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QUEERING SPORTS IN NYANDARA

Safe(r)spaces of "Unknowing" in a Conservative African Society

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ABSTRACT

In Nyandara, a pseudonymized Sub-Saharan African country, women's football and men's/mixed gender netball are safe(r) spaces for gender- and sexual diverse (GSD) persons. In 2024-2025 GSD persons were the majorities of players on such teams. This is surprising in a society where GSD persons are denounced loudly from church pulpits, and passersby shout out to them in public that they are "satanic", "demonic" and an "abomination". Christian churches are a major social force in Nyandara, whose conservatism is supported by colonial-era laws against intimate acts interpreted to be against the order of nature.

Using 73 interviews (2024–2025) and the conceptual lenses of knowing, legibility, safety and the stop, we answer the following questions: why and how have Nyandarans devised grassroots ways to not know GSD footballers and netballers? How does this shape football and netball as spaces? Under what circumstances does this unknowing break down? Common attitudes reconstrue players as less queer while queering these sports to the extent that crossdressing and androgyny have become tolerated aspects of them. We examine how this has occurred and its broader implications for the collective avoidance of stigma.

Keywords: transgender, football, Sub-Saharan Africa, safe space

Introduction

In Sub-Saharan Africa, non-heteronormative sexualities are criminalized in 30 out of 54 countries, and the pseudonymous country of Nyandara is one of them. Giving the country's actual name could jeopardize the current "safer" status of the players examined here. Same-sex acts are illegal under the country's constitution. If the "safe" space of football and netball were to become public, it could force the country's authorities to save face by publicly "closing" the space, either by threatening gender and sexual diverse (GSD) players with what would happen to them if they were caught (at the street level in Nyandara, simply being GSD persons is considered illegal), or by kicking them out of football and netball clubs.

Nyandara's penal code, taken from British colonial law, recommends lengthy jail terms for "unnatural offences" and "indecent practices" (Oberth 2014, 12). Strident rhetoric against LGBT persons and organizations has been part of politics in Nyandara since the mid-2000s. Church pulpits

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loudly denounce the behaviors of "gays" or "LGBT" every Sunday, and passersby in public shout out to GSD persons in public that they are "satanic", "demonic" and their sins are to blame for droughts and extreme weather. In this hostile context, our research has found what we call a safe(r) space in football and netball. We conclude that under certain circumstances, *football* can function as a gender. This is not the case for netball, and we investigate the reasons behind the differences in GSD persons' experiences in these two sports.

We draw on the conceptual lenses of *knowing*, legibility, safety, and *the stop* (Ahmed 2006; Murray 1997; Harju 2021; Westbrook 2010) to explore sports and particularly football as activities and environments that offer a sense of belonging, allowing GSD persons to contribute positively to society and avoid the violence and discrimination often faced outside of sports. However, it is important to note that in Nyandara not all GSD individuals engage in sports and not all participants in sports are gender nonconforming.

We answer the following questions: why and how have urban Nyandarans (neighbors, police, relatives) devised grassroots ways to *not know* footballers and netballers as GSD? How does this shape football and netball as a space of bodies and social imaginaries? Under what circumstances does this *unknowing* break down?

The original purpose of our project was to learn about street-level interactions between GSD persons and social authorities (including police), and to analyze violence. We did not originally intend to ask about sports, but many interviewees brought the topic up spontaneously. We followed up in interviews by asking more about the topic. Interviews were conducted in a safe space where the interviewees felt comfortable to speak about their experiences. All persons interviewed were aged 18 or over. All names given for interviewees are pseudonyms.

The authors are cis-gender heterosexuals who have personal stakes in researching these issues. Laura Stark has a close trans person relative with whom she spent time during the process of transitioning. Before this study, she interviewed 103 trans women and "in-between gender" persons in another African society. Vincent Jumbe has worked with GSD persons in public health in Africa, and Ernest Ako has defended GSD people's rights in the courtroom as a lawyer in Africa.

Gender and sexual orientation in Nyandara

We found the term *gender and sexual diverse* from online discussions by GSD persons and use it adjectivally. We needed a short acronym that would be inclusive and less ethnocentric than the terms embedded in the acronym LGBTQI+. The latter terms are Western-derived labels not always used by interview participants themselves, and using these terms in research perpetuates Western analytical imposition on non-Western contexts (Wilson 2024). The term used by participants in interviews can be translated as *the community*, but GSD is used here instead to avoid confusion with references to the broader heteronormative neighborhoods in which GSD persons lived.

There is no concept of socially constructed *gender* in mainstream Nyandaran society. Gender and sexuality were typically not distinguished from each other as they are in Western-derived, liberal and middle-class contexts. As in most Sub-Saharan African countries, gender is so essentially connected to biology in Nyandaran culture that biological sex = sexual destiny = social destiny in all areas of life: "[a]ll social males are biological males, and all social females are biological females" (Shepherd 1987, 263). As described to us by interviewees, most heterosexual Nyandarans adopt from childhood this biology-based, sex-role understanding of intimate identity (Harju 2021, 3), one that assumes women should dress and wear

their hair in certain ways, not least because their main purpose in life is assumed to attract men, marry and bear and raise children. Women must therefore make themselves *readable*, acceptable and desirable to men as partners, and men are expected to provide for female partners and father children. Marriage and childbearing are primary avenues for women in Nyandaran society to gain agency and respect.

Most residents (neighbors, police, and local authorities) in Nyandara's largest city were not familiar with what LGBTQI+ terms meant in the sense they are popularly understood in Eurocentric societies. Even the terms *gender* or *sexual orientation* were new for many. Research participants, too, had varying familiarity with LGBTQI+ identity categories, and some may have used vernacular concepts for themselves related to intimate identity that were not easily translatable into English in a fast-moving conversation (Nyanzi, 2014, 64; Otu 2022; Epprecht 2008, 8; Wilson 2024; Westbrook 2010, 45). In fact, we were told several self-designation combinations ("I am trans woman and gay," "I'm a man and lesbian") that fit uneasily into the familiar canon of LGBTQI+ definitions. This also meant that urban Nyandarans did not make distinctions between anti-gay and anti-trans attitudes.

It is important to keep an open mind about how interlocutors approached their own intimate identities. The term *intimate identities* used here encompasses the places, sensations, and activities adults experience intimately with other adults. It does not presuppose which aspects of identity (e.g., gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, designated sex at birth) are most important or how they should be defined. Our analysis is based on what our interview participants told us about their own intimate identities. In the footnotes, we have used their self-reported identifications to avoid forcing their self-understandings into the established Western categories of queer discourse.

Given the ubiquitous importance placed on gender assigned at birth in mainstream African societies and the many expectations that arise from it, we asked interviewees what gender they had been assigned at birth, in order to better understand the context of these expectations. We use the term *gender* here to be understandable to Western readers, but the reader should understand this term to mean *sex-based roles* as described above. Roughly half of the interview participants told us that the gender they had been assigned at birth did not correlate with their gender experiences or identities later in life. In footnotes throughout this paper, we tell what the interviewees told us regarding how they understood themselves to have been assigned by parents and doctors at birth, and how they self-identified in terms of gender at the time of the interview. In the main text, we use the term *trans* to talk about persons designated at birth as belonging to one binary category (male or female) but who, at the time of the interview, identified with the other category or more fluidly. Body-changing surgeries were not available for most Nyandarans and even hormones are expensive and not easily accessible.

