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Big brother's little sister: the ideological construction of women's super league

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the structure and culture of the Football Association (FA) in relation to the development of England's first semi-professional female soccer league - Women's Super League (WSL). Through observations at games and interviews with stakeholders, we examined the planning and operationalisation of the WSL. Drawing on critical feminist literature and theories of organisational change, we clearly demonstrate that the FA has shifted from initial tolerance of the women's game, through opposition, to defining and controlling elite female club football as a new product shaped by traditional conceptualisations of gender. It reveals how the archaic, labyrinthine structures of the FA abetted the exclusion of stakeholders involved in the pre-WSL era. This allowed the FA to fashion a League imagined as both qualitatively different to elite men's football in terms of style of play and appeal to a different group of fans, yet inextricably bound to men's clubs for support. The article concludes by providing recommendations for how organisational change might offer correctives to the current FA approach to developing the WSL.

A very brief history

This study explores how the English Football Association (hereafter FA) identified the needs of the sport within the context of its *own* structure and culture and also the methods by which the FA controlled the development of WSL. In 2000, the English Football Association began to contemplate launching the first professional women's league in Europe (FA 2001), claiming such a move would promote equity from the grassroots up, appeal to a family audience and would be developed in consultation with the existing women's game. Although that iteration of a league didn't materialise, the importance of its creation was reasserted by the FA in a 2008 report as a method of addressing the lack of quality and competition within the women's game which stemmed from inconsistency of resource. This is in contrast to the FA's historical reticence to administer the game, placing a ban on females playing on its grounds in 1921, lifting this in 1971 but only moving to take control in 1993, due to domestic and

international pressures around funding and fears of losing control of the growing female game (Woodhouse and Williams, 1999).

It is important to note that the FA's 1993 takeover of the female game came at a time when the most successful men's clubs, frustrated by the bureaucracy of the FA and realising that huge financial benefits could be accrued if they broke away from the Football League, planned a new league. In 1991, the formation of the English Premier League (EPL) was endorsed by the FA. In doing so Conn (1997, 17) states the FA relinquished 'its historic role as regulator, controller of commercialism for the wider good of the game'. It was within this context of a significant reduction in its control of the elite men's game that the FA sought to gain control over the elite women's game which had previously existed outside such commercialised narratives.

In February 2009, the FA (2009a) announced a 2011 launch for the professional league, yet three months later plans were shelved with the FA citing 'financially turbulent times' (2009b). At the time, Sue Tibballs the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation's Chief Executive commented, 'if anybody wanted a clear indication of the FA's regard for women's football, this is it. They were looking at their budgets to see what they could cut and women's football was an easy option' (Leighton, 2009). However, three months later, the FA reversed its decision and announced that the WSL would commence in March 2011 (FA 2009c).

As well as being indicative of the ambivalence the FA placed on football for females, relative to its support of the game for males, hesitation over the launch of the League may also be linked to the efficacy of the FA's structures and culture.   As far

back as 1968, the Chester Report (House of Commons, 1968) doubted the organisation's structures were nimble enough to allow it to operate effectively. However, the FA dismissed the report claiming researchers could not understand the complexities of the governing body (FA 2013a). In 1988, FA commissioned consultants identified that the FA Council was out of touch and too large and unyielding. Their recommendations were also rejected, on the basis that they were too radical (FA 2013a). The Burns Report, also commissioned by the FA, identified a complex and bureaucratic organisation with blurred lines of responsibility, overlapping roles and complicated decision making processes leading to deadlock and delay, alongside an absence of communication and transparency (FA 2005). The lack of response to Burns prompted political intervention, as the All Party Parliamentary Football Group raised 'doubts about the way the game is governed' (2009, 12). Resultant change was so minimal that in 2010 the Culture, Media and Sport Committee launched an investigation with the Sports Minister observing that football is 'the worst governed sport in this country' (House of Commons 2011a, 15). Most recently, at a time when national governing bodies (NGBs) wishing to receive government funding have been instructed to reform, the BBC on February 9, 2016, reported that the Sports Minister threatened to withdraw FA funding saying 'if you don't reform your governance structures, I will give that money to other bodies that deliver football'. This prompted one of the 19 FA Life Presidents, who had seen such threats before, to respond, 'Let them stop the money……..We have the money, we have the power, and they will be back in four years' time to initiate change again' (BBC 2017).

The first national women's league, comprising 24 clubs, was inaugurated in 1991 by the Women's Football Association (WFA), a volunteer run organisation which

administered the game at the time (FA 2014). However, games in this amateur league were played at facilities below the standard of those accessed by many recreational weekend male teams and attendances were poor (Woodhouse 2002). The establishment of WSL therefore provides the opportunity to reflect on the FA's shift from active opposition to football for females through to facilitating the semi-professionalisation of the elite club game. In doing so, we will examine the FA's organisational readiness, its governance and operational structures and culture and how these shaped the motivations for creating the League and how they impacted the processes that surrounded the development of WSL.

