

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Sexism and inequality in football, HC 830

Wednesday 16 November 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 16 November 2022.

Contains explicit and upsetting language about women

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Dame Caroline Dinenage; Kim Johnson; Rachel Maclean; Ms Anum Qaisar and Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee Member present: Julie Elliott.

Questions 1 - 27

Witnesses

Dr Stacey Pope, Associate Professor at Dept of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Durham; Fern Whelan, former professional footballer and Women's EDI Executive at Professional Footballers' Association; and Suzanne Wrack, author and women's football correspondent at *The Guardian*.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Stacey Pope, Fern Whelan and Suzanne Wrack.

- Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this afternoon's session of the Women and Equalities Committee and our inquiry into sexism and inequality in football. Can I start by thanking all of our witnesses for attending this afternoon? Committee members will ask you questions in turn. They will indicate which of you they wish to respond, but if any of you want to chip in at any point then please do just indicate and they will bring you in at the appropriate time.

Can I first ask each of you, are you happy to be referred to by first names or your full name? What would you prefer? Can I get a nod if you are all happy to be first names? Thank you very much. That is very kind of you. Our first question comes from Kim Johnson, please.

- Q2 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, panel. My questions are to Fern in the first instance. Fern, I just want to say well done for playing for the second best football team in the country. What is your experience of accessing football as a young girl, and how did you progress to the elite level?

Fern Whelan: We are going back a bit now, but when I started playing there were not any girls' teams in the school that I played for, so my PE teacher in my primary school took it upon herself—because she spotted talent in the playground—and asked me to go and play with the boys if I wanted to. That was at probably age 10, so maybe slightly later than some girls might start playing now, because we have a little bit more opportunity now.

Back then she said, "Do you want to come and play?", so I did. I played as one girl on the school team through many tournaments and was always within that starting team. Then she set up a team called Liverpool Feds, which then went into Liverpool Ladies, and asked me if I wanted to go and do some training sessions there. Really it was down to her as to why I progressed up to where I did.

Then I played at a centre of excellence, which was Tranmere centre of excellence at the time. I was given the opportunity to go and play within a tournament where all the different centre of excellences from the country would play against each other. I was spotted by the England scouts at that point. I was about 13 then. For me, that is when it started to become a little bit more real. I do not think before that I had ever seen football as a career pathway or anything like that.

Then it became more serious. I played for England under-15s, 17s, 19s, 23s and then got senior caps as well, playing for Everton and Liverpool while doing so. That was my journey through. Probably until I got to England, I was the only mixed-race player on the team while playing. I was given the opportunity to play, but again a lot of the time it was with the boys. It was very rarely finding the girls.



Q3 Kim Johnson: From your experience, would you say things have changed in terms of the comparison for boys and girls in football progressing through to elite football?

Fern Whelan: To some extent, yes, there are opportunities within schools for girls to play—more so in primary schools, maybe less so in secondary schools. I missed that out before, but in my secondary school I was encouraged to play hockey and netball, because they were the typical female sports. I am not sure whether this would still be the case in every school now. It probably depends on the staffing and who is working within the schools as to what they would promote and encourage.

Some girls in schools now would potentially have that opportunity to play on a girls' team rather than play solely on a boys' team. I have to say, I feel like playing with boys developed me a lot, so I am not saying that was a bad thing, but it is nice now that some of the young girls have the opportunity to play with girls like them, and they have similar or common interests. I would say it is different now. We could always do more in terms of offering more opportunities within schools, especially in secondary schools. I think 50% of girls between age 12 and 16 do not play any sport in secondary school.

Q4 Kim Johnson: What would you say the barriers are?

Dr Pope: People following the European championships might have seen Ian Wright's comments. After the celebrations in the semi-final, it was quite hard not to be moved by that emotional plea to allow girls access to football. To use his words, "Whatever happens in the final, if girls are not allowed to play football just like the boys can in their PE after this tournament, then what are we doing?" He took that moment—that opportunity—to really get that message across. According to the Football Association, only 63% of secondary schools, as you identified, are offering girls the opportunity to play football in PE.

One of the things that I have found in my research is that gaining basic access to football in physical education remains an issue. That is based on 150 interviews with women football fans—fans who follow men's football and fans who follow women's football. To some extent, we might expect that to be the case when speaking to some of the older generations, talking about their experiences going back to the 1950s and 1960s, but one of the striking findings in my book, "The Feminization of Sports Fandom", is that it actually spanned across the generations. There were similarities between the barriers that were identified in earlier decades and what was going on in more recent times, even when we have had the national curriculum introduced. The women discussing their memories in earlier decades are talking about that clear gender divide at school, which was basically an outright ban on girls being able to play certain sports and effectively prohibited them from playing football, but even when I spoke to some of the younger women fans I interviewed,



there was still that gender divide at school that was stopping them from playing football.

I can give you some examples, using their words. This was part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council project and some recent interviews with some of the younger women. These are women who are in their 20s now. They say, "It was very much boys played football, girls played netball. You never got the choice", or, "They didn't have any girls' football at my secondary school. It was a mixed school, but then it was the very classic netball for girls, rugby for boys, and that gender split."

One recommendation, based on that research and based on what we are hearing, is that concrete action needs to be taken to ensure we have equal access to these sports in physical education. We might even make sure that it is a requirement. It is not just about football. If boys and girls are allowed to play the same sports at school rather than segregating, not only will that make more opportunities in terms of girls being able to access football when we are talking about elite pathway as well as the amateur level, but it also means that we get away from this current situation where we seem to be teaching boys and girls there are gender-appropriate sports from such a young age. That probably endorses everything that you have described as well in terms of some of your experiences.

Q5 Kim Johnson: Thanks, Stacey. Just going back to the point about barriers, we know that some of the football clubs and elite centres are located outside of city centres, so there are some issues in terms of getting to places, particularly for girls in more disadvantaged areas. Do you see that as being one of the barriers for more girls getting involved in elite football, Fern?

Fern Whelan: Yes, definitely. Access is a massive thing for me. I can only say when I was playing, it was the era when we had the centres of excellence and there were 50 across the country. They then got scrapped and we ended up having 30 regional talent centres, so again, you are reducing that access. Those centres got moved to areas that were a little bit harder to get to—well, a lot harder to get to. I personally went through it when I was playing at a club. I was getting lifts from my actual manager. There were three players, and we were all in a minibus—and all black, I have to say at that point as well. We could not physically get to training if I had not had people who would step forward for me and say, "I will pick you up, I will then go and pick up this player, then we will go and get another one." That access is a massive thing.

Now we have these emerging talent centres that the FA has produced. I think they aimed for 70; we now have 60. It has doubled it from 30 to 60. We would need more, definitely. Access would still be a barrier. The strides are being made, but we need to definitely look at that, because people should not be excluded from playing football, especially at a young age. We want to widen the talent pool. We do not want narrow it at any point.



Suzanne Wrack: Can I jump in on that? Behind all that is the biggest problem, which is the socioeconomic background of people. If you look at the England team today and the England squad, it is overwhelmingly white. The reason behind that and the reason why so many black and ethnic minority girls cannot get into a sport in local areas is because they are from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds. It is inevitable that they have parents who are often working two or three jobs who cannot necessarily afford to take the time off work with less flexible hours. That is what has driven this. When you have those talent centres taken out of the cities and the localities, you have a load of parents who cannot necessarily afford to get their kids to those talent centres. They do not have cars necessarily and do not want to put their daughters on public transport late at night, particularly when the winter is here and it is getting darker and things like that.

For me, the biggest problem is the socioeconomic barrier to being involved in sport. It is not as impactful in the men's game, because the pool of clubs and facilities available is so much larger. Pretty much every boy has a club that they can play for very locally to them, so that is not necessarily as much of a barrier as it is in the women's game.

Q6 **Kim Johnson:** Picking up the socioeconomic point, we know that the Women's Euros were predominantly white, so both Fern and Suzy, do you think women's football has an issue with racial diversity? What needs to be done to improve it?