Space and safety

Safer spaces do not necessarily mean truly safe. By safe(r) here, we mean *not* a verifiable fact but a subjective experience as reported by interlocutors. We use *safe* to mean both mental health and physical inviolability in the case of footballers, and mental health (validation to counter isolation, emotional safety for processing trauma) in the case of netballers. Lesbian and trans men football players and gay and trans women netball players reported feeling less abused (in the case of footballers) and less isolated (in the case of netballers) than non-normative persons who did not play these sports. GSD footballers still receive insults or threats of physical violence in the city we studied, Nyandara's largest. Our concept of *space* goes beyond fixed

physical locations where things happen to encompass identities arising from interactions in specific spaces. These identities move with the persons involved when they leave these spaces. The players on football and netball teams we spoke with estimated that the majority (for football) and as many as 100% (for netball) on their teams were GSD players.

GSD persons experienced violence that includes theft with impunity, extortion, and flash mobs prompted by fear and outrage, whose primary aim is usually not personal harm but the looting of the GSD person's home. GSD persons' vulnerability to this violence appears from interview responses to correlate roughly with their socio-economic status: wealthier and better-connected GSD persons rarely suffered violence, or if injustices happened, they had a relative or friend in the police force or traditional leadership who could help. Ethnic differences were otherwise not brought up as relevant to GSD people's experiences of sport as safe(r) spaces.

Sport has long been known to be a discriminatory hotspot and to exclude those who identify as sexually and gender diverse, even though sport is necessary for the well-being of especially disadvantaged groups (Storr et al. 2021). There is a loose consensus among researchers and journalists in Euro-North America that GSD persons 1) need safe spaces in sports and 2) need sports to be a safe space in their lives, but findings are mixed as to whether these goals are being achieved (Rovira-Font and Vilanova-Soler 2022; Storr, Landi, and Flory 2024). Against this background, the overall positive accounts surrounding GSD people's experiences in women's football in Nyandara's largest city are striking, especially when regarded in light of the criminalization and hostility toward queer identities.

Data and historical background

This article uses 73 semi-structured interviews carried out by three researchers over the span of seven weeks in 2024 and 2025. We chose to focus on a peri-urban location in the city that was socio-economically mixed and whose main industry was low-level processing of a high-value crop grown in the region. Nyandara has a history of British colonialism and is one of the countries in Africa with the lowest gross domestic product (GDP).

We interviewed lesbian, gay, and transgender persons, and five coaches of female football.[1] This is not to say that these different groups should be lumped together as experiencing football and netball in the same way. However, interlocutors themselves indicated that all non-conforming identities were under attack by mainstream society. Gay and lesbian persons, of course, could better pass as the gender expected of them than could trans persons, but they could be outed in other ways. Most of the interview examples provided in the following analysis come from trans persons, as their experiences most clearly exposed invisible gender boundaries in everyday life.

Netball was invented in England, and British colonialists enforced the idea that "men should play football and women should play netball" (Mansfield 2014, 495). Football is a prestigious sport in Nyandara: "It's the best sport, loved by many".[2] The city we studied had seven female football clubs and multiple male/mixed gender netball teams in which GSD people participated. The lesbian and trans men football players we interviewed played mostly on women's teams but occasionally on men's teams.

1 Most of the interviewees had some secondary school education, some had some university-level education, and a few had a primary school education.

2 Sydney, 20s. "I was born a woman, but I identify as a man." All names used here are pseudonyms.

The situation was different in netball: gay and trans women played mostly on men's teams but occasionally on women's teams. GSD football players played at various levels from 'social' football as a pastime to playing professionally in clubs for salaries and bonuses. The highest salary we were told was equivalent to 53 euros a month plus 10-euro bonuses for team wins. Men's netball did not have its own professional league at the time of our interviews, but teams sometimes played against teams from within or other cities and were used as opening acts or "curtain raisers" for cis-gendered women's netball games. Nearly all other possibilities for GSD people earning income and self-expressing were blocked by social discrimination. Earning at least a small amount of money from football (with possibilities for higher future income) had become an economic space of refuge for lesbian and transmen players. It is also important to note that playing for established clubs conferred social status even if one was not being paid.

In 2016–2017, women's football associations strongly condemned GSD players' behavior – meaning dressing in a masculine way or being intimate with other female-assigned-at-birth persons – stating it harmed the sport's reputation and culture. An official from one regional football association had reportedly emphasized that GSD behavior would not be tolerated in the sport. This had put women's football as a whole at risk, because some players quit football to maintain their GSD relationships. As a result, there was a significant decline in talented participants in women's football by 2018, particularly in the region that rejected GSD players. The associations failed to recognize that their condemnations had contributed to this decline, but coaches noticed it and reflected on it.

During the COVID-19 lockdown starting in 2020, most teams could not play. After the lockdown, teams resumed training, and the previous condemnations were forgotten, allowing players to focus on revitalizing the sport without fear of judgment. This led to improved performance in women's football, with the national team winning a continental regional competition the following year. Currently, there are no signs that further condemnations of lesbian or trans male players are forthcoming from the women's football associations.

Despite the lack of institutional condemnation, at the local level there is still stigma attached to being a GSD person, and there have been ambivalent tensions involved in the return of female-assigned-at-birth GSD players to women's football teams after COVID-19. Gift, a GSD coach, pointed out that

> sometimes the authorities – chiefs and people in high positions in football associations – say because you are coaching girls and you dress as a man, you are going to turn the girls into lesbians, they might tell the girls not to attend the training. [Also…] random people and football fans say if these girls continue to play football, they will never get married because they will turn into men and men won't marry them. The Football Association won't give coaching jobs to a GSD person because "she is a lesbian and she will make love to all the girls."[3]

Gift's friend Linley pointed out in the same interview:

> I can say that about 60% of my team are GSD players. […] As a coach, I also feel targeted. People [=the general public] have said very impolite things to my face. People accuse me of being the one encouraging promiscuity and "these LGBT things".[4]

3 Gift, 30s. "I was born female, I'm now a 'he'."
4 Linley, mid-30s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a "he". (Identified by his friend Gift as a "lesbian").

The recent requirement by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) that each professional male football team should have a women's counterpart has had unexpected consequences in Nyandara: women's football teams must now accept lesbian and trans men players, as these are the persons who strive for excellence in football, having few other options for advancement in Nyandaran society.

NGOs helping GSD persons in Nyandara

When discussing safe(r) spaces for GSD persons in Sub-Saharan Africa, one form of agency that is usually mentioned in the research literature is non-governmental organizations (NGOs). NGOs can reshape non-normative African identities using Western terms in a process of making previously illegible genders *knowable* (Westbrook 2010, 44). This is done to attract support from northern donors, presenting these identities as hopeful resistance to discrimination (Biruk 2020; Thomann 2014). The framing of GSD persons as "intelligible victims" can be limiting and burdensome for those it seeks to represent (Otu 2022, 4). This knowability can also strip away the veil of secrecy that protects non-conformity from harsh scrutiny. Public LGBT advocacy was seen as a provocation. Without it, we found that authorities could quietly turn a blind eye to GSD people.

These dynamics take place in the context of backlash against Western-funded governments that use African debt as policy leverage. Political rhetoric in Africa often blames Western countries for bribing Africans to abandon their cultural values by giving equal rights to GSD people. In Nyandara, NGOs that support GSDs have operated with government tolerance since the 2010s, collaborating with healthcare workers, police, and the courts. Nyandara has seen its share of political rhetoric about LGBT being "un-African" and GSD persons being "gay for pay" (Currier 2019), but like so many other things in Nyandara, this uproar is also about the struggle for money. There has been a rapid mushrooming of pro-GSD organizations, and GSD persons are seen to disproportionately benefit from international donor funding.[5] The *knowability* of GSD intimate identities is not necessarily an advantage in these contexts (Rodriguez 2018; Thilongo, Tshanduko & Jacques Rothmann 2019). Interestingly, unlike most GSD *non*-footballers, most GSD footballers we interviewed had not sought information about NGOs through word of mouth and seemed uninterested in knowing about them, a point we return to when we discuss the issue of individuals' proximity to loci of power.

