

# Matches on and off the field: Nigerian wives pick a side

January 30 2020, by Oludayo Tade

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Credit: Muhammad-taha Ibrahim from Pexels

There are about [100 million active soccer fans](#) in Nigeria and the majority actively follow Europe's UEFA Champions League and the UK's Premier League. Domestic leagues in Nigeria have produced star

players like Segun Odegbami and Rashidi Yekini. But globalisation and packaging of the sport, and interest in watching Nigerian players in foreign clubs, make overseas leagues particularly attractive.

The keenest fans in Nigeria tend to be men. In a society structured to favour men, female involvement in sports is influenced by men—directly or indirectly. Nigerian men often watch [soccer](#) matches at public viewing centres and women are tactically shut out of the "sports family".

But support for a team also enters the [home environment](#). My [study](#) examined how being a fan of a soccer [club](#) can affect communication between couples. The club's victory or loss matters to the whole family because it influences behaviour.

## **Women share their experiences**

I interviewed middle class Yoruba married women in Ibadan North and Lagelu Local Government Areas of Oyo State. My questions included which teams (if any) they and their [husbands](#) supported, where they watched matches, what happened to communication in the family when the team won or lost, and how the wives had adapted to their husbands' fanship.

The study unpacks how husbands' identification with European clubs is redefining social relationships at the family level. It emerged that household relationships worked better during the UEFA and Premier League off-season when husbands weren't following so many matches.

The women I interviewed told me that when a man's club loses a match, he may behave aggressively at home or refuse to eat food that his wife has prepared. This shuts down an avenue of communication in the marriage. A match victory, on the other hand, may bring gifts from the

happy husband, and lead to better bonding and communication.

To minimise conflict in the home, the women "converted" to being fellow soccer fans.

They spoke about preferring their husbands to watch matches at home. They worried that watching at clubs and other venues would provide opportunities for men to drink more alcohol or spend time with other women.

This was another incentive to join their husbands in watching matches at home.

## **Three kinds of football families**

I found that [family support](#) for a club is dictated by what the husband favours. There are three types of families: those with husband and wife supporting the same club; couples who support rival clubs; and those where only one spouse (usually the husband) is a fan.

Where both are fans of the same club side, the women say that this keeps their husbands close to the family. Through sharing the club's fortunes, the family is well bonded and communicates peacefully. One wife said she had no choice but to support her husband's club: "I am automatically a fan of his club so I can have my husband with me. ... the best way to make him remain my husband is to be a fan of his club."

Where the husband and wife belong to different clubs, they become rivals at home. In most cases, the wife was already a soccer lover before marriage. They may joke, laugh and bet about which side will win. But there can also be arguments and bad feeling.

Where a wife lacks an interest in soccer, she may have to bear

consequences such as the husband watching the match outside the household. A mother of two children stated: "I watch soccer but not with passion. I watch maybe because there is a Nigerian in the club. My husband is a fanatic! He devotes hundred percent of his time to it and does not want any disturbance. Even when I try to understand everything they are doing, he simply will tell me I cannot understand."

## **How the match result affects the family**

Respondents described the mood in their household when their husband's club loses. They said communication ceases and children must avoid crossing their father's path. Some fathers didn't inflict their bad mood on their children but rather on their wife. A respondent said: "He never lets it affect his relationship with his children. I am the one who bears the brunt."

On the other hand, a victory for the husband's club is a victory for the entire household. Wives reported that their husbands are cheerful and may bring treats for the children. Communication between spouses is enhanced and issues affecting the family are discussed. It is a strategic moment for the entire household.

Studies in [Israel](#) and [Australia](#) have found the same patterns.

The Nigerian women in my study took an interest in European soccer so as to sustain the family and ensure effective communication, bonding and crisis management. This suggests that if men were more open to including [women](#) in their soccer world, it could benefit relationships at the [family](#) level.

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