Fern Whelan: I have been working for the PFA for a year. Even before the Euros—before the three black players were highlighted and then everybody started talking about it—the conversations were already happening. We knew we needed to look at what had happened and why clubs that used to have a real good make-up of diversity, including clubs I used played for, now had only one black player. There are areas in the north with a real diverse pool of young girls and young talent, so why are the girls not getting up to the top levels?

It is not to say these girls are not playing football, because they might be, but it is where they are playing and where they are maybe getting picked up from. Are they getting scouted? Are people going out to physically look for them because they cannot get to these elite training centres and are just playing locally? We can definitely do more in terms of getting out on the ground, and actually going and finding the talent and the players, because they might not be fitted into the system we are currently in.

When I started at the PFA, I wanted to set up something that I thought would potentially promote some change in that area. I set up a campaign called the "See It. Achieve It" campaign, which was mainly around promoting the players that we do have and celebrating them as role models—increasing that visibility for the players who are coming into the system and maybe looking at football and thinking, "I cannot connect with any of those players in that Euros Lionesses team because they are



predominantly white and I am a black girl, and I do not see that I can achieve anything in football." It is not necessarily just playing and on the pitch. We want it to be in every avenue in football: being a coach, being a physio, being an executive and working within the game as well. I wanted to do that so we can highlight the role models they do have, celebrate their stories, and celebrate them positively, not just talk about barriers as such. Maybe they can talk about how they overcame them, really share their success stories and provide that mentorship for the younger girls coming through.

I spoke to a young girl recently. She stopped playing. She was in an Arsenal academy and she basically said, "Everybody above me was white, and there was a sea of people I couldn't connect with, so I stopped playing and I didn't see it was for me." She must have been talented. She was playing at Arsenal under-16 level. We do not want that to be the case over the next five and 10 years. I would like someone to look at the "See It. Achieve It" campaign and say, "We had all these players in elite positions"—your Demi Stokes, your Nikita Parris, these types of players—"and I can connect with them. I see their story and I think there is an avenue for me in that."

Q7 Kim Johnson: Is the "See It. Achieve It" campaign adequately resourced? Do you have power to change things in elite football? It is one thing saying I have a campaign, but another thing having adequate resources to make real change happen.

Fern Whelan: I completely agree. We need more resources, definitely. I work in the women's football department in the PFA, and we are a team of two. There are conversations happening all the time with the CEO of the PFA around needing more staff. We need a bigger team and wider resources. Currently I service the whole WSL and I work with the professional game, but it is about working with the stakeholders that work within grassroots and within the youth set-up, and making sure we continue to have those conversations, because I am well aware I cannot do it on my own.

Q8 Kim Johnson: One final question. Was Beth Mead right when she said that racism is not a concern in elite women's football?

Fern Whelan: In terms of Beth and her comments, she has been very quick to apologise for what she said and to retract her comments. She said it was taken out of context slightly. I cannot really comment on what she said in the interview because that is what she said but, in my opinion, what we could do better is educate the players. That is my role at the PFA. I work for the EDI department, and I will be going in and out of clubs and speaking to players and educating them on what we have already talked about: that there are barriers, and the way the system is set up is not set up for everyone. Beth said that statement in adjunct to what she has already said. It is not on Beth to change the problem. It is not the players. It is the system and the way it is set up, which is not for everyone.



Suzanne Wrack: I think that sentence was wrong. I do not think Beth necessarily thinks that personally, but there is definitely a racism problem in elite women's football. Regardless of whether there is overt racism in the England senior team, which I definitely do not think there is, who is to say—particularly myself or Beth as a white woman—whether we have any idea of the type of microaggressions that players like Demi Stokes and Lauren James are experiencing day to day? That includes how they feel walking into a room with an all-white coaching team, and how their individual needs as black individuals are being catered for in the England environment. You cannot say there are not going to be problems there.

Fern made the point that you get players dropping out because they do not see the players and the faces around them that look like them or understand their own circumstances. It is an issue beyond players. It is a lack of coaches. It is a lack of staff. It is a lack of people in positions of authority. Ultimately, that all rolls back to this issue of grassroots and how we get more people in at grassroots level. How do we get young black and ethnic minority women wanting to go into coaching and things like that? That is about access. It is about the time that they have available, which again rolls back to the socioeconomic issues.

If you look at all of the black players that have played in the England team in recent years—Alex Scott, Eniola Aluko, Anita Asante, Lianne Sanderson, Hope Powell; there have been a lot—where did they all come from? The majority were scouted off their council estates, in their local cages or off their local playing fields. That is the big impact. They were went to, and there is no one really going there anymore. Instead they are being asked to go somewhere else. I think many of them would say that their parents would not necessarily have been able to do that. I know Nikita Parris, like yourself, was picked up by Mo Marley and driven to Everton training.

Fern Whelan: With me in the car. That is who I was talking about.

Suzanne Wrack: There we go. There are plenty like that, but it is reliant on coaches. You cannot even have that nowadays. Safeguarding means that you cannot necessarily have a coach picking up a group of kids and taking them to training in the same way that you could in an amateur game.

The professionalism of the game has meant that you have this situation where academies are moved into the suburbs as a part of the men's training grounds and the main women's training centres, where land is more affordable and there is space for them to put them into those places. The knock-on impact of the professionalism of the game is that you are not going into the communities in the same way. I had Arsenal Ladies come into my school and do coaching sessions. I am pretty sure they do not go back into Haggerston at the moment and do it in the same way they did back then.

Q9 **Dame Caroline Dinenage:** I was just going to follow on from that. I was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

going to basically call it the industrialisation of the game, in the sense that—we have seen it through the men's game, the boys' game—talent gets scouted younger and younger and younger, and boys get signed up to academies younger and younger and younger. Presumably it is the same in the women's game now.

I have done some work with the Hackney Laces. It is a team full of brilliantly skilled and talented female players, many of whom are black or from different ethnic minorities, but presumably they are too old to be at the age where the academies would be looking for them. How do we make that system work for girls when they cannot see necessarily the role models who would bring them into the game, when the infrastructure is not there to be in schools, attracting the talent and inspiring and bringing them through? How do we begin to deal with that?

Suzanne Wrack: I do not know about you guys, but for me the important thing is that being a girl and being involved in football is not about necessarily going into the elite game and becoming a professional footballer. There are so many benefits, and that is the point of all this and the point of the Lionesses' call for equal access to football and sport for girls in schools. There are so many benefits to every area of society for girls playing sport. It is beneficial long-term healthcare-wise. It is beneficial education-wise. You see the result in the classroom. There are studies that have been done that say that women who reach boardroom level have often played team sports at some stage of their careers. It is no accident that there is a correlation there. There are huge benefits to playing sport for personal development but also generally for society, whatever field you go into.

Yes, you have girls being scouted younger and younger, and the elite pathway is getting narrower and narrower, but at the same time, we should be opening the door and saying, "No, this is beneficial for society, for girls to be active and involved in sport in a way that they have not been before." For me, they are two separate conversations. I would say the bigger one at the moment is the diversity question in the elite game. How do we make that better? How do we make sure every single girl has an access and a desire to play sport? It is beneficial for everyone as much as it is for them.

Fern Whelan: I definitely agree with everything you have said in terms of the wellbeing and health benefits, but you may have young girls who just want to play. Again, sometimes a barrier could be parents. Sometimes parents say, "My daughter is going to go into dance. She is going to go into ballet," because maybe they are of a different generation where girls did not play sport. We are now in a different generation, so you could have a girl and their brother, and the brother goes, "Can I play football?" "Yes." And the girl says, "Can I?" and the answer is "No." That could be where we channel our energy as well: educating the parents of these young girls that sport is beneficial for all those reasons you just said, and why it is good to get them into sport, not necessarily for the long term. Potentially, there could be a very viable career pathway in it



now as well, which might not have been there before, but it is that education on that other side of things that is really important as well.

Q10 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you, panel. I want to ask some questions about growing the women's professional game. The Euros were a hugely successful tournament and they sparked a large amount of interest in the domestic women's game. Since then we have seen a huge boom in the number of people buying tickets to watch games held at the clubs' main stadiums usually used for men's games, but also in the smaller stadiums used by women's teams.