Queering childhood and adolescence through sports

Netball in Nyandara has, until recently, been a sport *only* for women. This means that, in general, Nyandarans who play netball need to be gendered feminine in some way. Football, on the other hand, demands that players are gendered masculine, as football is a masculinized sport. Stephanie told that "I'd rather play netball than football because I think of myself as a woman."[6]

This gendered pigeonholing of netball and football means that persons who would seen as trans women were not welcomed on either male or female football teams, as Promise, who plays on a men's netball team pointed out, "I can't stop playing netball. It's the only sport I can play. I can't play football because they won't accept me."[7] Ellis said that despite receiving some derogatory comments on the netball pitch [during the interview she

5 Currier 2012, 2019; Awondo, Geschiere & Reid 2012; Biruk 2020; Thomann 2014.

6 Stephanie, late teens. "I was born a boy and identify as 'she'."

7 Promise, late teens. Male designated at birth. "I feel like a woman because of my voice [feminine], from the way, I walk, I have no feelings for women, I'm strictly interested only in men [and I have two boyfriends]. People call me *adona* [= woman]."

had a visible beard and moustache], she had chosen to play netball "because of the way I felt about myself. Since I was born, I felt myself to be female. So I can't play any other sport. Netball is the only one."[8]

Football has been described as the last bastion of real masculinity, where men "can play out their role as men and where they are lauded and encouraged to do so" (Rubin 2009, 268). Even if female-assigned-at-birth footballers in Nyandara were doing nothing more than walking in public in their training tops and shorts, the similarity of their football clothing to the street clothes worn by men, and the sharp contrast of their apparel to the dresses and skirts worn by cis-gendered women made female football already strongly skewed toward what Nyandarans consider to be a male gender expression. This has been encouraged by the very essence of football as a set of international practices and discourses in which "[f]ootball players and fans [...] consistently valorise the idea of being a 'real' man and as such, women and all things feminine are derided and degraded within this environment" (Rubin 2009, 269).

A masculine-coded expression was emphasized by female-assigned-at-birth players who were identified by GSD persons *as* GSD persons:

> Because I play women's football, I was asked by my parents if I am lesbian. I denied it. But I know that they know. Because all friends who come home are "studs" or tomboys. They all dress and behave like boys.[9]

These expectations of gender expression surrounding each sport shape all knowing and unknowing happening around these sports. They impact children at a young age and give them choices but also limitations. Due to these gender dynamics, trans women say that netball is the only sport they can play. Football is *not* the sport where they can freely express their femininity:

> Because of how I am, I cannot play men's football. There, I would experience gender-based violence. They discriminate against you. They call you names. As a transgender woman, [...] We are netball lovers. We have netball in our veins.[10]

The netball players we interviewed started at different ages, some in their teens, some as young as five. They usually started by watching girls play, then were invited to play with them:

> ...I used to [...] watch girls play netball. One day, they invited me to play with them. I trained with them. But I could not play in games because only girls were allowed. There were no men's netball teams then. I was 17 years old.[11]

> I started when I was 11 years old. I used to follow my sister when she would go to play netball. From there I developed an interest. At first, I played in a mixed team, combining boys and girls. I also used to play netball in secondary school, boys mixed with girls.[12]

Both women's football and women's/mixed netball offered a culturally accepted pathway that diverged from the normative biology-as-social-destiny understanding of gender in Nyandara.

8 Ellis, 30s. "I was born a boy, I feel myself a woman."
9 Theresa, early 20s. "I was born female. I self-identify as a woman, a lesbian. Sexually I am attracted to fellow women."
10 Berenice, early 20s. Identifies as a "transgender woman."
11 Irene, early 20s. "I am biologically male. But I self-identify as female. I have sexual feelings and am attracted to men. I cannot date a woman. How I walk, talk, and dress I am female. Even the chores I do are female-related chores like cooking, washing plates, and cleaning the house."
12 Karin, early 30s. "Biologically, I was born male. But I identify as female. I am 'bottom'. I like doing female-related roles like cooking, playing netball."

GSD adolescents generally hid how they felt from their parents, who, since they belonged to tightly-knit church communities, were expected to be disapproving. These adolescents often tried, if they could afford it, to move away from home as soon as possible so their parents would no longer be seen as responsible for their identities and behavior. Especially for female-designated-at-birth (FDAB) adolescents, playing football at a high level enabled them to do this. Whereas GSD male-designated-at-birth (MDAB) adolescents tended to play in loosely structured "social" netball teams, GSD female-designated-at-birth adolescents were often integrated into more formal organizational structures of football at a young age:

> I was maybe six. My Dad used to play football, then he retired and started coaching. While he was coaching, he took me with him and I played with the younger boys of my age while my dad was coaching older boys. Then I was playing for school, then clubs, then the national team.[13]

When Linley was 12, there were only two teams of women's football in Nyandara, so he joined a boy's football team as the only girl. When he began to "develop" at age 15, the boys on the team began to harass him, saying "you're only a girl". When that happened in the middle of a game coached by a visiting coach from England, Linley went to complain to the officials, who stopped the game. A boy on his team said to the coach, "that one's a girl, she can't play here," and told the coach "to make me show my chest to the boys." The coach forbade the boys' harassment, and the game continued, but afterward, "the coach gave me a jersey and said *you play well, I see the boys are bullying you, I think you should play women's football*." Through a female player who had noticed his skills, Linley joined a women's team, and rose quickly in the league, since "at that time [cis-gendered] girls didn't know how to play football [...] I became a national team player, we were all female in appearance even though I was, you know, a man (smiles)."[14]

Becoming GSD: encouraged by peers and teachers

One of the surprising things that came up in interviews were stories of some girls *becoming* sexually or romantically intimate with other FDAB persons when living in football training camps or team hostels. Rafael, for instance, told us that in some female football hostels, volunteer helpers and trainers are trans men. If a girl who is heteronormative and has never been exposed to intimate non-conformity moves into the hostel and sees "women being intimate with each other, [maybe] she didn't come as LGTBQI+ but she starts intimacy [with one of the girls or transmen]".[15] The motivation, according to Rafael, can be that the girl is so poor she doesn't even own a bar of soap, so "if she sees that someone has a bar of soap but that person wants intimacy in exchange for it...", she may agree to the bargain.