Literature Review

To contextualise the study, we need to examine a number of associated themes in relation to the structure and culture of sport organisations. We begin by exploring gendered ideologies and approaches to addressing inequality, before focussing on organisational governance and change.

Woodward (2007, 771) argues that the power of gendered ideologies is particularly evident in English football as 'women are largely absent from dominant football culture'. Others have also identified that English football is, in terms of playing, spectating and its administration, a predominantly masculine pursuit structurally, institutionally, culturally and socially (Bell and Blakey 2010). Scraton et al's (1999) work on women's football in Germany, Norway and England identified that increased participation helped challenge *some* discourses around femininity, for example engagement in physical contact and exhibiting strength. However, along with Caudwell (2011), they question whether this has led to a meaningful shift in traditional gendered narratives as women's engagement with football remains stymied by 'common-sense'

beliefs about gendered entitlement to, and ownership of, football. The process whereby ideas become accepted as unquestionable truths is all the more powerful in many sports organisations as they are dominated by men (Cunningham and Sagas 2008), with football one of the foremost sites of male dominance in England (Caudwell 2009). Here then we glimpse the powerful ideologies around gender which shaped the FA's conceptualisation of women's football and its vision for the WSL.

Attempts to address inequality within sports organisations are typically rooted in a liberal paradigm. Welford (2011, 366) argues that , 'liberal policies have been problematic in this highly masculine context because they do not address gendered discourses underlying organisational definitions and practices … Sport organisations are places that still reproduce traditional gender roles and discourses'. In his work examining attempts by three UK NGBs to address inequalities stemming from such gendered ideologies, Lusted (2014, 86) highlights that 'many felt that their sport, and their own organisation, was already equal, open, fair, non-discriminatory and accessible to all; a formal policy to promote equality was, therefore, unnecessary.' Liberal approaches offer little challenge to an institutional logic that sees no value in organisational change (Rao and Kelleher, 2005). In his analysis of sports organisation affirmative action programmes for women, McKay (1997) demonstrates that such initiatives are often marginalised, trivialised or incorporated into the masculinist culture of the organisations, with equity initiatives also prone to resistance or subversion. Fielding-Lloyd and Mean's (2008) study focusses on the use of separatist coaching courses, espoused by the FA as addressing gender inequalities in English football coaching. In practice, the courses had a detrimental effect on the positioning of women

as coaches, as they did not acknowledge or challenge the powerful male dominated discourses that limited opportunities for these female coaches. This study endeavours to explore who was involved in decision making around the establishment of WSL and to interrogate why and how others were excluded. Hence, there is a need to examine how such gendered discourses impacted on the imagining of WSL and the extent to which the developing League will be a genuine challenge to the gendered ideology of the FA. Williams (2006, 160-161) asserts:

> we are asking the wrong questions if we make the focus of enquiry the means by which we might increase the number of girls and women playing football and the mechanisms by which we get the media to cover female matches more extensively ... These are cosmetic… we need to ask more robust questions about the values and ideas that have become common sense in this demarcation of football and women's football.

The equality issues being addressed here exist in a neo liberal context, where, according to Giroux (2005, 9) 'democracy becomes synonymous with free markets while issues of equality … are stripped of any substantive meaning'. The generation of solutions to problems imposed on the WSL, which we will examine later, such as income generation or boosting crowd sizes, are portrayed as being the duty of individuals at clubs, and not of the FA. Such individualization is a common strategy for minimising the gendered structure and practices of an organisation (Kelan 2009). Davis (2005, 9) states 'a major shift in neo liberal discourse is towards survival being an individual responsibility', with Fraser (2013a) highlighting the shift in feminist movement from prioritising solidarity to celebrating female entrepreneurs. For her, there is a turning from valuing interdependence in favour of individual advancement, with the process posited as female empowerment. Neoliberalism has authorised a sustained assault on the ethos of egalitarian redistribution. Therefore, the hitting of FA

targets becomes the responsibility of volunteers, despite the structures and capacity of many clubs remaining relatively unchanged. This means that the onus is placed on volunteers within football, who are predominantly female, to break into new markets and enact change despite their relative lack of cultural and material resources (Williams 2006).