For example, Arsenal women's team had over 47,000 in attendance at the north London derby with Tottenham held at the Emirates, but then they also sold out their opening game at Meadow Park. How has all of this increased attendance overall, and how has that impacted the women's game? Have we seen the same in lower level clubs in the WSL and in lower leagues? Have they seen a similar boost in attendance as well?

Fern Whelan: Yes, definitely. In terms of WSL and the championship below, there has been a massive increase in attendances across every club in terms of season ticket sales and personnel through the door weekly. There is a bit of a bugbear of mine that is related to the big stadia. I think it is amazing when we sell so many tickets—it is 47,000 or 50,000; massive records for WSL—but then we go back to the normal ground the next week. Again we sell them out, which is great, but you are looking at a 2,000-seater stadium then. What happened to those other 40,000 fans who were there last week? They now cannot physically go and watch their team play because they are sold out. They cannot get through the door now. Years ago we might be saying, "We cannot get people through the door", so it is great that so many people want to go, but we need to really try and invest in the women's game, think bigger and say, "Every team in the super league should be playing at stadiums that can let fans come in and watch." The problem has always been that we do not have enough fans; no one wants to come and watch. Now people want to come and watch, and we have nowhere to put them.

A massive thing for the investment in the game and where we go to next is that every team in the super league should be playing in a stadium that, at a minimum, seats 10,000 people. We need to not wait until we now have the fans. We need to look ahead and go, "It is a massively profitable business. It is really commercially viable. We need to invest, and we need to do it now." Especially off the back of the Euros and a World cup year, because the game can keep elevating, but we do not want that to be something that holds the game back. That is just in my opinion.

Suzanne Wrack: As well as the women's super league and women's championship, after the Euros non-league clubs were reporting significant increases in attendances—100% or 200% sometimes. There was a real boost right across the pyramid from top to bottom.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Fern's point on the big stadiums is really good. I thought Arsenal had a really good strategy; when you are a men's season ticket holder, you plan your entire calendar around the men's fixture list. If you are an Arsenal season ticket holder, the fixtures drop months in advance and when planning your year, everything you do is planned around that calendar. You sync it into your phone. It is there. You are going to those games. Arsenal's strategy of putting six big women's games in the Emirates and having that as an add-on price to the men's season tickets in that stadium was a really smart trick, because it means you automatically have those six games factored into your match day routine—your match calendar—in a way that you have not really seen before. Often these fixtures are announced quite last minute. You are asking people to then shuffle around their entire diaries when they are already fitting football in among their lives and jobs. It is quite a big ask of people. We do not get the fixtures early enough for the start of women's super league season. Things like that are problematic.

While you are not necessarily going to get 40,000 or 50,000 people in a stadium every week for every single game, whether you play your women's team in the main stadium is a statement as to how much you value them, isn't it? I thought that was a problem in the Euros. I highlighted it as unambitious when those stadiums were announced in 2018, and then four years later, ahead of the tournament taking place, it was painfully obvious that a load of those stadiums were inadequately sized for the type of crowds and the amount of growth the game had seen in the interim period.

Old Trafford was a late edition to the list of venues for the competition as hosting the opener game. A couple of stadiums pulled out. Leigh Sports Village and Manchester City's Academy stadium were the smallest women's Euros venues since '91. It is not even like it was a big, ambitious push. It is about the message that sends out when you are asking people to take this tournament seriously, or to take the league seriously. If you are not putting it in your biggest and best venues, that in and of itself is a statement as to where you value it in the hierarchy of football, which is a problem.

Fern made a great point. It is the World cup in the summer. There is real momentum here. Then it is the Olympics. We will likely have a Team GB squad for 2024 at the Olympics. Then it is Euros again in 2025. We literally have back-to-back tournaments four or five years in a row, with the Olympics last season as well. That is a real opportunity to capitalise on this momentum every single year, which is one of the benefits of the pandemic on the calendar.

Dr Pope: One of the amazing things we witnessed about the tournament was not just the peak television; 17 million tuned in to watch the final and 87,000 attended. In terms of attendances for both men's and women's football, that was the most for any Euros final. But also one of the great things was that it shone the spotlight on how football fan



HOUSE OF COMMONS

culture does not have to be what we see as this almost hotbed of sexism, racism and homophobia that is associated with the men's game. That really came out quite strongly. We can contrast the disturbances, crudely speaking—what we saw at the men's Euro 2020 final at Wembley stadium—with the women's finals held at the same venue. The men's tournament had a number of arrests—86 supporters—and 19 police officers were injured. For the Euros 2022 final at Wembley, there were no arrests made.

One of the things that I found in my research is that this perceived welcoming space can be a key motivation for fans of women's football. Some interviewees felt that women's football was a family-friendly space and a space that is a lot more welcoming and inclusive to women, children and LGBTQ+ fans. That culture of inclusivity is commonly contrasted against men's football. Women's football is found to be a much safer environment with far less vulgarity, physical aggression and drunkenness than was sometimes experienced at the men's game. For some, they see the men's sport as really daunting, angry and hostile, whereas, in contrast, the women's game is seen as inclusive.

That is not to say that we just market the sport to the family audience, but that tournament and the exposure that it got really shone the spotlight on how football can be done differently. You have that widespread enthusiasm now and it is a case of, like Suzy said, how do we keep the momentum up? How do we keep moving forward with that? Media is going to be absolutely critical, but I suspect that will be an area that we will want to return to in more detail, so just to flag that as well.

Suzanne Wrack: It is also an innately more progressive crowd because if you are going to watch women's football, by your very nature, you are likely to be a more progressive person on gender equality and homophobia more generally. Women's football plays a role in changing attitudes too because, as you said, you do not just want to market it at the family-friendly audience. I remember, just before the pandemic, the FA said that the biggest growth area in fans of women's football was men aged 18 to 30. Now you have those men going into this environment that is infinitely more progressive, where they see openly gay players kicking a ball around, where the chanting is very different, and where there is not the abusive, loutish behaviour. You would like to think that is going to change the way they view football and the atmosphere they want to see at games too.

Dr Pope: It is interesting that you say that. In our study we had 22% of the England fans say that they were motivated in their fandom by a commitment to gender equality. It is an ideal platform, in some respects, to open up these difficult questions, challenges and conversations around gender equality, through the Euros and moving forward with a spotlight on other events.

Chair: Julie, did you want to come in at that point?



Q11 Julie Elliott: Yes, thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. As we know, investment has grown massively in the game on the back of its rising popularity with, for example, sponsorship deals. However, for the game to grow, we need to have more equality in the way clubs are owned and run. There is a huge disparity in the finances between women's clubs that are linked to men's clubs and women's clubs that are not, which is growing all the time. Fern, do you have any ideas as to how we solve that problem and make sure that all clubs develop on an equal level in order for the game to be sustainable?

Fern Whelan: Yes, it is that trickle-down effect. Even just recently, the FA cup winners' prize money being increased means that it is not an expenditure for those clubs to take part. They are not having to pay for travel, minibuses and hotels, all coming out of their budget and meaning that they are at a detriment by taking part. That was probably the first step in having that trickle-down effect to the lower league, championship and northern premiership teams that want to try to keep up but physically were not able. It has to be about the desire to develop the women's game as well within the clubs.

We have many clubs that do really well in terms of the one-club mentality—the women get the same as the men—but we also have clubs that consider the women's team as a side part. This is potentially still happening in the top leagues. Their female footballers are there because they tick a box, because we need to have a women's team. That is sometimes the downside to having that link to the men's club—being seen as an afterthought. Then you have the progressive clubs that are solely focused on their women's team and everything goes into them. They are a priority and sometimes you need to feel like you are a priority as a player within these clubs for you to actually develop in any way, shape or form.

The clubs need to think about why they have that women's team in the first place and make sure that if you have an EDI lead in the men's team, the women's team is not just an afterthought—that they do not just go there at 5 o'clock and say "Maybe I need to talk to the women's side." It needs to be across the clubs. They need to do it together and collaborate within clubs on how they can get the best out of both their teams—men's and women's—and support them with, for example, working conditions as well.

