

Racing Against the Odds: The Rise of Women in Formula 1

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Abstract

Formula 1 remains one of the most male-dominated arenas in professional sport, with women making up only about 1.5% of licensed racing drivers worldwide and none competing full-time at the sport's highest level today. This paper examines the history, challenges, and future prospects of women in Formula 1. It traces the sport's early resistance to female competitors, including the FIA's 1958 ban on women in F1, and presents case studies of two pioneering drivers, Maria Teresa de Filippis, the first woman to start a Formula 1 World Championship race, and Lella Lombardi, the only woman to score a championship point. The paper then analyzes the structural barriers that continue to limit female participation, including a lack of sponsorship funding, unequal access to karting and junior racing opportunities, biased media coverage, and persistent gender stereotypes. Finally, it looks at initiatives such as F1 Academy and its karting pipeline, growing fan support for mixed-gender competition, and the rising number of women in engineering and strategic roles within F1 teams. The paper concludes that while significant barriers remain, the trajectory of the sport suggests a more inclusive future is possible.

Keywords: Formula 1, Women in Motorsport, Gender Inequality, Female Racing Drivers, F1 Academy, Motorsport Sponsorship, Gender Stereotypes, Female Representation

1. Introduction

Formula 1 is the highest level of professional motorsport in the world. It is a sport where drivers compete in some of the fastest and most technologically advanced cars ever built, reaching speeds of over 200 miles per hour on tracks spread across continents. Every single detail matters in Formula 1, from the aerodynamics of the car to the split-second decisions that a driver makes going into a corner at full speed. It is a sport that demands not just physical strength and endurance, but sharp mental focus, strategic thinking and years of dedication starting from a very young age. Millions of fans around the world follow the sport closely, making it one of the most watched and talked about sporting competitions on the planet.

Despite all of that passion and global reach, one thing has stayed the same for decades, Formula 1 is almost entirely dominated by men. The paddock, the pit lane and the driver's seat have historically been spaces where women are the exception, not the rule. Out of all the licensed racing drivers in the world, only about 1.5% are women. That number is striking when you think about it. It means that for every hundred drivers out on a track, barely one or two of them are women. This is a wall that very few women have ever been able to get over, and even fewer have made it all the way to the Formula 1 grid itself.

The reasons behind this are not simple, they go beyond just talent or opportunity. They touch on how the sport is structured, how young drivers are scouted and funded, and the kind of environment women have historically faced when they try to compete in motorsport at a high level. Studying women in Formula 1 is important because it forces us to ask harder questions about why certain spaces stay so closed off for so long, and what it actually takes to change them. It is also important because the women who have tried, competed, and pushed for a place in the sport have stories worth telling, stories that often get left out of the mainstream conversation around racing. This paper explains the history of women in Formula 1, the challenges they face, and how the future can change for female racers.

2. Early History of Women in Motorsport

Motorsport has not always been open to everyone. For most of its early history, racing was seen as a sport built for men, physically demanding, dangerous and simply not the kind of thing women were expected to do. This was not just a social attitude but in many cases it was written into the rules. Women were formally banned from competing in certain racing events, and governing bodies made it clear that the track was not a place they were welcome. The Federation Internationale de l'Automobile, the organisation that oversees Formula 1, actually banned women from competing in Formula 1 in 1958, which was the same year that Maria Teresa de Filippis became the first woman to race in it. The timing says everything about how the sport viewed female drivers at the time.

Despite those barriers, women still raced. In Europe and across other parts of the world, female drivers found ways to compete, often in smaller regional events and categories where the rules were less strict. They showed up, put in the laps and proved they had the skill to go wheel to wheel with anyone. These early pioneers did not get much recognition for it. Their results were sometimes dismissed, their achievements were rarely celebrated the way a male driver's would have been, and the support they needed to move up through the ranks simply was not there. However, they kept racing anyway, and in doing so they laid the groundwork for every woman who came after them.