Examining change processes, Holt et al (2007) state that successful change is founded on a clear vision which allows all involved to understand the rationale for and objectives of change. The way change is managed and whether outcomes are achieved is also dependent on the extent to which all parties recognise its validity (Burnes 2004). Indeed, *resistance* to change can result in organisations redoubling efforts to maintain insular, top-down structures (Van Dam, Oreg and Schyns 2008). Marginalising key stakeholders during change works against successful implementation that will produce growth (Bouckenooghe 2012), and will not generate feelings of empowerment for all parties (Cruickshank and Collins 2012). Accordingly, our analysis will examine the extent to which universal support was sought by the FA in engaging in genuine consultation with females football stakeholders and we will question the decision to make the development of WSL heavily dependent on existing structures and men's clubs, meaning that the kind of significant changes that can challenge the values of the FA (Burnes and Jackson 2011) were avoided.

Methodology

Adopting a critical feminist stance, our qualitative research included attendance at thirty-nine WSL games over the first two seasons by one of the authors. Observation at games was crucial, especially in the initial stages, to familiarise ourselves with the new

League. Walsh's (2012, 254) marginal native position describes the observations carried out to achieve 'a poise between a strangeness that avoids over rapport and a familiarity that grasps the perspectives of people in the situation'. All home grounds of the original eight WSL teams were visited so we were able to experience what fans did and were able to see the impacts of FA decisions about how WSL was delivered. As well as allowing for the construction and testing of theories that fed into interviews carried out with participants, observations also played a part in shaping recommendations for change as WSL continues to develop.

As the FA has a virtual monopoly on defining the structures of the elite game, we attempted to give voice to those affected by its decisions. As we will see in later discussions, our participants felt that they were not consulted by the FA so could not play a part in the creation of WSL, stakeholders here being excluded, with a commensurate reduction in levels of trust (Matuleviciene and Stravinskiene, 2015) and commitment. Drawing on Bauman (1987) our participants can be seen as *interpreters,* those with a history of involvement in the female game. This means that they have extensive knowledge but may understand the game differently to FA *legislators,* who are the installed experts now governing the women's game. Bauman's (1987) exploration of legislators and interpreters provides us with a useful distinction here in that interpreters, in this case members of the FA, are experts able to protect their position though gatekeeping. Interpreters, those outside the FA, such as many of our participants who had a history of involvement in the female game, possess extensive knowledge but understand the sport differently and have little power to impose their interpretation (Ritzer 1997). Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted, via snowball sampling, with individuals working within and around the WSL and its prior

configurations. Nine participants were male and eight female. The sample size reflected the small pool of staff and volunteers involved in elite women's club football and was compensated for by the richness of testimonies as the interview schedule was designed to allow participants to share their experience of the challenges they face in relation to the new League.

FA personnel involved with WSL proved hard to identify, partly due to the impenetrable nature of the organisation, which we examine later. Only a small number of staff had responsibility for WSL and these staff were heavily work loaded which led to difficulties in arranging interviews or, in one case, the interview being cancelled at short notice.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by one of the authors. Transcripts were analysed by the authors and conflicting interpretations omitted. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic data analysis were then utilised to define, name and review themes. To ensure 'trustworthiness' of analysis (Shenton 2004), the authors drew on other data collected as part of the wider project, such as field notes from observation of games and archived documents.

Due to the relatively small number of people working in elite women's football in England, it was difficult to guarantee anonymity and this was explained to participants throughout and their right to withdraw was emphasised. To provide a level of anonymity, we have not offered detailed information on the roles of participants within the sport, whilst acknowledging that the provision of such detail may have allowed for a richer discussion of data (Saunders et al. 2016).

Analysis and Discussion

The thematic analysis identified four broad areas that explain the FA's ideological construction of the WSL: the rationalising of the need for WSL, the League model the FA adopted, match scheduling and attendance, and barriers to change. These themes are not listed in order of importance to participants nor are they distinct, as they are indelibly influenced by the structure and culture of the FA.

Rationalising the need for a WSL

WSL provided the FA with an opportunity to exercise power in a way that was now largely denied it in relation to the men's professional game (Bell, 2012). Thus, the FA attempted to create a commercially viable product via increased sponsorship, media attention and spectatorship. To justify this shift, it claimed that salaried players would improve club playing standards, increase international success and boost grassroots participation via the provision of role models (FA 2012). There was consensus amongst stakeholders around the need for change to increase the visibility and viability of elite women's football. An exemplar of this consensus, one participant interpreter (Bauman 1987), a journalist of the women's game, described the previous structure as: 'not a shambles but something had to change … the league structure needed to be professionalised.'

Analysing this shift from volunteerism to being more business-like, Bayle and Robinson (2007) highlight the importance of professionalising activities, individuals and processes and structures. In terms of *activities,* participants consistently said that the FA's goals and methods of achieving them were arrived at without genuine consultation. In relation to *individuals,* rather than also engaging additional staff, more demands were

made of volunteers at WSL, and potential WSL, clubs. Finally, *processes and structures* did see a more centralised and hierarchical decision-making processes via the WSL licensing process; the specialisation and differentiation of roles which should accompany this though was absent with, once more, the onus on volunteers to work harder to secure more funding in order to comply with the tendering process.