Q12 Julie Elliott: I was going to move on to that. Earlier in the year Toni Duggan announced that she was having a baby and highlighted all the issues around the welfare of women who become pregnant while they are playing. What do you think the clubs can do to build that into a programme so that people do not feel it is an unusual thing to happen? At the end of the day, a football pitch for those people is a workplace and having a baby in the workplace should not be unusual.

What more do you think the clubs can do to support the injuries we are seeing in the women's game? The much higher incidence of ACL injuries,



for instance. There does not seem to be much investigation into why that is happening. I would be interested in any of the panel's opinion on what more the clubs can be doing to support the welfare of the women players, both coming through as their bodies are still developing, and then when they are playing at the professional or semi-professional level.

Fern Whelan: I will touch on the maternity issue and then anyone else can jump in. As a mother who has played in the WSL, it is something I am really passionate about. I have a little boy who is now 18 months old, but my partner currently plays for a team in the WSL and we had very different experiences within the clubs as to how they approach having mothers on their team. That is the starting point and it is massive in terms of creating that club culture that promotes the comfort to be able to say, "I want to have a baby" before you even get to that stage; not feeling as though you have to hide it from anyone is massive. The club must be there to wrap that support around you, to be able to say, "Look, I want to start a family. I still want to play football, I do not want to feel that I have to retire just because I want to be a mum. What are you going to do, not even during my pregnancy, but once I have a child? What kind of policies do we have in place to support that?"

The strides we have taken over the last year or so in terms of the PFA and the FA collaborating on maternity provisions within the super league have been a really good start, but there is still a way to go in terms of those family-friendly policies. For example, if I am a mother and I am breastfeeding, but I want to go back to playing, can I bring my child in? Is there somewhere I can breastfeed privately? Can I express? As a club you really have to think about all those things.

Medically, you are going to need to support a woman in terms of her pelvic health. Do you have a specialist within the club? Or if you do not have a specialist because of funding, which is what we will hear—we do not have the money for specialist staff—do you have a physiotherapist within the club who can be sent on a course for pelvic health? Then they have the expertise to deal with the players when they arise and do it as a proactive measure now, rather than saying, "Okay, I have a Toni Duggan now, what can we do for her?" Every club needs to be in that culture where they are ready for having mothers within the teams, and know how they are going to support them to get back to playing. Once they are back playing, there is a hell of a lot that comes with it in terms of being that support for that mother, because they are going to go through a hell of a lot.

Suzanne Wrack: Regarding pregnancy, the narrative very much needs to change as well, because it is almost always talked about as a burden on the clubs, on the players and on their careers. I remember Emma Hayes speaking about Katie Chapman, her former captain, saying that after having her three kids she was a much better player than she had been before. There is a real education piece there; it does not end your



HOUSE OF COMMONS

career or necessarily make you a worse player. It does not have to be seen negatively.

In terms of ACL injuries, it is a massive problem. Although it pales in comparison to the type of research that would be done if it was as big an epidemic within the men's game as it is in the women's, there is a lot of research being done, but it all feels quite disparate. I spoke to someone at Roehampton University who has been researching the mechanics of knee movements, the way players move and the different things that can impact that. I took Claire Rafferty, who has damaged her ACL three times, to have her test their equipment. They rig you up as though you are in a film on a green screen, where you have all the dots over your leg and build a mechanical version of your leg to test the weights and the movements through it.

There are many other aspects. Other people have done research which says it is about the type of footwear you have, and the positioning of the studs on the bottom of a football boot is not helpful when women's boots are often just what has been designed for a man's foot and shrunk—the positioning of the studs is wrong, your arch is in a slightly different place, or the heel is slightly narrower, things like that. Ball size is another issue. Today there was a report on the BBC that research by Staffordshire University has said that ball sizes can impact ACL injuries for women.

I feel there is a piece of research that needs to be done collectively, that brings together the voices of women who have had these injuries, and ensures they play a part in being involved in this research, which needs collective investment. It should not be the case that one club goes off and does their own little bit of research and then is protective of their secret recipe for preventing ACL injuries. There needs to be FA, league or even premier league-wide support for this kind of research, because it is a huge issue.

There were three or four ACL injuries in the space of the World cup and we have already had a whole bunch in the last few weeks alone. The better the game gets, and the more physically and technically developed players get, the injuries are only getting worse. There is no one clear answer, but there are things that work. A guy at Roehampton told me there was a study done on hockey in Australia, where they had worked with a team for two years, and in that time they saw ACL injuries dramatically increase by roughly 80%. After this they worked with them on the types of movements, stretching, exercises and conditioning that they should be doing that would help prevent them from getting ACL injuries. It was not conclusive as it was only a two-year study with a group of around 20 players. That is not a big enough pool of players to be working with and obviously hockey is a different sport—you move your knees in different ways and it will have different results—but why is this kind of thing not being picked up and run with collectively across the league, by the FA or really by anyone working in the game?



Fern Whelan: The specificity of it is the main thing. It has to be for the elite level, so it has to be around the players that they are doing the studies on. As you say, a lot of studies are done on college athletes or on athletes who maybe train two or three times a week, but the full-time professional demanding game is very different. Are they actually being done specifically for the elite women footballers?

Dr Pope: I think what we are highlighting here is really the various forms of inequality, but we need to move away from the situation where the women's club is seen as the bolt-on, and it needs to be the core business for football clubs. The campaigns you mentioned earlier, where they have the one-club mentality are great, but we did some research on responses after covid-19. If you looked at the men's premier league, the response was, "We must get it started again, up and running at all costs." Women's football was, "We will just end that; it is not an option." The money is not there to make sure that we can do the safety checks in the way that we are doing for the men's. It was the same when the Sunderland men's team were relegated and the women's team were associated with the club. The mentality was, "What is the first thing we can lose and where we can make cuts?" In very recent times, we are still seeing examples of this.

Julie Elliott: If we are being honest, that was more to do with the owner than anything else.

Fern Whelan: That happened to me personally as a player not long ago. I had been at Notts County for a couple of years. I was full-time and professionally contracted, due to play Arsenal on the Sunday. We were called into a meeting on the Friday, told training was cancelled and that we did not exist anymore. It was literally because we got a new chairman. We went to the PFA and they gave us some money to tide us over, and then we all had to find new clubs.

Dr Pope: There is that real fragility still and if you have it as the core business there needs to be something in place to prevent this from happening. It would be one thing when it is properly integrated, but the research is growing on the wider issues we are talking about. All these things do need more work; menstruation and kit design can be added to the list with maternity. Initially it is the payment, and then are we properly set up for what happens when a woman does come back? It is all reflective of the nature of the history of the sport being male dominated. The point is it needs to be the core business. If it was, a lot more would be done in all these areas.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I have some more questions, but I am going to try to split them up between you all, because I am going to get into trouble with my colleagues if they do not get to ask their questions.

Chair: Can you answer succinctly, please?

Q13 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Stacey, do you think the current pyramid structure



allows women's football teams to be able to grow?

Dr Pope: I am not sure. That question might be better placed to one of the other panel members. It is not something I have done any particular research on.

Fern Whelan: The structure definitely needs to be better. We compare everything to the men's game. I am not saying we need to do everything the men are doing, but in terms of structure, we have the super league, the championship and the academy set-ups, and now we are looking to develop our academy system and the way we promote that route through to the pathway. It could definitely be better, because we have not got that in place at the moment. We have young girls still potentially paying their subs—paying to play—whereas on the boys' side they are considered scholars and they are starting to be treated like professionals already when they are 12, 13 and 14. I remember going to training, not long ago, where you had to wait until the boys' under-eights team finished training before we could train at 10 o'clock. I am hoping that does not still happen now, but it has been experienced within the women's game that, again, we feel like a little bit of an afterthought. It is about making sure that that women's pathway is suited for the girls to be able to access elite coaching, because at the minute we do not have that.

Q14 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** How effective has the FA specifically been at driving the growth of the women's game?

Fern Whelan: As the FA have alluded to in the past, some of the actions they took have obviously reduced the talent pool. Those included stopping centres of excellence, not having RTCs, and having fewer places where people can go and play. The FA looked at possibly bettering the girls' facilities and trying to get more women to play. We do a lot of campaigns to get girls into sport, but we do not then look at the intersectionality of that and ask what type of girls will be coming through these pathways.