Those early stories matter because they set the tone for what women in motorsport would continue to face for decades. The resistance was not just about rules on paper. It was about a culture inside the sport that was deeply uncomfortable with the idea of women competing at a high level. Mechanics, team principals, sponsors and fellow drivers all played a role in making women feel like outsiders, even when they had earned their place fair and square.

Very few women have ever made it to the Formula 1 grid, and a big part of that comes down to how the sport is structured. Formula 1 teams operate like businesses. They invest in drivers who come with sponsorship money, strong results from junior categories like Formula 2 and Formula 3, and relationships with the right people in the industry. It is a pipeline that takes years to move through, and historically women have faced extra obstacles at every single stage of it. Bias affected who got noticed by scouts, who got offered a seat in a junior team, and who got the

funding needed to keep racing at all. When those opportunities do not come, even the most talented driver cannot reach the top.

The early history of women in motorsport is really a story about persistence against a system that was not built with them in mind.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Case Study 1: Maria Teresa de Filippis

Maria Teresa de Filippis was born in Naples, Italy, in 1926. Her journey into motorsport began almost by accident after her brothers challenged her to participate in a local racing competition. Proving them wrong, she performed exceptionally well and quickly developed a passion for racing. During the 1950s, she competed successfully in several sports car events, establishing herself as one of the most talented female drivers of her era.



Picture Credit: Motorsport Images / Motorsport.com

In 1958, de Filippis made history by becoming the first woman to compete in Formula One. Driving for the Maserati team, she entered multiple Grands Prix during the season and became

the first female driver to start a Formula One World Championship race. Her debut marked a significant milestone in a sport that was almost entirely dominated by men.

Despite her talent, de Filippis faced considerable challenges throughout her career. Many people within the motorsport community doubted whether women were capable of competing at the highest level of racing. In some cases, male competitors and race officials attempted to discourage or prevent her participation. One race director reportedly stated that the only helmet suitable for a woman was the one used in a hair salon. Such attitudes reflected the widespread gender discrimination present in motorsport during the 1950s.

Another major obstacle was the lack of support from competitive teams. Unlike many male drivers, de Filippis did not have access to strong financial backing or top-tier equipment. This limited her opportunities to compete consistently and achieve better results. Nevertheless, she continued to race and demonstrated remarkable determination in the face of these barriers.

Her most notable Formula One result came at the 1958 Italian Grand Prix, where she finished tenth. Although this result may not appear extraordinary by modern standards, it was a significant achievement considering the limitations she faced and the competitive nature of Formula One at the time. More importantly, her participation challenged existing stereotypes and proved that women could compete alongside men in elite motorsport.

Today, Maria Teresa de Filippis is remembered as a pioneer who broke barriers for future generations of female racers. Her courage and perseverance helped open doors for women in Formula One and other forms of motorsport. While female participation in Formula One remains limited, her legacy continues to inspire drivers seeking to challenge traditional gender expectations within the sport.

3.2 Case Study 2: Lella Lombardi

Maria Grazia "Lella" Lombardi was born in Frugarolo, Italy, in 1941. Before entering professional racing, she worked in her family's transport business and developed an early interest in driving. Lombardi progressed through various levels of motorsport, competing in karting, Formula Monza, and Formula Three before eventually reaching Formula One. Her determination

and skill enabled her to succeed in a highly competitive environment where opportunities for women were extremely limited.



Picture Credit: RadioElorn / ARTE Radio Audioblog, “Le pied sur le frein – Portrait de Lella Lombardi.”

Lombardi's Formula One career spanned from 1974 to 1976. During this period, she competed for several teams, including March Engineering. Although she often drove cars that were less competitive than those used by leading drivers, she consistently demonstrated resilience and professionalism. Her performances earned her recognition as one of the most capable female racers of her generation.

The defining moment of Lombardi's career came at the 1975 Spanish Grand Prix. The race was shortened following a serious accident, resulting in only half points being awarded. Lombardi finished sixth and received half a championship point. This achievement made her the first and, to date, the only woman in Formula One history to score points in a World Championship race. Her accomplishment remains one of the most significant milestones for women in motorsport.