Flynn's narrative corroborated this observation:

> My father, when I was 11 to or 12, took me to a football club after school. He bought me male clothes. Between primary and secondary school there is a long holiday where we were residing in a hostel, and all the girls there were of 'the community', they encouraged me to join. [When Stark asks:] They used the [local] word [for 'the community' of GSD persons]. The word started a long time ago. The teammates encouraged me to find a girlfriend and found one for me.[16]

13 Gift, 30s. "I was born female, I'm now a 'he'."

14 Linley, mid-30s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a "he".

15 Rafael, 30s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a man.

16 Flynn, 20s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a man. "I only have feelings for girls."

When we later asked Linley and Gift in January 2025 if they agreed or disagreed with what Rafael and Flynn had told her in August 2024, Linley recounted:

> in those days [when I attended football camps] we were mixed, there could be 10- or 30 year-old persons in the same camp. Here we are poor, it can happen that an older person has money and the younger girl doesn't have money. Or the owner has no money to pay the players. An older player is paying the younger ones. [The younger players think:] "Maybe I should get one [older lover] to get all those things". Then they end up enjoying it. Then they get that thing in their mind. They think it's nice.[17]

Gift was more skeptical than Linley at first:

> In my opinion, I can both agree and disagree with what you heard in August. You can't become a lesbian because Linley [here] is a lesbian. For some it is inborn. It doesn't matter how close we are, if we don't have that feeling. But... in camps sometimes there are people who don't know that two girls or women can sleep together, but you know, in camps they do share beds. [One might say to the other:] "You know nothing, you want to try?" And the lesbian might even encourage her straight friend to have a girlfriend because the girlfriend "can wash your clothes". Or if someone wears boxers or has short hair, another might say 'oh that looks cool' and imitate them. There is a lot of free time in camps, […] sometimes top players from different regions meet, and one says, "oh, you are pretty", and it starts like that. It can be a peer pressure thing. Camps can change the female player's appearance and which gender they are dating afterwards, yeah, that's true.[18]

17 Linley, 30s. Female designated at birth, now identifies as a "he".

18 Gift, 30s. "I was born female, I'm now a 'he'."

We extrapolated from interview responses that ordinary city residents are aware that young FDAB players go to football training camps and live in hostels, and they see that some of them emerge from these spaces dressing or behaving differently than before. The relatively closed nature of these associations may make it easier for the general public to ascribe changes in behavior or appearance to *football* rather than to other processes leading to gender/sexual non-conformity.

Netball had its own contexts of socialization in which cross-dressing could be facilitated by adults. Three MDAB interviewees[19] explained in a group interview that in primary school they had been encouraged to wear girls' netball uniforms and play on the girls' netball team:

> Our teachers also gave us female clothes to play netball. We started playing netball at a very young age. We played with girls who were also young and had not developed breasts yet. We all looked the same. When people saw us, they could not differentiate between us, a boy, and the other girls because we had similar features. […] The teachers just wanted us to play and win […]. It did not matter if we were a boy playing for the girls' team.

Blaine and Promise explained:

> The teachers gave us that female netballers kit because they didn't

19 Blaine, 20s. Male designated at birth. "I feel 'in between' because I feel like a woman in terms of my voice and how I walk. I feel more like a woman than a man so I can't explain much about the male part [lots of laughter from everyone in the group interview at these questions]; Sandy, 20s. Male designated at birth, identifies as a woman because "the way I walk, my voice. I have more women friends, have never slept with a woman, I have only slept with men. I play netball, and my actions portray I'm a woman."; Promise, late teens. Born male-assigned. "I feel like a woman because of my voice [feminine], from the way, I walk, I have no feelings for women, I'm strictly interested only in men [and I have two boyfriends]. People call me *adona* [= woman].

> want the opposing team to see that boys had been added to the team. They didn't know we were GSD. [...] Netball was for girls only at that time.

Blaine:

> No, no teacher ever said [to me] that no, you should not wear a girl's gym dress. There was no teacher discouraging me from dressing as a girl because I was playing netball, because we were kids, we hadn't started developing yet.

A fourth trans woman in a separate interview also said she had worn skirts when playing football in primary school, sometimes with nobody knowing "I was a boy".[20]

From a Western perspective, these transwomen were encouraged by teachers who seem to actively *unknow* that boys willing to be dressed in girls' clothing might be GSD persons. The teachers in these stories give the impression of viewing children's bodies as merely interchangeable devices that could be swapped out to gain an edge over the opposition in competitive matches.

In the global North, children are pushed into normativity early on, and teachers are expected to take notice of those who diverge from these norms (Zaman and Anderson-Nathe 2021, 119–118). In Nyandara, by contrast, interlocutors described a concept of development in which gender expression mattered only after puberty.

It is common in feminist and queer literature to assume that heterosexuality is a social construction, formed at least in part under the pressure of peers and socialization by elders. LGBTQI+ persons are, paradoxically, argued within Western non-normative communities to be "born this way", and the idea that non-normative intimacy could be socially constructed is still a radical one (Zaman and Anderson-Nathe 2021, 116). The idea that homosexuality or transgender identity could be learned from peers or adults goes to extremes that few researchers in the West may be comfortable with, for three main reasons.

First, calling into question the "born that way" explanation is a dangerous one because it implies that people could theoretically be retrained or re-educated into heteronormativity (Titouan 2025). Second, society's heteronormative pressures on children are seen as so powerful that minority cultures are generally thought incapable of being closed or isolated enough to foster same-sex socialization within the minority group.[21] In Nyandara, however, interview responses indicate that such socialization *is* occurring in relatively sealed-off spaces like camps, boarding schools, and even school gyms. The fact this was *not* reported to happen in young people's netball communities may be because netball, not being as well-organized or as well-financed as football, offered no opportunities for young GSD persons to find themselves in netball training camps or team hostels.

Third, stories of intimate identities being learned from peers can be interpreted as cult-like recruitment of children and young persons and thus turn against GSD persons (Tamale 2003). The stories we heard, though superficially similar to these beliefs, discredit them by painting a more mundane picture of everyday interactions and transactional sexuality in which some girls gradually developed a familiar *knowing* of intimacy among FDAB persons (Dankwa 2021). This knowing eventually became part of their adult identity.

20 Berenice, early 20s. Identifies as a "transgender woman".

21 We thank our anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

Safe(r) spaces

We asked all interview participants which city spaces were the safest and which were the least safe. What we wanted information about was physical safety, but many respondents talked about how behavior and incidents in certain spaces also affected their psychosocial wellbeing. The least-safe spaces were said to be open air markets and bars if they were not owned by GSD persons or not known to be tolerant of them. For non-footballers, the safest space in the city was agreed to be one's home. Most GSD footballers, however, felt they had another safe space – the football grounds where they trained and played games:

> At football stadiums. There I […] talk and communicate with fellow GSD persons. I find my inner peace there. After being insulted by the "straight" people, my worries melt away there. Especially when I am watching or playing football.[22]

> The place I feel most safe is when playing football, because everyone is doing the same thing and we have a common goal. Where I feel unsafe is clubs where we drink beer, because different people come there with different agendas.[23]

Netball, by contrast, did not provide the same spaces as football did. Instead, it exposed those GSD persons who might otherwise have kept their identities secret. Since trans women could often not pass as women (Harju 2021), playing netball in public could feel like an unwanted exposure, and visibility became a liability (Rodriguez 2019; Svensson, Edinborg, and Strand 2025):

> In the community they do not recognize I am GSD. But at the sporting event people see us as GSD. As soon as I play netball, people think I'm GSD, whether I am or not.[24]

> When we are in the community we wear a different face. At the netball grounds, we meet new people who, based on our voice and way of walking, [label] us GSD.[25]

Blaine, Promise and Sandy added: "We feel safe everywhere except when we play netball."[26] At this interview the Nyandaran interpreters (one GSD person and one cis-gender straight man) agreed: "The game is stigmatizing."

Jesse and Stephanie, who came to be interviewed together, told:

> We feel safe and the coaches are not saying anything, but fans are the problem, [insulting us] […] When we play netball, our teammates are fine with us, but when we leave the netball pitch, that's when they start talking bad about us.[27]

These interviews make clear that safe(r) spaces in netball were only realized only in the presence of coaches or other GSD netballers, and did

22 Lee, late teens. "I was born female. But I self-identify as a man. I am a lesbian. Sexually, I am interested in girls. I have never dated a boy. Boys are like brothers."