Now, with the emerging talent centres, the FA are trying to do more. I have had many conversations with some really good people within the FA about how we can collaborate better. We are sometimes a little fragmented within football in general, not just in the women's game. Different stakeholders maybe all have really good ideas but are all doing their own things. In order to get the best for women's football, we should all collectively do more things together, working towards the same common goal, and that is to get more girls into sport and a more diverse pathway for girls into elite sport.

Q15 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you. Suzy, has the increased revenue from ticket sales and broadcasting rights presented an opportunity for women's teams to become more financially independent, and is that the way people want things to go?

Suzanne Wrack: Clubs are still making losses on some of the big games because they do not charge enough for the tickets, which presents



HOUSE OF COMMONS

different problems. Some are struggling to find the right level; if you pitch prices too low, people do not necessarily feel the need to show up. If you pitch prices too high, people do not necessarily want to spend the money. They are experimenting and trying to find a balance.

In terms of the broadcast money, it points back to the question that Julie raised earlier about the game growing equitably. You have 25% of the broadcast money going to the women's championship, which is a really good step forward because that is very different from the way it works on the men's side, but it could go further. You still have 75% going into the women's super league and 25% to the championship. Why is that the case when the women's super league is the one that has more money? Why would you not flip that, and try to raise the boats in a much fairer way? Why did it not go deeper? Why does some of that money not trickle down to the women's national league, and some of the clubs that are really trying to make that leap into professionalism? There are chances for clubs to become sustainable. At the moment, it is only really the very, very top clubs that have the opportunity to move in that direction—the Arsenals, the Chelseas and Man Cities, which are putting the games in the big stadiums, have the global fan bases and are investing. There is not really the support there for clubs below that to be able to do that.

Q16 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you. I ask this to Stacey and Fern: the Chelsea manager Emma Hayes has been quite vocal in her calls for women's football to leave the FA and become a completely separate entity. Do you agree with her?

Dr Pope: This is more of a personal opinion, but whoever is responsible for women's football needs to be the organisation that wants to drive it forward. So, if there is a better place for that, yes, but that would just be my personal opinion.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Fern, should they leave the FA?

Fern Whelan: The FA have been quite open and honest about this and the fact that they understand the game is growing at potentially a more rapid pace than they can maybe cope with in terms of commercialisation. They may not have the commercial head for what it really needs to grow the game, which is getting the partners, marketing and sponsorship right. Maybe what is needed is new owners with new ideas, with a real influx of money who can really invest in the game from the top level through to the championship, right down to the lower levels, and especially through grassroots. It could be time for a new kind of growth for the women's game to step in.

Suzanne Wrack: Women's football needed the FA for what it has done up to this point.

Fern Whelan: Definitely. They have said as much in that they understand they have grown the game to where they can.



Suzanne Wrack: It needed the authority of the FA initially, but the FA is a not-for-profit body. It cannot champion women's football over disability football or grassroots football or any other areas it works in. It cannot say, "We are ringfencing this money whilst making cuts to this money". It cannot champion the game in the way it needs to be championed.

It needs independence. Emma Hayes argues repeatedly, to my personal frustration, that it should be run by the premier league. If you are arguing that it should move on from the FA because it needs to be championed in and of its own right, going to an organisation where it would 100% play second fiddle to the men's game would not necessarily be the right route. I am also glad that the FA have rebuffed private equity involvement because that is not the right answer either.

Fern Whelan: Baroness Campbell even stated the other day that the FA want more talent centres in order to grow the pathways; they would love to have at least 200, but they can only fund 60. We need someone who can come in and say, "We have the investment; we want to develop the game". The FA want to do that but they have openly said they may not be able or best placed to, so maybe we need someone else to step in and help grow the game.

Q17 **Rachel Maclean:** It is lovely to meet you, panel. Stacey, I would like to ask you about some of the themes you covered in your paper. I found it really interesting regarding male football fans' attitudes and whether women feel safe when they go to football matches.

Your paper highlights some quite worrying findings, and I think you referenced earlier that it was the men in the younger age groups exhibiting those misogynistic and highly sexist attitudes. One in five female football fans said they had experienced unwanted physical attention when going to football matches, and one in 20 were put off going to football matches after experiencing some form of sexism. That proportion of women put off from attending football by sexism has more than doubled, which I find quite surprising given that actually we would hope that attitudes would move on. Are clubs doing enough to tackle this?

Dr Pope: The short answer would be no, not really. Neither clubs, governing bodies, nor the football industry as a whole, cater adequately for women. We spoke about the inclusivity of women's football, but we are also looking at women's experiences as fans of the men's game. Some women do obviously attend live matches while others are not able to do so due to these issues of gender discrimination and an environment that essentially is not safe, welcoming, or inclusive for women. The findings around sexism, and misogyny somewhat permeate all spaces associated with football. It can take place within the stadium itself, but also online, on the walk to the stadium, in pubs associated with match days, public transport and travelling to games. The severity ranged from sexism and misogynistic comments to sexual harassment and sexual assault.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

At this point in time, there is no mechanism in place from clubs or governing bodies to report, respond and to remedy sexism and misogyny in football. You might ask why we need that. Well, if referring to the study and results that you were outlining there, it is a bit of a two-pronged approach. Obviously, we have undertaken extensive research with women football fans—women talking about their experiences of being at the stadium and being a supporter—and that research shows the strategies that are used continuously by men to undermine women's fandom and women's status as authentic or real supporters. There is this added pressure to routinely prove that you have a right to be in that space or prove that you are a real fan.

The women reported many accounts, describing men who thought that women in football are a bit of a joke, and extreme hostility to their presence in the stadium. Some male fans refuse to speak to women because they supposedly do not belong in football. There were comments such as "Shut up, you are a woman, what do you know?", "Just go home, you should be doing pots or doing the laundry", and so on. There are real consequences for women who enter the traditionally male space of the football ground, and women are seen to be kind of encroaching on men's patch or, in the words of respondents, "Taking over their sport". Then you get this hostile, threatening atmosphere. As a result, men are more likely to be challenging and it is not seen as a space for women who are easily offended.

There are also issues around the design of stadia and whether that is something that is welcoming, inclusive and safe as a space for women. This was a qualitative survey, with just under 2,000 supporters, and the results from women showed that sexism and misogyny are very much alive and kicking in UK football today. This is then supported by the survey results from male football fans, which showed the extent of the misogyny. In that sample of just under 2,000 men, the results showed that those expressing hostile or sexist misogynistic attitudes were by far the most dominant group. They were men with openly misogynistic attitudes and formed just under 70% of respondents. They were men who would see women's sport as inferior to men's sport, particularly in relation to football, and some suggested that women should not participate in sport at all, or if they did it certainly should not be sports like football. There is extreme hostility to any woman who goes into that space. There is also a backlash in relation to the visibility of women's sport. This is something that is described as PC nonsense and positive discrimination, and very much caused an anti-feminist backlash against these recent changes that we began the discussion talking about.

It was not all bad news. Just under a quarter of the respondents who had the progressive attitude actually spoke openly about how the increased visibility of women's sport, especially women's football, had changed their attitude. In some cases, they spoke about how they could move from being openly sexist to watching women's football, and it completely changed their perspective. In some cases, they were a fan of men's



football and they then became a fan of women's football, but there was no getting away from the fact that the largest cohort in that sample were those expressing misogynistic perspectives. Probably most depressing was what you pointed out at the start, which was that this is not something that is dying out among the generations. It is not something that is just older generations; younger men are also likely to express these attitudes. There are no generational differences.

- Q18 Rachel Maclean:** Why are clubs not tackling this? You would have thought it would be in their commercial interest to attract a broader audience, or is it that they do not want to upset their traditional audiences by seeming to be more open? I am quite alarmed that there are no reporting mechanisms. If people are actually subject to criminal acts—to put it bluntly, sexual harassment—in a stadium and there is nowhere for that to be reported, surely these are basic things you would have thought they could do. Are any clubs doing this at all? Are there any good examples?