Like many female drivers of her era, Lombardi encountered numerous challenges. Securing sponsorship was particularly difficult because many companies were hesitant to invest in women competing in a male-dominated sport. Financial limitations often restricted her access to

competitive machinery and reduced the number of opportunities available to her. Furthermore, there were very few Formula One teams willing to take a chance on female drivers, making it harder for her to establish a long-term career in the sport.

Despite these obstacles, Lombardi built a respected racing career and became a symbol of perseverance. Her success demonstrated that women could compete effectively at the highest levels of motorsport when given the opportunity. Beyond her Formula One achievements, she continued racing in sports cars and endurance events, further showcasing her versatility as a driver.

Lella Lombardi's legacy extends beyond her historic championship point. She remains an important role model for aspiring female racers and is frequently cited as evidence that talent, rather than gender, determines success in motorsport. Her achievements continue to inspire efforts to increase female participation in Formula One and other racing categories, making her one of the most influential women in the history of the sport.

Table 1. Female Pioneers in Formula 1: De Filippis and Lombardi

Factor	Maria Teresa de Filippis	Lella Lombardi
Country	Italy	Italy
F1 period	1958	1974–1976
Historic achievement	First woman to start an F1 World Championship race	Only woman to score an F1 World Championship point
Landmark race	1958 Italian Grand Prix	1975 Spanish Grand Prix
Key result	10th place	6th place; 0.5 championship point
Major barriers	Gender discrimination, weak financial backing, limited competitive equipment	Sponsorship difficulties, weaker machinery, few teams willing to support female drivers
Long-term significance	Broke the initial gender barrier in F1	Proved a woman could score championship points at F1 level

Table 1: Compares the careers, achievements, challenges, and historical significance of Formula 1 pioneers Maria Teresa de Filippis and Lella Lombardi.

4. Why There Are So Few Women in F1

Despite the progress made by pioneers such as Maria Teresa de Filippis and Lella Lombardi, women remain significantly underrepresented in Formula One. Only a handful of women have ever competed in a Formula One World Championship race, and none have raced full time in the modern era. This is not because women lack the ability to compete at the highest level. Instead, it is the result of several long standing barriers that make it much harder for female drivers to reach Formula One. These barriers begin at the earliest stages of a racing career and continue throughout the motorsport pathway.

4.1 Lack of Funding

One of the biggest challenges for aspiring racing drivers is the high cost of the sport. Motorsport is one of the most expensive professional sports in the world. Families often spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on karting, equipment, travel, coaching, and race entry fees before a driver even reaches the junior categories. As drivers move into Formula 4, Formula 3, and Formula 2, the costs increase even further.

For many female drivers, securing sponsorship is especially difficult. Studies have shown that women receive less than one percent of motorsport sponsorship funding, leaving many talented racers without the financial support needed to continue competing. Sponsors often prefer investing in established male drivers because they are viewed as a safer commercial choice. Without sufficient funding, female drivers struggle to access competitive cars, experienced coaching, and regular race opportunities. As a result, many promising careers end before drivers have the chance to demonstrate their full potential.

4.2 Limited Opportunities

Another major barrier is the lack of equal opportunities from a young age. Most Formula One drivers begin karting between the ages of five and eight, gaining years of experience before moving into higher racing categories. Boys generally make up the majority of participants in karting competitions, giving them greater visibility to racing teams, talent scouts, and sponsors.

Female drivers often have fewer chances to participate in high level competitions or testing programmes. Since there are fewer girls racing, they may receive less attention from development academies and junior teams. Missing out on these opportunities creates a disadvantage that becomes increasingly difficult to overcome as drivers progress through the racing ladder. Even highly talented female racers may struggle to build the experience and reputation needed to reach Formula One.

4.3 Media Bias

The way female drivers are presented by the media also influences public perception. Instead of being recognised primarily for their racing ability, women are often portrayed as unusual or inspirational simply because they compete in a male dominated sport. News reports and interviews frequently focus on their gender rather than their performances on the track.