23 Flynn, 20s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a man. "I only have feelings for girls".

24 Blaine, 20s. Female designated at birth. "I feel 'in between' because I feel like a woman in terms of my voice and how I walk. I feel more like a woman than a man so I can't explain much about the male part." [Laughter from others in the group interview.]

25 Promise, late teens. Male designated at birth. "I feel like a woman because of my voice [feminine], from the way, I walk, I have no feelings for women, I'm strictly interested only in men [and I have two boyfriends]. People call me *adona* [= woman]."

26 Blaine, 20s. Male designated at birth. "I feel 'in between' because I feel like a woman in terms of my voice and how I walk. I feel more like a woman than a man so I can't explain much about the male part." [Laughter from others in the group interview.]

27 Jesse, late teens. Male designated at birth, self-identifies as "in between"; Stephanie, late teens. "I was born a boy and identify as 'she'".

not include fans and non-players on the netball grounds. Teammates who were not GSD embodied a grey zone free from symbolic violence but also devoid of trust.

Yet some interviewees made a distinction between security and comfort/happiness. While most MDAB netball players did not consider the netball court a physically safe space, they took away positive experiences from it, including advice and help from other GSD persons:

> I was 15 when I began [football]. It's not a safe space, sometimes men who come to watch bully girls because [the girls] want to be men. But for me it's a comfortable space.[28]

> I play netball every Saturday at 2pm at a field near where I live. My teammates are all GSD people. It's a place I go to be happy to speak with fellow GSD folks about my problems and share knowledge [with them]. I don't think the netball grounds are a safe place to go because other people come there who are not GSD persons and therefore it's not a place I can call safe, even though I meet fellow GSD people there and I am happy.[29]

The stop

When seen to be biologically grounded, intimate identity "is fully assumed on the basis of socially-coded looks or other identifiers such as voice. To look is, here, to know" (Harju 2021, 8). Or at least in the view of the Nyandaran majority, it should be. If features such as voice, gestures, makeup or clothing contravened an initial identification, a bypasser might feel the need to resolve the confusion in their mind about the non-identifiable person. Being confused, they sought to clarify the situation using what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls the *stop*. The *stop* is a situation in which a person is asked questions in public such as: "Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing?"

Instances when bodies are prevented from seamlessly navigating space can highlight subtle mechanisms of power that people generally fail to notice when focusing on the flow of bodies through public spaces (Nisar 2020, 317–318). GSD persons were often stopped because others had quickly categorized them as men or women based on tiny details like the back of the head or walking patterns (Harju 2021, 11), yet something did not fit that categorization, creating cognitive dissonance in the viewer.

GSD persons are acutely aware of the role their readability played in the treatment they received (Harju 2021, 5). In Nyandara, they could be stopped anywhere, on the street or at a bar. Sometimes the stopper was polite and calmly lectured the GSD person on the error of their ways. Sometimes male "stoppers" used aggressive words or violence:

> I was travelling home for football training. I was stopped by a boy. He asked me whether I was a boy or a girl. I was rushing to training, so I did not stop. He wanted to beat me. People around had to restrain him. I felt disappointed. The incident soured my mood. I didn't feel like training.[30]

Rafael recollected an unusual stop that happened to him when he was 13. He was playing football at that time on both adolescent girls' and boys' teams. His young male teammates knew he had been born a girl, and his female teammates understood and accepted that he was more masculine than them because he dressed as a boy and dated girls. The *stop* did not

28 Grace, 30s. Female designated at birth. "I feel like a woman."
29 Gabriel, late 30s. "I was born a guy but I feel like a woman."
30 Remy, late teens. Female designated at birth, identifies as male.

occur while he was playing with these familiar teams. It happened when he began to play on a new girls' team who had heard he was *"as strong as a boy"*. In the first game he played with them, he scored a goal,

> but the other girls didn't want me on their team. Some thought I was a boy after all. I was bullied. One woman [who was a player on the opposing team] even came right up to me and tested me by kicking me in the crotch. When I didn't react, she said: "ah now we know you are a girl." After that I went back to playing with the boys' teams until I was 19.[31]

Rafael's *stop* was motivated by rumors that he could play better than most female players, which aroused suspicions of his "biological" gender. The *stop* was unusual: from what we heard, most violent acts against GSD persons targeted the head, and were perpetrated by men.

Authorities such as police officers and local security guards generally view *stopping* as part of their work to make communities secure from dangerous outsiders (Göpfert 2012). Public servants backed up by violence (including police) rarely need to understand what *stopped* persons are thinking, rarely need to do interpretive work. Instead, exerting violence eliminates the need for communication or imaginative thinking outside the box (Graeber 2012). In Nyandara, two decades of work by GSD-supportive NGOs have clearly improved how social authorities treat GSD persons, but the greater danger came from the heteronormative public. The paranoia experienced by GSD persons needing to be "*read* as majority in order to survive or thrive" (Harju 2021, 5) could only be alleviated by remaining fully within the closet or belonging to a group large enough to be the majority in that space. Numerous GSD football players told us that GSDs made up the majority in their training camp or team: "the place where I feel most safe is football because a lot of teammates there […] belong to GSD".[32]

Leslie explained:

> There is no discrimination where I play netball because the majority or all of them are GSD people. We are able to express ourselves, and be who we are. The coach tells us, "if you feel discriminated tell us and we can help you".[33]

Riley, a self-identified transgender woman in her late 30s, gave an example from her own experience:

> The whole netball squad is composed of LGBTQ members […] This other day, we had a game at [a shopping mall]. I put on shorts/skin tights. We won against [the opposing team]. Some guys [working] in [the mall supermarket] started mocking us, shouting at us that we were gays. That we are looking like girls and that we play netball. All of us, the netball squad, went to complain to their manager. Their management had to apologize. We fought for our rights. We were able to buy things from the shop freely.

In sum, both football and netball provided two necessary elements for individuals to *access the means of production of their own intimate identity*: the first was resources (skillsets, mindset, stamina) valued by society that were embodied and that could not be taken away. The second was numerical predomination in relatively secure spaces such as sporting fields and grounds, training camps, and hostels with likeminded persons where the work of self-production could take place. A third element of intimate self-

31 Rafael, 30s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a man.

32 Jay, 20s. "I was born as a woman, I identify as a man. I express myself as a lesbian."

33 Leslie, 20s, "I was born male but feel both. I am more female than male, but I can have sex as a man and also as a woman."

production – connection to a socially celebrated locus of power – applied to FDAB footballers but not to MDAB netballers. Netballers identified with feminity, which was undervalued in this strongly heteropatriarchal society.

The greater stigma faced by MDAB netballers may derive in part from the lower status of the sport they played, but we found in our interviews that among non-players in Nyandara more generally, trans women suffered more violence and exclusion than did lesbians, gays, or trans men.

In patriarchal cultures, female-to-male transitions tend to be valued more than male-to-female transitions, because masculinity is more socially valued than feminity and therefore, female-to-male transitions validate the existing cultural value system and are viewed as upward mobility (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). By contrast, male-to-female transitions challenge the heteropatriarchal system by seeming to reject the rewards of power and privilege it offers. Male-to-female transitions are also perceived to reject the burdens and responsibilities of provision for wives and children placed on men, a gender-based expectation that is still strong in African societies. This trans double standard was described in a story told by Rafael. Introduced to football by his brothers, Rafael soon became a high-scoring player. Instead of disapproving of his transition, Rafael told that the other boys on the other teams were fascinated by him. He reminisced,

> I used to play on a lot of boys' teams. […] My gender didn't matter to [the boys], what was important was the fact we were playing football and I was excelling at it. That was not a problem from the men's side […] because what I've seen in our country is that women who behave as boys get a lot of praise from the community, which is very different from boys who are trying to…who are behaving like women.