Dr Pope: When we are talking about premier league teams, they are going to fill the stadium regardless, so they are probably taking action to some extent, but I cannot see the commercial case going on for your lower league clubs. By not creating that space for women, taking the example of stadium design—I appreciate we have some older stadiums in this country and there is only so much you can do—it needs action. Also, the fact that some clubs actively discourage or in some cases have an outright ban on taking young children to matches, means that one of the things that I found in my research is that women's fan careers follow different paths from male fan careers. You can be the most committed supporter ever, but at the point that motherhood kicks in, because we all know that caring is gendered, women are more likely to then take that responsibility. Generally speaking, this does not affect male fan careers in that way. They can continue to go to matches where women do not because there is not that safe space to be able to take their children. Obviously some of those women do return when children are older, but many who drop out—certainly a substantial proportion—do not.

You would think that it would be in the commercial interest of clubs to be able to maintain women fans, but perhaps there is an element of fear that you might marginalise what is seen as the core fan base. Without having a mechanism in place that clubs have to do something about this, as things stand, women do not feel confident reporting to stewards or police or whoever. How do you even go about this? What happens?

Having the mechanism to identify, respond to and remedy sexism and misogyny in men's football would seem critical. It also has to be something that comes right from the top, because you cannot just have this as voluntary action. If it is not in place, there is no incentive for them to do anything about this. If the fan-led review happens or recommendations take place as part of that or anything else along similar lines, then as part of the EDI strategy you could actively fight sexism and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

misogyny. However, without something concrete coming from the top, it is just not going to change the situation at all.

Suzanne Wrack: When the majority of those at the top are men, where is the incentive for them to do it?

Fern Whelan: Football stadiums are predominantly designed for male fans—for males in general. Previous experience for me as a mother tells me that if I want to go and take my 12-month-old son to a game, okay, we are let in, but where do I change his nappy? There are no baby changing facilities. I have changed them on a dirty floor in the public toilets of the changing room. That is where I would potentially like to see change in the women's side of things as well.

On the women's side, you have female players who are going to have babies. I want to bring my son or daughter to a game, but there is nowhere for us to go. It is not designed for us; it is designed for men. It is designed for the male sport, and it is purely designed for that. That has to change because it is not equal. It is definitely not accessible for anyone who wants to do that.

That is another barrier as to why you would potentially not have a child as a female player. You are probably not even aware of that barrier as a player yourself. You probably would not even think about it until you literally walked in the stadium and went—

Suzanne Wrack: What do I do?

Fern Whelan: Where do I put him? What do I do? Do you know what I mean? That is from personal experience. I have had that numerous times, not just on one occasion, but in numerous football clubs across the country.

Dr Pope: We saw it in the Euros as well though, when they played the women's matches at the men's stadia effectively, and there were queues for toilets because, from the off, you do not have enough women's toilets. In speaking to women about their experience—who, no doubt, are highly committed and passionate fans—they are prepared to put up with this as part of being a football supporter and you are not going to drop out of that, but they are complaining about not just the lack of toilets, but the poor condition of those that do exist: basic things like no sanitary bins, no mirrors, no locks on doors and only hangers. When they complain to the club, the club is not obligated to respond in any way.

Perhaps one of my favourite examples was a woman fan I interviewed whose club shall remain unnamed, but it was in the football league. She took it upon herself to somehow get a drill into the toilets so that she could fix it herself. She was putting up basic things up like mirrors because all the women fans she was stood with, or the women fans she knew at the ground, had been moaning about this and complaining about it for absolutely ages, and they fixed it themselves somehow. It should



HOUSE OF COMMONS

not come down to that really, but women will put up with this as supporters; they are very passionate.

We cannot get away from the fact that it is very difficult to challenge because you are doing fandom in a very male-dominated space. If you raise these issues, you draw attention to the fact that you are a woman and it then raises questions around authenticity. Consequently, it means you are more likely to receive sexist abuse.

Female fans are constantly trying to manage that tension and, therefore, to go out and start being vocal about this is quite difficult. People would not put up with this in other areas of society. People would not put up with this in other public spaces, but there seems to be something about, "Well, it is football and you are lucky to be here", that makes it acceptable in some ways.

Fern Whelan: When I have brought it to the attention of clubs, it has not been a pushback. It has been, "Wow, okay, we really didn't realise; we didn't think about it." It is an afterthought rather than them being proactive and asking, "What are we going to do? Have we ticked every box and have we crossed all the bases?" I have had apologies from clubs saying, "I have not even thought about that. I am so sorry. We will do more." We need the clubs to turn around and say they will put some action in place, and that needs to be across the board. I have experienced that as a player—maybe less as a fan—but, again, it is in general across sport and football.

Suzanne Wrack: As journalists we get the same. We do not have access to toilets at a lot of games. I have been on my period, begging a steward at Man City to let me into the office toilet behind the press box and being told—even though I am working—to queue up with the fans. It is things like that. It is every single ground, every single stadium. I have taken my son to women's games. He has never been to a men's game because it is not appropriate for him to be there.

Fern Whelan: I stopped taking my son to the games.

Suzanne Wrack: He comes to women's games because he can run along the terraces a little bit, but not the men's.

Chair: Thank you. It is heart-breaking that you stopped taking your son to games.

Fern Whelan: It is, yes.

Chair: We want kids—

Fern Whelan: I have taken him this season, but not last season. Certain stadia are fine, certain stadia are not, and I know where I can and cannot go.

Q19 **Dame Caroline Dinenage:** Stacey, I want to talk to you about the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

media coverage of women's football. You said the Euros game in the summer had a viewing figure of, I think you said, 17.5 million. By that point, it was the most watched programme on UK television, which is incredible, and, of course, 50 years in the making. It was nice to see the girls finally getting the job done where the blokes had failed.

We know that women's sports coverage is still a tiny fraction of the TV sports coverage that we see. To what scale do you think it is getting better? To what scale do you think it is almost self-perpetuating—that to have the success like we had in the summer drives the viewing figures? To what scale do you think there is more we need to do, and how do we give it the same focus?

Dr Pope: All those points are important. One of the things that I have been working on is longitudinal work to look at mega-events like the women's world cup and how the media has responded to that over time.

If we go back to the 2015 FIFA women's world cup, this was the first time we found that newspapers were reporting on this event. There have been quite a lot of positives happen in quite a short space of time. Going back to 2011, there were no women on the BBC Sports Personality of the Year shortlist. You had the Andy Gray/Richard Keys "incident", shall we say—what they thought—and then what happened with Sky Sports and the presentation team being sacked for the sexist abuse there.

We have had a number of events in quite a short space of time. For example, there was the 2012 London Olympic games, and that being described as the women's games. In 2015, what we found, looking at media coverage of newspapers—broadsheet and tabloid—was that this was the first time that any coverage of women's football was happening on an extensive scale. Not only was it covered, but it was reported on seriously. It was not trivialised, which often happens with women's sport, where the players are sexualised and reporting done in an undermining way. It was very respectful coverage, and focused on the skill and achievements of the England national team.

There were comparisons with the 1966 and 1990 heroes and, as you referred to with the recent Euros, the women's team managed to push forward with that. If we go from that virtual invisibility to positive coverage, and then to our analysis of the 2019 World cup, it shows that there has been a large increase in the number of articles published showing that the coverage is not only being sustained on a positive upwards trajectory, but has been surpassed.

It is interesting because the newspapers discussed how this could be a turning point; it could be a revolution for women's football but, alongside that, I undertook interviews with 100 women football fans to get their perspectives on what they are seeing in the media coverage. Generally speaking, unlike in the men's football, the coverage is reserved for the duration of the World cup. We do not see a spillover effect. Once that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

tournament has finished, it is business as usual and it is dependent on the success of the team. There is that added pressure as well.

Hopefully this will not happen, but if the men's team get knocked out in the forthcoming men's World cup, you would still expect to see coverage of the World cup tournament. That is not the case here.

I will give an example from one of the interviewees. They had frustration at this very temporary and short-lived media exposure, which disappears once the England team is knocked out. She says, "Suddenly we've got an England team. Regardless that it is women, we've got an English team in a semi-final and now everyone needs to care. I remember at the time I've got the radio on; they keep talking about semi-final, semi-final, semi-final." Obviously, you know what happens at this point—England get knocked out—and she says, "Boom, it wasn't something that everyone's talking about anymore."

