when communication fails with regard to the future of women's soccer and rugby during the pandemic. This is evidenced in the responses by Res 7 and Res 8. Res 7: '*I think we will lose a lot of female administrators especially in volunteer positions, because they (federations) will now concentrate on income recovery*'. Interestingly, Res 8 points to another feature of change theory, that is, adaptation and reflection (Batra *et al.* 2014) in stating: '*I believe that women are naturally inclined to provide transformative leadership and this is*

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*rethinking spaces and responsibilities; providing support and listening when needed*'. Res 8 points to features of change where sportswomen reflect on their circumstances with the intention of bringing about change.

The sport administrators had some interesting reflections of what the 'new normal' should look like. They shared the following sentiments which have been evident in the literature: strategy planning to accommodate such events; more optimization of digital space; more focus on health measures, role of medicine and sport science on the field of play and at events (Gilat & Cole 2020; Janse van Rensburg *et al.* 2020); adjusted training programmes (Mohr *et al.* 2020; Toresdahl & Asif 2020); facilities management; rethink the role of virtual sport and eSport and restructuring of existing programmes; financial impact on sport (Clarkson *et al.* 2020); rethinking the business of sport (Evans *et al.* 2020).

Internationally, the business of sport has changed drastically over the last ten years (Fauci, Lane, & Redfield 2020). South Africa has been falling behind and the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded the country about the power and importance to effect change when needed. Leadership and governance in sport have been challenged during the lockdown and the time is right now to make changes for the future (Parnell *et al.* 2020). Moreover, the digital era is here to stay, South African sport administrators will need to learn and use it optimally in the future as has been advocated by Boyle (2017).

From a theoretical perspective, there are a few new theoretical insights that this study can offer: sustainability of women's sport during the pandemic is dependent on adapting to a changing environment and embracing online administration; financial insecurity of women soccer and rugby players demand a change in the fundamental aspects of the sporting codes, for example, the role of contracts for all women professional players to ensure job security as women were also the breadwinners in their families and they had financial obligations in their households; the psychological impact of COVID-19 on women in sport also has far-reaching implications in terms of change which is needed in finding approaches to deal with mental health and self-esteem issues for the women burdened with multiple roles in their households apart from their status as professional sportswomen.

## **6 Conclusion**

This chapter has delved into the experiences of selected women soccer and

rugby players and administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given more time and access during the pandemic, the study could have included more participants. However, this was not possible due to COVID-19 and time limitations. In addition, another limitation was the availability of current literature and empirical studies due to the recent emergence of the pandemic. This should change drastically as the impact of COVID-19 emerges over time. Almost all codes of sport have been severely impacted by COVID-19. It is through the sharing of experiences that all concerned with sport can learn from each other and manage the considerable impact that COVID-19 has had on the sporting fraternity. These findings of this study are not meant to draw generalizations but to describe the experiences of professional female soccer and rugby players, and sport administrators for theoretical insight locally. Women's professional sport in many countries has been severely hampered and it is unlikely that it will return to pre-COVID-19 conditions in the near future. Therefore, the challenge for players and administrators is to re-invent themselves and their respective codes of sport to face a future that has been forever altered by this highly contagious virus.

## **7 Recommendations**

Female soccer and rugby players and sport administrators must work together in order for them to 'take the sport' to the public on various platforms. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented female players from playing these two codes of sport, it has also prevented sport administrators from doing their work as well. Whilst these two groups of people have experienced the pandemic from two different perspectives, both are linked to the growth and sustainability of the same sporting codes. With most sporting activities being cancelled, it has become necessary for players and administrators to adjust to new ways of doing things, especially technology platforms that will allow players and sport administrators to continue to work from home.

Specific recommendations for female rugby and soccer players include: training programme adjustments and providing psychological support to female players and support staff such as sport administrators; regular check-ins with soccer and rugby players to remain connected with them and to ensure that they are taking care of their well-being; new initiatives to keep soccer and rugby players focused and active for the remainder of the year; online learning and sharing initiatives as teams; future research to include female players from

different race groups. The recommendations for sport administrators include: spending time innovating using different platforms to communicate, report and record their business; reconsideration of communication strategies with female soccer and rugby players, club executives and team members, to ensure regular contact; using every available opportunity to review, revisit and collaborate with everyone involved in the sporting code, to ensure that they are prepared for the ‘new normal’.

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