"So let's accept them": active unknowing

Once stopped, those who could be understood as *footballers* by the stopper were often 'waved through'. For instance Aidan, a self-identified trans man in his 20s who had played football for the policewomen's football team, was once pulled over by a police officer who asked for his license and asked him to get out of the car:

> The name on my license is female, so the officer said, "this license is not yours". I said, "it is mine". Then another policewoman asked: "can I touch you?" [gesturing towards my chest]. I said, "no, no, you cannot touch me" that was not OK. I said: "you can take me over there and I can undress to my underwear, but you cannot touch me". All I had with me was 1,500 but they wanted 15,000. I said I don't have that kind of money, I [only] play football. They said: "Oh you play football, so that's why you look like that!" And they let me go. (Emphasis in original).

Trans persons could be waved through even if they did not play football, as long as they could be *read as a footballer*, as Paula explained regarding her partner:

> …"He" is a stud, a tomboy. So, he was driving and speeding and a policewoman stopped us and looked at his license and said "this is not you," because the license says female and he looked like a guy. There were two policewomen and one policeman and they were joking about "should we touch the breasts to see if he is a girl?". They even said, "I know these ones, my neighbors' daughter plays football and wears like you. So I know these ones." [They gave him back the license and said:] "I gave you the license back because you

> are like this, if you were not like this, you would have had to pay".[34]

It is important to note here that traffic police in Nyandara were motivated to pull over anyone for alleged minor infractions. They were incentivized to issue fines because the criminal police force's daily expenses were funded by the traffic fines collected. Traffic cops even had state-imposed quotas they needed to meet in collecting fines.

The compelling question, therefore, is why the traffic police in these stories allowed the drivers to go without paying fines. One clue was provided by other GSD persons we interviewed, who were relatives of police, children of middle-class parents, or children of local chiefs. These GSD persons occupied a position close to money and/or power, and from what they told us, the closer an GSD person was to a locus of power, the less troubled they were by social authorities of any kind. To be read as a footballer was to be read as someone close to such a locus of money, power, and fame.

In many countries, discourses construct queer gender in sports as highly visible and contentious. In Nyandara, social authorities strive to *unknow* that netball and especially football players' intimate identities are non-conforming:

> Our neighbors knew that we [in the football hostel] were GSD [...] Some [neighborhood] parents [of young persons we were meeting] took the matter to the chief. They agitated for us to get evicted from the neighborhood. But the parents and the chief lacked hard evidence to do so. The chief sided with us. We denied it when we were called [to him] that we were GSD.[35]

> One day, I put on a skirt to play netball. A person shouted at me: "You are gay!" I was angry. I took the issue to the local security guards. They called the guy, and in front of the security guards, I asked him to produce evidence that I was gay. He did not respond. They told him never to say that again to me.[36]

Unknowing here was possible in part because of the double meaning of the term *gay* as both gender-divergent in manner and practicing same-sex intimacy. It should not be assumed that Nyandarans saw these as necessarily connected (Miguel 2025). To avoid conflicts in the community, therefore, some local leaders required evidence that the second meaning had been actualized before taking any action.

Not only social authorities, but the majority of ordinary city residents outside the spaces of football and netball – teachers, police and neighbors – also actively engaged in *unknowing* by accepting female-designated-at-birth GSD players as long as they could be identified with the label "football". Playing football brought a sense of safety to players, as Eric explained: "Everyone says of me 'this one plays football', they don't give me any problems."[37] Leila, too, pointed out "the feeling of safety comes from the fact that we hide our identity behind football, which is a male sport."[38] Victoria told us:

> I feel safe because I hide behind football. Some people question my gender identity because I like dressing like a man, a boy. Others say, I am dressing like this because I am a footballer. That's how footballers dress. So they let me be.[39]

34 Paula, 20s, "I was born a woman and feel like a woman".
35 Viva, early 20s. "I am a lesbian, a femme. I have sexual feelings or attraction to my fellow girls."
36 Karin, early 30s. "Biologically, I was born male. But I identify as female. I am "bottom". I like doing female-related roles like cooking, playing netball."
37 Eric, 20s. , Female designated at birth, self-identifies as a man.
38 Leila, 20s. "I feel naturally a woman and I'm attracted to women".
39 Victoria, 20s." I self-identify as a woman. Sexually, I am attracted to women".

When city residents sought to explain GSD persons and settled on "football" as the category that was most socially relevant, they were also urging others to react to this identity in a certain way. In the stories below, the speakers encourage the listeners to treat the female-designated-at-birth GSD person as *something else*, and advise what to do next:

> Some straight people in the community know we are GSD but they say, "**leave them alone**, they are footballers, that's how they dress".[40]
>
> Yes, it has helped, society has accepted me because people say, "this is just how football players dress **so let's accept them**", otherwise if I did not belong to a football club I would be facing more rejection from society.[41]
>
> A female-born stud propositioned a heterosexual girl. A non-GSD girl. The girl reported this to her boyfriend. The boyfriend went to the stud and confronted him, [asked] why he was proposing to his girlfriend. A fight ensued. The local security guards came, but the stud had already been injured. His two teeth [had been knocked] out and he was bleeding. A local security guard had to confront the aggressor: "**don't you know** that these girls belong in this [neighborhood]? They play football."[42]

These reported comments indicate that city residents, through their discourses and practices, were actively constructing "football" identities for female-designated-at-birth GSD persons. Comments like these are part of an active communal project to render these unreadable subjects legible, but in only one aspect: football.

40 Leila, 20s. "I feel naturally a woman and I'm attracted to women".
41 Sydney, 20s. "I was born a woman, but I identify as a man".
42 Viva, early 20s. "I am a lesbian, a femme. I have sexual feelings or attraction to my fellow girls."

Football in Nyandara creates entertainment, excitement, positive emotions, and social ties. It is an institutionalized activity seen as potentially offering income and fame to children or relatives in the future. Because football is a significant source of positive emotion for Nyandarans, there is thus a reluctance to scrutinize players' identities too closely. Football, as a locus of money and power, is so compelling it has erased the need people to know anything about players' difficult-to-categorize identities except that they are footballers.

What *was* made known was female footballers' contribution to society – GSD players became legible because they were seen to contribute to the community in a socially valued way (Westbrook 2010). What was actively made *unknown* was not socially-constructed gender – a concept that had no real significance for most Nyandarans – but biological sex roles, which did. Talented FDAB players were socially allowed to devote themselves fully to football – they did not need to balance it with gendered expectations that they participate in motherhood or domestic labor. As a career pathway for most FDAB players, at least those in their teens and 20s, football thus negated the image of wife, mother, and homemaker, making female players odd in the eyes of outsiders. Footballers were already viewed as queer without this being attributed to gender or sexuality.

Queering football

These social processes have also changed "football" as a space and set of social imaginaries. On the basis of interview conversations, we found that that the gender-bending of footballers was made deliberately vague by the power of football, coupled with the simultaneous process of footballers being ascribed what can be analytically called a *football gender*.