However, the FA's vision for the League and its methods of achieving that vision were disputed by many stakeholders. The inclusion of a wide range of views is central to success within sports governing bodies as those organisations require a participatory culture where stakeholders are, or feel they are, partners (Bayle and Robinson 2007). It was evident though that such an approach was not adopted by the FA, as the organisation's insularity, bureaucracy and patriarchal composition (Michie and Oughton 2005) excluded key stakeholders. FA gatekeeping had distinct consequences according to a number of participants, including those involved in the Women's Premier League (WPL), which WSL replaced and now constitutes the tier below it. The Head of a WPL club explained '…consultation was really just to inform us this is what was going ahead as opposed to asking us what do you think,' adding 'they can't be told or wouldn't be told, it wasn't that we weren't prepared for change it's just that I didn't feel they were realistic targets.'

Although the FA is the sport's governing body, its staff has little experience of launching leagues which was part of the rationale for using consultants. This is indicative of an organisation yet to come to terms with the increased commercialisation of the sport generally, as Shilbury, Ferkins and Smythe (2013, 356-7) offer:

> commercial influences on sport began to gather pace in the 1980s and the pace increased rapidly in the second half of the 1990s … these commercial pressures created the scope for the two worlds of sport (i.e. amateur and professional) to collide, largely because governance structures, cultures and personnel were not originally designed to accommodate sport in the commercial sense.

The strategy of engaging consultants has taken place in change carried out by governing bodies in other women's sports including cricket (Stronach and Adair 2009) and netball (Mansfield and Killick 2012). However, in this case, the consultants' perceived lack of knowledge of women's football caused concern amongst participants, as did the need for such agencies to accede to the wishes of those paying them (Taminiau, Boussebaa and Berghman 2012). The approach taken by the FA here contradicts Ruoranen et al (2016) whose research into sports federations highlights the importance of engaging paid personnel with specialist expertise of the sport and an understanding of volunteerism, who should then draw on the expertise of volunteers, freeing them up to engage with strategic development. The FA, in its legislator role, chose which consultants to use and also what they were tasked with delivering. Those involved more directly with the delivery of women's football in the past, the interpreters, were made peripheral. Such marginalisation is problematic as participation by all stakeholders in organisational change is central to successful implementation. Ruoranen et al (2016) also offer that at a time when NGBs are 'professionalising,' often under pressure to do so from funders, relationships between volunteers and paid staff can become strained, with the acknowledgment of the value of voluntary being lost. As we shall see, our participants' issues were not with salaried FA staff but rather with the use of external 'experts' and the decisions of FA members, also volunteers but, importantly with the power of legislators.

Whilst the decision to change the elite league system was perceived by some participants as the next logical step for the sport, some felt that the motivation behind the FA's decision was a negative reaction to competition from other sports, one

journalist participant stating 'they were frightened cricket and rugby were going to overtake them.' Alluding to the FA's decision to put plans for the League on hold and then, within three months, reversing that decision, the Chair of a WPL club indicated that the issue of funding cuts linked to participation may also have forced the FA's hand:

> the government…said to the FA, right this is all the money women's football have had - what's happening? All of a sudden there was a panic at the FA so something that was mooted for [the future] was brought forward.

Indeed, female participation amongst over 16s had fallen significantly from 283,000 in 2010/11 to 200,400 in 2015/16 (Sport England 2016) and waning participation levels can have serious funding repercussions for NGBs, as has been evident in other sports (Roan 2011).

Affecting radical change entails challenging the culture of institutions by changing assumptions, behaviours, processes and products (Kezer and Eckel 2002). Whilst the changes to the elite female league structure were significant, there is little evidence that the introduction of WSL was accompanied by such cultural shifts. There may have been consensus about the need to overhaul elite female club football but the FA's approach was one unlikely to create universal, enthusiastic support. The creation of WSL can be viewed less as a proactive decision, enthusiastically embraced by a progressive organisation determined to address the gender inequality inherent in the sport, and more as a reaction to external economic and political drivers, whilst maintaining the cultural positioning of women as second class members of the community.

Barriers to change*: Structure and culture*

Van Oss and Van 't Hek (2011) suggest that the presence of resistance to change, exemplified, as we have seen by the FA, exists in organisations trying to retain their core characteristics, with Ruoranen et al (2016) stating that the traditional culture of a sport organisation can provide barriers to development. It is common for alternative voices to be excluded from dominant narratives produced by organisational elites which want to retain their cultural superiority (Palmer 2000). How the FA conceptualised the inadequacies of the WPL was crucial in determining who gained the power to develop a new professional league and it was the shared belief of our interpreters that the FA did not question its own role in the historical marginalisation of women's football in England and saw itself as best placed to now develop the sport; as one said 'they weren't really realistic but they can't be told or wouldn't be told' (Head of football at FA WPL club).