As well as increasing the amount of coverage, interviewees also discussed needing more gender equitable coverage beyond the mega-event. They would describe how there were inaccuracies in a lot of the reported results, player names, goal scorers, this kind of thing, when they do not have the journalists covering it seriously outside of the mega-event. There was a lot of frustration around that.

There was frustration at journalists not being sent out to cover elite women's club matches. Interestingly, a lot of people turned to social media, outside of traditional mainstream media news, because they were frustrated at that lack of exposure. They would often follow women sports journalists and female football journalists for information which was not getting into the mainstream news. To some extent they were having to use other mechanisms to follow the tournaments.

There is no doubt that more could be done, otherwise there is the risk that this is something that happens every time we have a mega-event—that it does not have that spillover effect. While there have been some improvements, it is clear that it is still heavily slanted towards male-dominated coverage.

Q20 Dame Caroline Dinanage: Suzy, what do you see as the obstacles to reducing the disparity? What do you encounter as obstacles in the coverage of women's sport?

Suzanne Wrack: Oh, so many. There has been a huge change in the number of journalists covering women's football on a full-time basis. When I started writing my weekly women's football column in *The Guardian* in 2017 ahead of the Euros, that was the first time that a national newspaper switched from reactive coverage to regular coverage—not just responding to a big event, but "We are going to do this every week regardless of what is going on."



HOUSE OF COMMONS

When you look at the landscape now, there is me at *The Guardian*, there is Molly at *The Times*; Tom at *The Telegraph*, Kathryn Batte at *The Mail*, Sandra at *The Sun*. The BBC has Emma Sanders. There is a huge number. Pretty much every outlet has a full-time women's football writer or someone who is dedicated to writing about women's football, which is a huge shift in quite a short space of time.

Just before the World cup in 2019, I would say there were two of us; now there are significantly more. It has improved, but then because we are one journalist in an organisation, say, we are required to cover a lot. We are having to jump on every press conference across the league and we have to pick out the significant games we are going to go to that week, but then the other clubs are neglected. Players get frustrated about the inaccuracies and things like that.

It is not like in the men's game where you have your Manchester reporter and your Chelsea reporter and your Arsenal reporter who are there at that game every single week, covering that team week in, week out, watching the machinations of the formation changes and every single press conference the manager does.

You end up with an over-reliance on the big clubs to provide the stories above some of the smaller ones, so there are all those gaps. It is all about personnel, but then again, print journalism in particular is shrinking. Sport is shrinking. I would say women's football and women's sport have been one of the few growth areas recruitment-wise in newspaper sports sections generally. It has bucked a trend of decline.

In terms of the Euros and the coverage of it, from my point of view at *The Guardian* we treated that as closely as we possibly could to the men's Euros the previous summer. We hit so many barriers. For the stadium choices for the men's tournament, we would have a minimum of three people at every single England game, for example, and a minimum of two at every other game. We could not do that at the Euros in the summer because the stadiums they had picked did not have press boxes big enough and it was clear that they had not even considered it. We were lucky if we got three at the England games. We had to wheedle it with getting a freelancer who had been accredited separately to help us out because we were only allowed two per outlet at some.

At England's semi-final we could only get two journalists into that game whereas the men's we would have three or four. The final, again, was Wembley, so that was back to normal, but at some of the smaller games we only had one person—me. At the other semi-final we would have had at least two. We had Sid, our journalist from Spain, come over. He was supposed to be at that game with me. He reached his hotel door and was told, "No, you have to turn around. We are sending Suzy instead, because she has not been accredited and you have, and we are having to work out who we send." There were problems that we never have in the men's games that they had not thought about at all and the coverage is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

weaker because of it, because we have people doing stuff off the TV instead, which is just completely insufficient.

I noticed the difference. The commitment from the top is really important. I am lucky in that *The Guardian* is very committed and my stuff is always very well promoted on the website. We have some of the men's writers doing regular stuff. Jonathan Liew, who does women's champions league stuff, has been to the FA cup finals with me. He was helping out at the World cup. We had Nick Ames doing stuff at the World cup, and Sid coming over from Spain to cover Spain at the Euros.

We did a 40-page supplement in the run-up to the tournament in the same way that we do for the men's. We profiled every single player in the same way we do for the men's, but I know a lot of other outlets do not have that commitment from the top that means you get that level of coverage and the same coverage as the men's.

Often my word counts match what a men's journalist at *The Guardian* would be given for a major premier league match report. I have the same word count; it is promoted in the same way on the website. A lot of the other journalists who I sit alongside in the press box do not have that. They can travel 200 miles for a game up north and be given a 250 word count for a big WSL game, whereas I have 700 or 800 words. That is from the top; that is about editorial level, and there are not enough women in sports journalism generally. There are definitely not enough at editorial level.

It is about that ideological commitment to it as well as a recognition that men's football did not just grow on its own. It did not just spring into life and then journalism was there to pounce on it and go, "Oh, we can promote this and feed off it." It played a role in building it to the point it was. Journalism and sports journalism have a responsibility to women's football to help grow it as a mutually beneficial relationship. We benefit from its growth in that people will then want to buy our papers to read the coverage, and it is that level of commitment and that level of ideological understanding of the role of the press in growing it and vice versa that is very important.

Q21 Dame Caroline Dinenage: To the panel as a whole, what do you think the women's super league TV deal will do for the profile of women's football? Do you think that that, and other coverage, will drive that progressive attitude towards women's sport that we spoke about earlier?

Fern Whelan: From a player's perspective, from that visibility piece and that inspirational piece, the fact is that the super league is now shown on Sky Sports and the BBC with the TV deals, and they are giving opportunities to potential, current and former players to be visible within TV and speak about the game, showing their expertise. Females may be changing the mindset of males who think females do not know anything about sport. The pundits who tend to talk are quite educated on what they talk about; they know their stuff. It is changing perceptions. It is



increasing the visibility and, again, it is about those role model figures for the current players who are playing. For young girls wanting to get into the sport, they may see, "Actually, I can be on TV one day. I can be talking about the sport, I can be writing about the sport." Again, it has that real positive impact on women's sport in general, especially across the super league, for those reasons.

Suzanne Wrack: It is game-changing. When I was a kid, I was lucky; I grew up on a council estate in Hoxton and Arsenal Ladies leafletted my council estate when I was about five and said, "We are training opposite, come and watch us train and play." My dad took me across the road as a five-year-old to watch Arsenal Ladies play in the park opposite me. They were visible. When I got a little bit older and they moved their training to somewhere else, I lost a relationship with that team because I could not see them. They were not on telly except for maybe the FA cup final. I did not know where the games were played. They were in the middle of nowhere. I was a kid and I could not get there—so my relationship to football completely shifted to following men's football.

I was an Arsenal fan. I followed Arsenal men. Occasionally, when there were the trophy parades through Islington in '98 or the early 2000s, the women's team would be on the bus behind with their trophies and I would see them and go, "Oh, that's cool." I did not see them play, but I knew they existed. I was one of the lucky ones in that I knew they were there, but I could never watch their games.

The idea that you switch on BBC and Sky, and you can watch your team every week is absolutely game-changing because you build a developed relationship between fans and clubs and these players from a really early age in a way that has not been able to exist before.

That is where the committed fan base comes from and it is going to take time to mature into one that is, in and of itself, in a position financially to be able to afford to go to games and buy season tickets, and stuff like that. It is a new fan base and a young fan base that is developing a relationship with the game.

Q22 **Chair:** Thank you. I think some of the areas I wanted to ask about have already been covered, but can I particularly ask about sports broadcasting—not print journalism—and what the barriers still are to women breaking through into broadcasting and whether there are any intersectional components? Is it harder for black women to get involved in sports broadcasting, in football particularly?

Fern Whelan: I can speak from personal experience, maybe from working—post playing—with Sky Sports and with the BBC in terms of the opportunities I have been given. I have to say I am very appreciative of the numerous opportunities I have been given. What is really important is the companies I have worked with recognise internally what perhaps needs to be done differently, or where there may have been barriers in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the past. It is clear to see that there are a lot more females and a lot more black females across broadcasting in general.