We posit here a football gender but not a football sexuality. The reason is

that actual sexual intimacy between same-sex persons was not visible to other Nyandarans, so sexuality per se was not the cause of the cognitive dissonance that were behind *stops*. Coaches might hear from other female players that two players were dating each other, but this was not generally known to people outside the team. What needed to be actively *unknown* was players' gender expressions,[43] not their hidden sexualities. The result was a loose consensus that football was an authoritative force that could queer individuals assigned female at birth, and was justified in doing so. Football made its players seem gender-illegible, but it was considered that *that's just what football does, it's not a problem*. Part of this queering of football was the fusing of two antithetical stances into one "football" idea. Gift explained that even if GSD persons were viewed as a bad influence on children, football itself was seen as a force for social good for youth, so GSD players could still be idolized as role models:

> But in a positive way, parents and some chiefs may also say [to young persons] that because I am [a] popular [football player], "you should play with that one [me] because she has played on the national team, you are good", and the kids should be like me, I'm the example. I heard a certain leader say [to girls in football training], "it's good you are playing football because that way you avoid problems in the society, because otherwise men might impregnate you or you might start to smoke or use alcohol."[44]

If *queer* is defined as an intentional practice or expression that arouses a sense of cognitive dissonance, then the masculine valorization of football queers football by going *beyond* the gender binary to occupy a distinct money-power nexus.

This can be seen from male fans' reactions to men's football. The positive queering of football has been celebrated by cross-dressing entertainers who support their football teams in stadiums on game days. It is interesting that whereas football absorbs FDAB players into its hegemonic masculinity, it is a cross-dressing non-GSD male fan who is most known and loved in Nyandara, having received his team's award for best fan in 2024. He has appeared in male dress in his team's locker room and during a prison visit, but he is primarily known for energizing games while wearing a girl's school outfit (a white blouse and a skirt in his team's color, the men's team) and a wacky Afro wig with a small matching bow. He has a short beard. A video on TikTok shows him leading vigorous self-composed chants with men (and a couple of women) of all ages who are wearing street clothes or team shirts. In another TikTok video, he wears a different schoolgirl outfit, carries a pink backpack, and is being interviewed by a social media journalist.[45] If his YouTube videos are anything to go by, at the time of writing he is quickly morphing into a stage artist with a large fan base. As Rafael – who was highly connected to the world of football – explained: this fan's "way of expressing his support and feelings about the team is by wearing women's clothing, but it's not only him, there are a lot of them."

Although football generally expresses a hyper-masculinity across all media, this entertainer distanced himself from hegemonic masculinity. His appearance seemed to argue against the concept of the *football gender* as being located on a gender binary. For him, football was just "over-the-top", period.

This queering of football protects lesbian and trans men players, and this protection explains the overall attitude of indifference among GSD football players toward NGOs that could have supported them. These football

43 One caveat here is that players could be perceived to be expressing as male by others even if they saw themselves as either heterosexual or lesbian women.

44 Gift, 30s. "I was born female, I'm now a 'he'."

45 Video links have not been provided because they would reveal the real name of the country studied. Journal editors have seen the links.

players did not need to put themselves in a position of dependency on pro-GSD community-level organizations or have their identities made legible by them. They already occupied a locus of power that ascribed them a *football gender* and gave them a sense of agency earned through their own efforts. Football clubs assisted GSD perons and gave them spaces where they could earn money, feel cultural competence, and have a sense of community belonging.

Netball, however, did not offer the same safe spaces for gay men and trans women as football did for lesbian women and trans men. Communities were not willing to do the same work of *unknowing* by saying "ah they're netballers, that explains it" to obscure the identities of MDAB players who had transitioned toward the feminine.

Football in the army and heteropatriarchal violence

Football is not the only locus of power within Nyandaran society, of course. Multiple sites of authority, multiple institutions compete for the right to be heard, to define situations and subjects. These include security actors, the most powerful being the army and the police. The police have long encouraged football players to apply to the police force, although we were told that this applied more to male football than female football. Eric and Adley told us:

> I play football for the police team [Stark asks:] Even though the police know we are GSD, this does not bother them. Even some of the police officers are GSD. For example, the football coach has not come out as gay, but I suspect he is gay. I know a policewoman who has a girlfriend.[46]

> I play football. […] The team I play for is a police team. We have two policewomen on the team, but they are not GSD. They have promised to enlist us in the police service.[47]

Football, in fact, has served as a bridge between police and GSD persons in some respects. Eric told a story of his cousin, a policewoman, arresting men who were verbally insulting two gay men at a bar where Eric was drinking with his girlfriend and cousin. He had other friends who were police officers as well. The reason he gave was:

> I play good football, I have so many skills, the police admire me and encourage me to continue playing good football. And when the police recruit new police, they want to recruit footballers. They know that footballers are already physically fit and will be able to complete the training.[48]

Rafael had led an NGO that organized football matches between (female, male, and GSD) sex workers and 'service providers' (police and health workers), using a model from the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

> Some interactions were good, you could interact with easily movable persons, some people within the group would just be cool there, maybe because they received allowances [for attending], drinks and the fun. [After] the sessions, there was also a 50/50 chance of those providers responding to us [if the NGO asked for help].[49]

46 Eric, 20s. Female designated at birth, self-identifies as a man.

47 Adley, late 20s. "I am in between. I was born like a girl. I feel like a man. But because of society I behave like a woman."

48 Eric, 20s. Female designated at birth, self-identifies as a man.

49 Rafael, 30s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a man.

Rafael considered the 50/50 odds to be a successful outcome. One self-identified, in-the-closet lesbian policewoman we interviewed, however, took a more pessimistic view of the police's tolerance of GSD persons. She had played football but had not been recruited directly to the police as a footballer. She said that only those who had special skills in football might be noticed by police recruiters. Having been on the police force for many years, she had been transferred to an undesirable posting in a remote area, and had been told by her aunt, a fellow policewoman, that she had been transferred there because the police knew she was "gay".

Although we heard stories in which individual members of both the police and the army had used violence against GSD persons with impunity, the army was far more feared than the police, to the extent that, according to my male interpreter, it had power second only to the president, and most of the population did not wish to associate with soldiers.

The army's unquestioned authority occasionally served GSD persons' interests: one GSD-led NGO had rented space in a building owned by a former brigadier, "so nobody gave us trouble", according to the organization's co-founder. In another story, a GSD person's father

> was a soldier, so he used his position to threaten the people who wanted to arrest his child. He said "everyone has a right to be whoever they want to be and to do whatever they want to do, so leave my child alone." And the people were scared of what he could do to them, so they left.[50]

Both the army and the police in Nyandara had their own female football teams, which Stark watched play each other one afternoon in 2024 on a field outside the army barracks. The army's team won, which she was told was not surprising, since unlike the police, soldiers train daily in physical fitness. According to Rafael who knew the players, female-designated-at-birth GSD persons had played on both teams in the game.

Rafael reminisced that when he had played college football against the army- sponsored team, the army's players had threatened Rafael and his teammates with what would happen if they won:

> …they will tell you that if you win, you will return on foot, implying that they can deflate the tyres of your car. In our case we won the match, but we had to walk a distance of more than two kilometres to reach our bus, because they had started throwing stones at it during the match. So the moment the ref blew the final whistle, we didn't waste time, we had to run in fear to where our bus was parked […] the team manager had already told us that as soon as the ref says it's over, don't even stop to drink water.[51]

Rafael said that although the police had their own female football club for some years, the army did not have a women's football team until 2023. New rules from the FIFA require that to be part of the National Sports Council of Nyandara and to compete in the Super League of Nyandara, all men's football teams had to have a corresponding women's football team. The army had three men's football teams, and therefore needed to create three new female football teams. These three new teams became composed to a significant extent of female-designated-at-birth GSD players, because most players in established football clubs were GSD persons. The army management, not knowing – or not wanting to know – anything about the players' intimate identities, decided that all talented players would undergo army training to become soldiers. Rafael pointed out that "for us [GSD

50 Flynn, 20s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a man. "I only have feelings for girls".

51 Rafael, 30s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a man.

folks], it was good, because most of the GSD players were [previously] unemployed. So the players are now motivated by this opportunity to play well. And a lot of GSD players have been employed by the army."[52]

Thus, large numbers of female-designated-at-birth GSD footballers joined the army as part of a package deal to ensure that the army's male football teams – important to the army's social prestige – could still compete at national levels. The army was not aware of – or at least not forced to publicly acknowledge – the intimate identities of the new soldiers in their ranks. In January 2025, however, several events described below jolted the army awake. These events speak to the subversive agency of transmen and lesbians at the centre of Nyandara's hegemonic masculine power, but also to the violent reactions to which the GSDs were subjected when the army felt under threat.