The FA had a small number of staff responsible for overseeing the women's game and these staff were commended by some participants as being, in the words of the Head of one WPL Club: 'very approachable...They are the front line. I think the issues lie with the committees.' The above claim is supported by former FA Chief Executive Ian Watmore (House of Commons, 2011b) who stated 'however critical I think you must be about the governance of the FA this must not apply to the staff...talented, hardworking, modern in outlook, energetic and diverse, relatively low paid, passionate'. However, participants found it hard to identify the number and role of personnel involved in WSL. A picture emerged of a small number of staff solely involved in WSL, working closely with another small number responsible for the game as a whole. For our interpreters, the structures and decision making process caused

concern, with one WSL Chair claiming: 'it's very complicated… things take forever which shouldn't.' Michie and Oughton (2005) report that the FA has too many committees with inadequate or inappropriate terms of reference, reporting systems, membership and programmes. This impenetrability is not accidental, rather it is part of a process which facilitates the retention of power and resists change, as this complexity enhanced the ability of the FA to define agendas (Castells 2007). Footballing matters are ostensibly governed by the FA Council, a structure of approximately 125 people including representatives of 43 County Football Associations (CFAs). One FA Council member describes their first meeting:

> one of the members of Council said to me, 'this is the best gentleman's club in the world'…it's not a very good place for detailed discussion …by the time they have gone through all the committee minutes lunch calls.

Council is portrayed as an old boys' club (Hoffman 2011) 'overwhelmingly white and male, as is the FA Board and the senior management team' (House of Commons 2011a, 18).

The division of responsibilities within the FA is certainly complex and was exemplified by a member of FA Women's Committee who explained:

> [Women's Committee] provide delegates for all Super League games, we travel with the England national teams, we have a Centre of Excellence Sub-committee and representatives on the WPL Sub-committee … the Super League is… sort of controlled by the Board's WSL Sub-committee because all the finances are from the Board… but the Women's Committee have 2 seats on that … The Board have someone who sits on the Board's WSL Sub-committee and the Chair of the Board WSL Sub-committee sits on the Women's Committee … the Super League… has a League Management Committee which sits below the Board…. The WSL Management Committee is from the Board's WSL Sub-committee, there are club representatives and staff and we make operational decisions of the WSL … There is a policy group the Board WSL Sub-committee, whereas the WSL Management Committee is operational

Such arrangements are at odds with Ruoranen et al (2016) who call for specialist functions, clear differentiation between board and employees, clearly defined competences and decision making and transparency to members and stakeholders, from sports organisations. Reflecting on this quagmire, the Department for Culture Media and Sport (House of Commons 2011c) stated that for the FA to govern effectively its 'decision making structures should be transparent, understandable and open to external challenge'. Yet, it is within a significantly complex and opaque environment that decisions about the WSL were made.

In their work around the professionalisation of sport federations, Ruoranen et al (2016) insist on the importance of organisations justifying their social and commercial activities to stakeholders, including government and member clubs. However, in the year that WSL launched, the FA cited potential FIFA sanctions as a repercussion of government intervention in its operations (FA 2011a). This government interference rule though is used only to punish major infractions, for example the three week ban imposed in 2013 for Cameroon after the president used government security forces to gain access to football federation buildings (Bongben 2013). The FA then used a rather spurious threat to create yet another barrier to structural and cultural change.

Numerous government efforts to persuade the FA to reform, from the Chester Report (House of Commons 1968) to Ministerial threat above reported by the BBC on July 24, 2016, have not resulted in meaningful change, with this inertia leading to suggestions that change needs to be enforced. This refusal to listen to alternative voices, to external and internal experts, is also played out in relation to the specific case of WSL. We will now examine how the structure of the governing body allowed it to

further control the elite female club game via the selection process for League membership and the setting of operational criteria.

The FA's model for women's football

The FA's goal was that WSL clubs become 'small, sustainable businesses' (FA 2010, p1) with viability and sustainability *the* focus of the tendering process. The Chair of one WPL club explaining 'they just wanted to know where we were going to get the money from.'

Bell (2012) uses the term *franchise* to summarise the FA's position on women's football clubs, where spending was tightly regulated by the FA, with binding agreements allowing it to exert control. Successful franchises were expected to demonstrate considerable resources before entering the League, meaning many WPL clubs felt unable to apply for a WSL licence. Decisions on successful tendering appeared to favour clubs that demonstrated that they could obtain the most resources, rather than those with notable histories of footballing success. The desire to establish absolute control over the game drove the FA to 'set back to zero' (FA 2013d, 3) the clock on elite female club football.