It is the people who work within those organisations, directing those organisations, who want to make that change from within, and having the conversations as to how that is being done, if that makes sense. The opportunities are increasing. Yes, there definitely could be more, but they are there and they are clear to see. We have black females and black role models now within broadcasting, not just covering the women's game, but covering the men's game, presenting their own TV shows, which maybe you would not have seen five or 10 years ago. There has been real progress in that area and it gives players who are maybe within the game or coming out of the game the chance to look and say, "There is an opportunity there that I will be given."

It is not just the opportunity where you are told, "I am going to throw you on telly, go talk about it"; it is having that support behind the scenes—having that real feedback and connection with the broadcasters as to wanting to develop you and support you throughout your journey in the media. Maybe you have been playing sport and maybe you have that knowledge, but you are going to be talking about it; it is different when you have a camera in your face. From personal experiences, those barriers are definitely starting to be broken down a little bit.

Q23 Chair: Suzy spoke about the importance of leadership. There is no doubt that she is right about that, but what sort of leadership did you see? We all know, do we not, that just because you can play brilliant football it does not mean that you can talk about it on television competently. How much training, support and energy went in from the top to make sure that you were equipped to do that?

Fern Whelan: There can be more. A lot of the onus has been on me personally. I have done a lot of research myself, studied and been proactive. I have taken courses in media and in media training and things like that. I have had to go out and find that support and education. That is where I want to change things in terms of the PFA for players so that we can offer media training, support and advice for players who are maybe going into, or who want to go into, that avenue—about what the industry looks like, what it might be like to present yourself in front of a camera, to talk about a goal and make it sound good. How do you talk about why the goal was good? How do you talk about the different changes that maybe need to be made within the game as it is going on? All of that goes into it.

For me personally, I have had to take the onus on myself to find out what it is you need to be able to last in this industry. I am constantly doing that and speaking to people and getting feedback. You do it as a former player because that is all you have ever known as a previous footballer. You want feedback, you want that advice and you want that guidance, so you will seek that. Some of the companies I have worked with have been great and give that, but you could maybe have a more proactive



HOUSE OF COMMONS

relationship in terms of, "We are going to offer specific training or specific mentorship or shadowing. Come in and shadow someone—go to "Soccer Saturday" and shadow someone who is doing that work." Maybe you will get those experiences by watching and learning as well, rather than having that specific media training. Sometimes you need to learn on the job.

Q24 **Chair:** Thank you. Stacey, you mentioned earlier the spectre of 2011, and Richard Keys and Andy Gray. Could that happen again today?

Dr Pope: I was just thinking as you were talking that it is great that you have that increased visibility of women, and we need to see that and that is brilliant, but I suspect—I do not know whether you would feel this if you were commenting, especially maybe on men's football—there is an added pressure for women in that space to make sure they get it 100% right. You can have bad male pundits and commentators, and that is fine and people will complain about it, but if you ever have a woman who perhaps makes one simple mistake or does not quite catch something, it is not just that she got that wrong; it is always due to the gender, and the amount of backlash you get—

Q25 **Chair:** Can you quantify that? When a female pundit is criticised, what proportion of the time is gender brought into it?

Dr Pope: You would probably just need to look on some of the Twitter feeds to see—

Suzanne Wrack: I will give you some.

Chair: Go on.

Suzanne Wrack: I have some. When Karen Carney said that Leeds had been promoted in part due to covid—that they benefited from covid—Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink, in a video clip that was doing the rounds, completely agreed with her. He did not get any abuse for that. She got called—excuse my language—a "Silly bitch", "Stupid slag", "Twat of the week", "Get back in the kitchen you deluded C word", "Put your mic down and get yourself home, there are dishes to wash and clothes to iron." Someone else said, "Sick of these shit women's pundits." Another said, "Women's lives matter but, come on, women and football—get the kettle on, love." Another one, on a screenshot of a close-up of her eye make-up, said, "In defence, she does look like she has been on some heavy gear." Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink said, "Spot on", and he got nothing.

Chair: He got zero?

Suzanne Wrack: He got nothing, none of it. It was all targeted at her, as you can see. It was all very misogynistic and gender-focused language.

I got it. I wrote about Sergio Agüero when he grabbed Sian Massey-Ellis, the linesman, by the neck from behind, and the reaction on Twitter was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

quite divided in response. Lots of people were very unhappy with it. Lots said, "Oh, there's no problem here." I wrote an article explaining why some women would find this triggering in the context of violence against women statistics and things like that.

I got, "Honestly, you have to stop writing about football, you clearly know nothing you stupid fucking whore", "Sad C word", "You are a clown", "You complete idiot", "You are a fake feminist", "Plug the iron in, love", "Stay home, just cooking", "Give your head a wobble, you stupid cow", and "Oh, fuck off, Suzy, you mutt." I wrote an article trying to contextualise why people would be frustrated about having seen that, and that is the kind of response you get. Two weeks ago, I was told I should be hanged after writing an article. It is just constant.

Fern Whelan: It is a massive barrier in terms of the crossover.

Suzanne Wrack: Exactly.

Fern Whelan: For me, having the opportunity is there—it is great—but personally I have had loads of conversations with people I work with about the barriers. I have been given the opportunity to come and talk on a men's game, "Come and do a men's game for us", and I have a massive reservation. Personally, it is a real deterrent. I cannot speak on behalf of everyone, but it is a deterrent because you are opening yourself up to criticism. You over-prepare. You do your work, your research and your prep, but they are potentially scrutinising every little word you say because you are a female. I do not like to look at my social media after I have done anything.

Suzanne Wrack: It is why you feel the need to do all that research.

Fern Whelan: You should be able to go on your Twitter and have a scroll and see what is going on, because you do get some really nice positive stuff, but it is that fear sometimes. You might not have negativity, but it is the fear. There is negativity—okay—but then you get the misogyny, the sexism, the racism. It is the comments on there that are really uncalled for and that are potentially a real deterrent and barrier for females wanting to cross over into the media on the men's side of things.

Q26 **Chair:** I bet no male pundit ever has that same hesitation about commenting on a women's game, do they?

Suzanne Wrack: No, and obviously not to tarnish them all with the same brush—lots do excellent levels of research—but you get some newer former players brought in on the men's side to comment, say, on the World cup or something, and it is quite clear that they have done very little research now and again. You saw it during the Russia World cup in 2018. Some of the punditry from some former men's players was dire, and it is in such stark contrast to whenever a female player goes on; they have researched to the hilt. Alex Scott gets so much abuse. Few know that she was studying for a sports journalism degree while she was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

playing. She has not just walked off the pitch and into the studio. She has worked hard to learn her craft. She had a column in *The Independent* that she wrote herself while she was still playing, but they do not see that and her level of prep.

Fern Whelan: And she has played the game just like the male players have played the game.

Suzanne Wrack: Exactly.

Fern Whelan: Again, it's football at the end of the day.

Q27 **Chair:** Is it easier now to call out the abuse, the misogyny and the racism than it was a few years ago?

Suzanne Wrack: The environment that we are in—as in general society—means that it is easier, but it prompts more abuse and, essentially, you have to have a bit of a thick skin about it.

Fern Whelan: That is what I am told: “You just need to toughen up”, “Thicken your skin”, “It is the world you live in and it is the industry you are in, be prepared for it and be prepared for the backlash and ignore it.” It is easy for someone who is looking from the outside in to say, “Ignore it. They don’t mean anything. You don’t know them. There are loads of trolls.” That would affect you as a person if you are going on to your Twitter or your social media afterwards. I do not do it full-time—I do it part-time—but if you are a full-time pundit and you are getting this abuse on a regular basis, it is not about developing a thick skin, is it?

Suzanne Wrack: Exactly.

Fern Whelan: It should not happen in the first place. You should not have to go on to your Twitter, and see emojis and really expletive words about yourself. It is not the world we want to be working in or living in.

Chair: Thank you. Do any other members of the Committee have any additional questions? Okay. Can I take this opportunity to thank all three of you for your evidence this afternoon? It has been incredibly thought-provoking and really helpful, and I just have to bring the meeting to a close.