In 2024, GSD footballer-soldiers were assigned living quarters in the army barracks. They began socializing with the wives of officers, which Rafael described as leading to the wives becoming "disrespectful" towards their husbands, accusing the latter of not satisfying them sexually. As a result, army officials began questioning the GSD soldiers and confiscating their phones for investigation. The GSD soldiers rushed to erase all their mobile and WhatsApp messages, but the insinuated threat remained that the army officers could at any monitor and punish the behaviors of their soldiers. "The situation became intense", Rafael commented. He also told of another case in the barracks that happened to a GSD footballer in 2024:

> Robin, a trans man, had a fight with his girlfriend, and this girlfriend was new to the GSD community and did not really know the laws and the landscape. To her, her man was just a man, and could be taken to task by his superiors. The barracks had a rule that if a man is violent or not treating his wife right, the wife could report it to the bosses. This lady went to the army welfare office to lodge a complaint against her man. They said, "give us the name of your husband." The army officials looked at their lists and discovered that "he" was a "she". So they said, "come back with your husband." So now Robin knew it was over. He said to his girlfriend, "what have you done?" Robin didn't go to his superior's office, but he was called by the office and given a three-month disciplinary leave. He was supposed to go on leave and had to go back to [his home city]. In reality, Robin would have been fired, and to save his employment, he had to have sex with numerous supervisors to prove his gender. "You have to have sex with us to prove to us that you are a woman and not a lesbian", the managers had said. They don't even know that transgender people exist. Robin was forced to have sex with several levels of superiors.

Robin had confided to Rafael that these experiences had traumatized him.

We analyze these narratives as showing that in civilian life, football was the easiest go-to framework used by Nyandarans for interpreting GSD persons. But in the context of the armed forces, however, football was not a sufficient locus of power to deflect attention away from soldiers' intimate identities. Although the army had hired these FDAB soldiers to be footballers, now as soldiers they were subject to a new framework of interpretation: heteropatriarchal violence. In the context of the army and the hegemonic masculinity expected of being a soldier, the *football* framework for *unknowing* diverse genders and sexualities broke down. The male army officers were conceptually challenged by the intimate identities of these GDS soldiers. Instead of learning alternate schemas that would have helped them understand their subordinates, they reacted with threats and rape (Graeber 2012).

52 Rafael, 30s. Female designated at birth, identifies as a man.

Conclusions

Many of the most talented players in women's football in Nyandara were GSD persons because Nyandaran society's strict gender norms meant that heterosexual, female-identifying persons tended to follow the expected path of marriage and children – often at early ages. Such women were thus not using their time to train in sports. As an unexpected by-product of the shortage of girls in football, football ended up accepting those FDAB persons who rejected heteronormative roles.

Finding mentally and physically safe(r) spaces in sport as a GSD person was a gradual process of knowing that took years. Both football and netball were gendered in strict ways so that trans women did not play on (male or female) football teams, and trans men did not play on (male or female) netball teams. Learning, *knowing* and possibly internalizing GSD practices as children may have been encouraged by adults to win games or by peers for diverse reasons. The recollections of GSD persons in Nyandara challenge Western ideas of children and childhood by highlighting that children are active learners and explorers of gender and sexuality. They can encourage their peers to adopt GSD identities, and the age at which heteronorms are institutionally applied to them can be later than in the West.

The emotional and social benefits of football have outweighed mainstream Nyandarans' desire to probe players' difficult-to-read gender identities. Saying "they are footballers" was a social code signaling that the confusing person had a social node into which they fit and contributed to the community. It was a signal to others to refrain from inquiring into the confusing person's intimate identity. Football has thus unintentionally contributed to an active *unknowing* about female-to-male gender-crossing practices among the general public. Consequently, these practices have become legible in a different way (Westbrook 2010, 44). This *unknowing* of players' identities is not linked to gender or sexuality but to the transformative power of football itself, by virtue of its being an international nexus of heteropatriarchal power, wealth, and collective energies. Football as a space is hyper-masculine to the extent that it transcends traditional gender categories and is read as a locus of power operating beyond them. Even non-GSD fans have expressed the queerness of this space in their visual and audial entertainment aimed at other fans. Football can work as a gender because it brings with it the authority of near-universal approval in Nyandara.

Whereas the queering of women's football obscured the sex/gender of the players, this did not happen in men's/mixed netball, nor did netball provide the same safe spaces for GSD players as women's football did. Communities were less willing to *unknow* MDAB players' identities, possibly because netball did not provide a money-power locus powerful enough to provide identity misdirection; or more likely because the male-to-female transition was seen to embody a rejection of the idea of masculine superiority. Nonetheless, since the specific gendered dynamics of netball and football left netball as "the only sport" trans women and gay men could play, many of these players found fulfillment from it, even if it dangerously exposed their intimate identities to public scrutiny.

Lesbians and trans men who played women's football in Nyandara had, through struggles and a long wait, gained access to the means of production of their own genders to the extent that even the Nyandaran army hired them (knowingly or not), and the police recruited female-designated-at-birth GSD football players to their ranks. But whereas football in ordinary Nyandaran urban spaces served as the explanatory framework that directs attention away from players' non-conforming intimate identities, this misdirection was not operable in the context of the army institution. The

events that led to the army realizing they had recruited GSD footballers point to a fatal flaw in heteropatriarchal power: men's fragile relationships with "their" women. In order to be seen as "real men", heterosexual men in Nyandara needed to be seen as able to sexually satisfy female partners. When GSD players' familiarity with army wives began to publicly expose husbands' inability to do this, the framework of *football* no longer served to veil the players in communal *unknowing*. Male superiors – backed up by state power and thus not needing to understand GSD soldiers' frames of reference – reacted to this threat through intimidation as well as through sexual abuse.

Our findings have broader implications for the collective non-reproduction of stigma. Communities can either *know* (and violently target) non-conforming intimate identities or work to actively *unknow* these identities, focusing instead on a more socially valued identity, where such exists. In conservative heteropatriarchal communities, which path is chosen depends on the social proximity of the non-intelligible person to money and power, and whether there is permission from a power base to apply a more violent and less interpretive frame of reference to the situation. To understand why knowing or unknowing is likely to be practiced in a given situation, it is vital to identify and contextualize the power that is brought to bear, as well as the sources of that power.

Football may be a special case because it brings together two dynamics that make it easier for a society that otherwise rejects GSD persons to turn a blind eye to the gender and sexual diversity of its FDAB players. The first dynamic is that women's football demands from players a dedication of time and energy that normatively heterosexual women cannot give due to the maternal and domestic roles socially expected of them. The second dynamic is that football gives emotional value to masses of fans who are willing to invest time, energy, and money to obtain this value. This collective investment is what constitutes football as a locus of power whose aura overrides any concerns about the intimate identities of its players.

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