New markets needed to be found by the FA and the women's game was identified as having that potential (FA 2013b). The switch to a commercial focus was a huge transition for clubs with the Chair of one WPL explaining that: 'it is a completely different world … having to bring in revenue … [we do that now] but on a small scale… but now you have got to add lots of zeros on the end.'

The FA committed to match fund the accumulated club revenue to a maximum of £70,000pa, stating that within 2 or 3 years, their investment would decrease and the elite structure would become self-sustaining (Kessel 2010). The driving of groups to self-sufficiency mirrors broader shifts whereby voluntary organisations are required to become business orientated (Fyfe 2005). However, participants were sceptical of the clubs' capacities to achieve such targets, with the Head of a WSL club saying: 'matching it [£70k] wouldn't be enough to do what we wanted' and the Chair of a WPL club adding 'we were moving in to the economic meltdown … we struggled to get £10k.' Their subsistence financial status meant some clubs dreaded qualifying for European competition, one Chair saying 'please don't let us have to go to Russia … We'd lose money.' Clubs finding themselves in such a predicament is at odds with the FA's aims of increasing playing standards and providing role models and media showcases through the new League.

An apparent lack of understanding within the upper echelons of the FA of how onerous change would be for these clubs, combined with the use of outside consultants who did not understand the position of the women's game and the marginalised position of those at the grassroots who did have knowledge of the game, meant key decisions overlooked some of the realities of the game. Clubs, still heavily dependent on volunteers (Williams 2011), were made responsible for meeting targets set by the FA. Participants and other volunteers at these clubs were expected to be altruistically driven entrepreneurial agents to achieve the goals imposed by the FA (Stott 2011). This meant that securing a WSL berth was in part dependent on volunteers having relevant business skills. As one CFA official who was previously involved with a WSL club said

'somebody who worked for him [Chairman of the club] who had worked on Olympic bids, she …put the bid together and without her I don't think it would be as strong.'

Clubs were 'asked to break into new markets as a way of justifying their place in the sport' (Williams 2006, 163), strengthening the process by which the FA was able to reposition the solution to improving the women's games' fortunes as being located in individual clubs rather than within FA practices and discourses (Fielding-Lloyd and Meân 2011). Such individualisation also militates against the kind of partnership work between clubs which would be beneficial to developing a new endeavour. As the Head of a WSL club noted: 'You do feel from some clubs that they are [thinking] I'm not going to give away my best ideas in case they copy me and do it better,' echoing . The FA then, as we will see when discussing the inability of one of the most successful clubs in women's football, Doncaster Rovers Belles, to secure a WSL licence, created an environment where off field competition between clubs for scant resources was central to success. The participant comment above exemplifies Fraser's presentation (2013b) of the two scenarios available for female liberation and that rather than following the path where gender emancipation 'went hand in hand with participatory democracy and social solidarity' the FA's approach fits the neo liberal form of liberation, one which militates against solidarity and participation in decision making (2013a). The competition to join, and flourish in, WSL epitomises capitalism in the neoliberal age, incorporating and neutralizing any radical potential (Fraser 2013a).

Fixture scheduling and attendance
The FA (2011a) announced that WSL fixtures would run through the summer, to create a season away from the majority of men's elite football, assuming that a media,

sponsor and fan focus on the men's game would hinder WSL's ability to grow. A summer setting would also overcome pitch related postponements. Participants acknowledged that a summer league had its strengths, with the Chair of one WSL club asserting: 'diehard fans [might say] "I need some football. Let's go along and watch".' However, the Chair of another club identified that the reality would be a fixture pattern that remained frustratingly fragmented for clubs and fans:

> they play most of the games at the two peaks of men's football … they have a big break to fit around the England side the Euros and the World Cup and I don't think they got that right

Since its inception, WSL has struggled to resolve issues around the scheduling of fixtures. The 2012 season began in March and included an eight week break due to the Olympics, by which time the winter sport calendar, which included men's football, had commenced. Solving fixture congestion was also made problematic due to the sharing of facilities: 'we are still going to close for the month of June to let the pitches recover' (CFA Official and FA Council member)[1]. Female clubs, without their own facilities, find themselves not just ranked below men's fixtures in terms of importance; the turf on which the game is played is prioritised over WSL club fixtures.