This type of coverage can unintentionally reinforce the idea that women are exceptions rather than serious competitors. Male drivers are usually judged by their lap times, race results, and technical skills, while female drivers are more likely to be described as role models or symbols of diversity. Although positive representation is important, many female racers have argued that they simply want to be evaluated by the same sporting standards as everyone else.

4.4 Gender Stereotypes

Deep rooted stereotypes continue to affect women's participation in motorsport. For many years, racing has been viewed as a sport designed primarily for men because it is associated with speed, aggression, and physical strength. Although modern Formula One relies heavily on fitness, mental concentration, technical knowledge, and race strategy, outdated beliefs about gender still influence attitudes within the sport.

Female drivers often report feeling that they must constantly prove they belong in racing. A single mistake may attract greater criticism than it would for a male driver, while strong performances are sometimes treated as surprising rather than expected. These stereotypes create additional psychological pressure and can discourage young girls from pursuing motorsport in the first place.

Overall, the low number of women in Formula One is not the result of a lack of talent. It reflects a combination of financial barriers, limited opportunities, media representation, and persistent stereotypes that have shaped motorsport for decades. Addressing these challenges is essential if Formula One is to become a more inclusive sport where success is determined by ability rather than gender.

5. The Future: Programs Helping Women in F1

While the history of women in Formula 1 is marked by exclusion, the present moment looks noticeably more hopeful. The clearest sign of change is F1 Academy, a series launched by Formula 1 in November 2022 with the specific goal of preparing and developing female drivers so they can progress to higher levels of competition, including Formula 3, Formula 2 and eventually Formula 1 itself, giving drivers more access to track time, racing and testing, along with technical, physical, and mental preparation support. All drivers compete in identical Tatuus T421 chassis, the same car used in Formula 4, which removes the funding gap between teams and puts the focus back on driving ability rather than budget, with Susie Wolff heading the series as managing director. [Woman MagazineWoman Magazine](#)

F1 Academy has also built a pipeline that starts well before single-seater racing. Its Champions of the Future Academy Program (COTFA) supports young female karters, and the results have been striking: the share of female drivers on the COTFA grid rose from 5% in the program's first year to 30% in 2025. For 2026, F1 Academy expanded this support further, backing up to 27 young female drivers across new international, UAE, and British series. Susie Wolff has pointed out that because every driver races on identical, budget-capped equipment, the program reveals who stands out purely on merit. This kind of structural support directly addresses the funding and opportunity gaps discussed in Section 4, giving young female drivers the track time and visibility that earlier generations, like de Filippis and Lombardi, never had access to.