Participants in this study identified that from the outset the FA equated WSL 'success' with high attendances, a decision not made in partnership with women's clubs. The increased use of quantifiable outcomes in sport, and the assumption that such

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[1] The FA announced a *winter* schedule for the 2017-18 season, contradicting its earlier stance. It offers targeting a win in the 2023 World Cup, improving player welfare and doubling participation and attendance as the rationale (BBC 2016). However, it is unclear how the shift to a winter programme will achieve these disparate international, elite club and grassroots aims. It is also an example of the FA oscillating, lacking a coherent, owned strategy to embed the new League in the consciousness of fans and potential fans.

outcomes are meaningful, has been questioned (Sam 2012). The FA's decision to focus on attendances meant some clubs may have falsified returns to 'meet' what they see as unachievable targets, one WSL club Chair claiming: 'we are one of the few clubs that have reported accurate attendances…there are others that just double theirs.' There was even a suggestion from one of the participants, a CFA official previously involved in a WSL club, that the FA colluded in the practice of 'putting a bit of a PR spin [falsifying attendances] on it.' This claim has some support in the FA's round-by-round approach to calculating averages which claim growth 1.5% higher than BBC figures from July 12, 2016. Given that 'Building, enhancing and maintaining a good relationship with fans is perhaps the most fundamental principle of sport marketing' (Kim and Trail 2011, 65), the FA, understandably, wished to attract more fans to WSL and decided to focus on appealing to fathers and their teenage daughters who had not previously attended women's club matches, (FA 2009d) creating a spectacularised (Debord 1994) match day experience with pre and in match entertainment, such as face painting, bouncy castles and girl bands, aimed at this teenage demographic. This approach also reinforces the status of males as gatekeepers of sport for females (Farrell et al 2011), female fans often portrayed as lacking knowledge or being inauthentic and rendered largely invisible in histories and research of the sport (Pope and Williams 2011). However, that there was an absence of a strategy for retaining the existing fan base runs contra to the recommendations of authors such as Kim and Trail (2011) who point out the need for a move from an exchange model of sports marketing to relationship marketing as a means of building trust and commitment which then leads to consumption behaviours including a commitment to attend games, the purchasing of merchansise, engagement with media coverage and promoting the sport via word of mouth. Furthermore, many fans are not paying customers, as clubs allowed free entry to meet targets: 'we still give

away probably about half of our tickets… 3-400.' (Head of football WSL club B). Hoeber and Kerwin (2013) identified concerns that those benefiting from complimentary tickets have little interest in the sport they are watching, meaning they are unlikely to return when they have to pay, which does not fit with the FA's long term plan of creating a financially sustainable League but is rather a short term solution to meet targets.

The FA's approach to gender equity here then is a surface one (Liston 2006), with a focus on tweaking support at club level and on measuring outputs, rather than addressing the underlying, cultural and structural causes of inequality within the sport. The FA's selection and enforcement of short term measurables reinforces their position as gatekeeper of the League, as legislators, whilst simultaneously stifling resistant discourses about what 'success' might look like and how that should be measured.

The absorption of women's clubs

Whilst many questioned the FA's vision, the desire of women's clubs to access or remain at the apex of the elite club structure was strong. As a participant from a WPL club stated: 'whatever it may be or whatever the future holds, however it evolves, we want to be part of it.'

There was a tendency on the part of participants to minimise their critique of the FA's plans due to both sympathy for the small salaried team at the FA implementing the new vision, and a fear of potential negative repercussions, a WSL club Chair offering 'if you haven't been toeing the line you might not get your third licence.' Utilising Delgado Bernal's (1997) oppositional behaviours model with its 'awareness' continuum

and 'motivation to create change' axis, the Chair demonstrates a clear awareness of the domination of the FA but reflects the conformist position occupied by most clubs, driven by a fear of exclusion if they attempt transformative action, what Giroux (1983) would identify as subordinated groups demonstrating self-defeating and conformist behaviours rather than the reactionary and transformational ones displayed by Doncaster Rovers Belles, below. Those engaging in conformist behaviour may lack a high level of consciousness of such domination and conform to expected behaviours, accepting the *potential* for change but accepting its slow pace whilst also being accommodating. Those possessing a higher degree of consciousness are more likely to be critical of the status quo and more motivated to create transformational spaces. As Burke (2010) identifies, change is unlikely to occur when groups, or in this case most WSL and WPL clubs, are too busy trying to survive in an unfriendly organisational environment to create new discourses.

The FA required clubs to function without funding from them by 2018, and a model of merging with men's professional clubs as a sustainable option for WSL clubs was presented, alongside the claim that such absorption has 'proven to be very successful' (FA, 2013b, 16). Indeed, having finished bottom of the League in the first two seasons, Liverpool Ladies became increasingly aligned to their men's club which provided sizeable cash injections and the club won the League in 2013 and 2014. As the Chair of one WSL club identified: 'to run a women's football club properly it is going to cost approaching half a million pounds … there is only Liverpool and Arsenal who are approaching these figures.' However, such reliance on a men's club can be problematic with the Head of another WSL club adding 'obviously it's not a real priority or it doesn't feel like it is a real priority to them.'