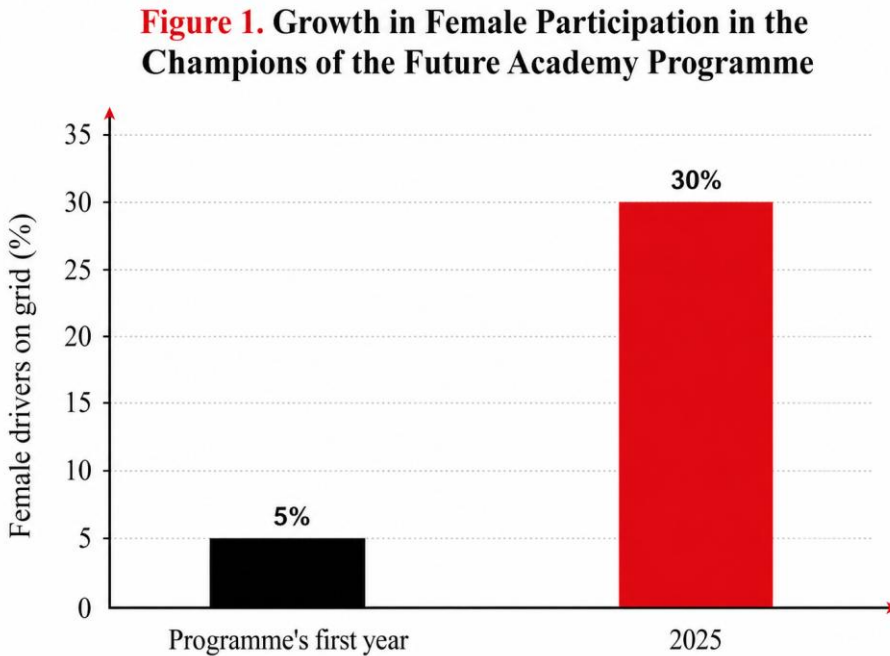


Figure 1: Illustrates the sharp increase in female participation in the Champions of the Future Academy Programme, rising from 5% in its first year to 30% in 2025.

Fan attitudes appear to be shifting as well. Surveys of motorsport fans have found strong majority support for women racing directly against men in F1, with figures commonly cited in the 73 to 80 percent range. This matters because fan sentiment shapes sponsorship decisions, and sponsorship has historically been one of the largest barriers female drivers face.

Beyond the cockpit, more women are also entering engineering, strategy, and technical roles within F1 teams, from race engineers to strategists to mechanics. This broader shift matters because it changes who is inside the sport making decisions about car development, driver selection, and team culture, not just who is behind the wheel.

Taken together, these developments suggest the future of women in Formula 1 looks meaningfully different from its past. A dedicated development series, a growing pipeline of funded young talent, more supportive fans, and a slowly diversifying workforce all point toward a sport that is, gradually, becoming more open than the one Maria Teresa de Filippis and Lella Lombardi raced in decades ago.

Table 2. Structural Barriers to Female Participation in Formula 1 and Emerging Responses

Barrier	How it affects female drivers	Emerging response
Lack of funding	Makes karting, coaching, travel and progression through junior categories difficult	F1 Academy and development programmes provide greater access to racing and testing
Limited opportunities	Fewer girls enter karting, reducing visibility to scouts and teams	COTFA and F1 Academy are creating a female development pipeline from karting upward
Media bias	Women may be discussed for their gender rather than their racing performance	Increased visibility of women as competitive racing drivers may gradually shift the narrative
Gender stereotypes	Creates pressure to constantly prove competence and may discourage girls from entering motorsport	Greater female participation and representation can challenge traditional assumptions
Limited female representation inside teams	Few female decision-makers and role models historically existed within the sport	More women are entering engineering, strategy, technical and team roles

Table 2: Summarizes the key structural barriers faced by female drivers in Formula 1 and the emerging initiatives designed to address them.

6. Conclusion

Women have been part of Formula 1's story since its earliest days, even when the sport actively tried to keep them out. Maria Teresa de Filippis became the first woman to start a Formula 1 World Championship race in 1958, the same year the FIA moved to ban women from competing altogether, and she raced anyway, finishing tenth at the Italian Grand Prix despite facing open hostility from within the paddock. Lella Lombardi went further still, becoming the only woman in F1 history to score a championship point, at the 1975 Spanish Grand Prix. Both women succeeded not because the system supported them, but in spite of a system that rarely did.

The barriers that kept the number of female F1 drivers so low were never really about talent. They were about funding, about who gets noticed as a child in a kart, about how female drivers are written about, and about stereotypes that quietly shaped who got taken seriously. Those

barriers are well documented, but so is the fact that every woman who has raced in F1 has proven she belonged there.

What has changed is that the sport is finally starting to build structures, like F1 Academy and its karting pipeline, that address these barriers directly instead of leaving talented young women to find their own way through a system stacked against them. Combined with growing fan support and more women working in technical and strategic roles, the pathway to the F1 grid looks more realistic today than it has in decades.

Formula 1 has not yet reached equality, and it would be dishonest to claim otherwise. But the direction of change is real. The women who raced before the doors were open proved what was possible. The question the sport now faces is not whether women can compete at the highest level, that has already been answered, but whether Formula 1 will finally build the opportunities to let them.

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