Lusted and Fielding-Lloyd (2017), in their study of the merger between men's and women's cricket in England, argued that taking such a liberal absorption approach to gender equity is unlikely to be effective, in part because it relies on male clubs sharing resources in a way that facilitates a growth in women's cultural power. Such an approach, they claim, results in non-performance inclusion (Bury 2015) with organisations conforming to equality rhetoric in the broadest sense but doing little to challenge the continued prioritisation of male interests. The FA's chosen path might be seen as, initially, setting strict parameters for entry into WSL i.e. control by absorption, *then* exercising control via ambivalence towards women's clubs, ceding control of them to established male clubs such that female players now find themselves at the mercy of the priorities of men's clubs. An early warning about the dangers of this approach can be seen in a BBC report of April 21, 2016, which revealed that Notts County Ladies had been disbanded by its 'parent' male club only 3 years after being formed, due to the male club's own financial difficulties.

The trend towards aligning to men's clubs intensified in the selection process for the expanded WSL. In 2009, without financial backing from their associated men's club, Doncaster became Britain's first women's sport based social enterprise, a model which uses business strategies to support a social mission; a choice which may be interpreted as a radical feminist attempt at independence as outlined by Sage (2015). The club was attempting to deliver positive outcomes in social policy areas within the community, whilst achieving viability outside the FA framework, challenging the hegemony created by the FA, which had naturalised 'its domination by installing the presuppositions of its own worldview as common sense' Fraser (2017, 2). The Chair of a WPL club

explained: 'Doncaster….have gone down a lot of the charitable routes and the FA don't want that.' Doncaster Rovers Belles, the only club to have played every season in the elite league since its inception in 1991, would start the 2014 season in WSL2, replaced by in the top tier by Manchester City, a club with little pedigree in women's football but significantly better compliance with the FA's tendering criteria. As Cloake reports (2013) 'instead of holding the club up as evidence of all the things the game likes to tell you it stands for, the FA has opted for another approach.'

Conclusions and recommendations

This study has demonstrated the FA's problematic conceptualisation of WSL, its lack of meaningful engagement with women's clubs, and the subsequent limitations on the development of the League. It was identified that the FA's rationale for the inception of the League resulted in cutting ties with the pre WSL elite club game, with several structural and cultural barriers to the development of the women's game unacknowledged in the FA model. The model for WSL was driven by measurables, such that the FA equated success with rapidly improved attendances. Furthermore, an apparent enthusiasm to absorb women's clubs into the existing male infrastructure appeared to blithely ignore the realities of such non-performance inclusion (Bury, 2015) in a sport rooted in a culture where the male game is privileged and we are left with a '"pseudo" inclusion of women's football within existing male orientated structures' (Liston, 206, 373). The initial investment in WSL of £1.5 million per year for two years represents a mere 0.5% of the FA's turnover and just 1.5% of funding put aside for investment in football generally (FA 2011b) yet, the FA is still able to emphasise gains made, to promote a sense that inequality is being addressed.

Walters, Trenberth and Tacon (2010 47) tells us that:

'there are still particular aspects of governance in which many NGBs in the UK do not adequately address including board induction, board training, and the evaluation of board performance. These are important issues that NGBs need to consider in the context of modernisation'.

Whilst the FA is attempting to create a sustainable professional League, the NGB itself remains unprofessionalised. Despite NGBs being more 'business-like,' voluntary work remains at the heart of sport administration (Seippel, Ø 2011). Restructuring within the FA should not be seen as the dismissal of combined centuries of service to the game.. However, if existing practices are to be challenged, the size of FA Council should be reduced to facilitate more strategic and swifter decision-making and to provide clearer channels of communication. It is only via a rationalisation of Council size alongside the retention of grass roots volunteer expertise that the structures, practices and assumptions of the FA will be challenged and cultural change achieved and sustained.

Whilst acknowledging that what should be measured in terms of goal achievement is not always clear in sport federations (Ruoranen et al 2016) the FA has stated that creating WSL has multiple objectives i.e. improving both club and international standards, encouraging mass grass roots participation and creating a larger fan base. As suggested by those same authors, with such a broad set of objectives, the FA should consider developing more bespoke strategies to meet what can be the very different support needs and goals of WSL *and* WPL clubs rather than the inflexible licensing model selected.

However, those familiar with the long history of calls for FA reform may expect continued inertia from the organisation. Fielding-Lloyd and Mean (2011, 346) remind

us that 'mere presence, often used to demonstrate equality and inclusivity, is not (necessarily) equivalent to acceptance, inclusion and equity'. Therefore, this paper has brought into sharp focus the organisational culture behind the development of the WSL and also makes a number of suggestions in terms of organisational reform. What is required in terms of future research is critical inquiry which challenges those FA success measures and the organisational culture and practices which define them.

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