

Written evidence submitted by Women's Sport Trust

Introduction to you or your organisation and your reason for submitting evidence

The Women's Sport Trust was founded after London 2012 with the aim of raising the visibility and increasing the impact of women's sport in the UK. This is achieved through the promotion of role models, stimulating media coverage and encouraging greater funding. It is the leading UK charity focused on using the power of sport to accelerate gender equality.

1. How can the growth in domestic women's football be accelerated?

Our research shows that the visibility of women's sport, is one of the main factors that drives engagement with it. And by extension it's the main factor that will drive commercial growth and grassroots participation.

Our research has highlighted interest and reach is greater with international football than domestic, yet international tournaments are not annual and rely on a UK-friendly time. Bridging the gap between exposure and engagement of international and domestic tournaments will grow and enable a more consistent audience, which in turn provides stability for commercial investors including broadcasters and sponsors, versus the cyclic nature and potentially top of funnel funding to the national game. In turn a strong domestic game should strengthen the national teams.

The Euros were a huge success yet the cumulative TV audience for the 2019 World Cup was marginally higher (note that there were more matches at the World Cup). Domestic football has seen growth during the three years in between, but with the next world cup in Australia, football cannot rely on the boost of an international tournament.

Going forward ...

- Confirm and accelerate an independent WSL body
 - Commercially independent to EPL to ensure unconscious bias does not take hold
 - Separate from The FA, allowing for The FA to govern the game but not influence the commercial growth which also links to the Lionesses
- Success on the pitch is absolutely vital but cultural narrative, belonging and fandom is equally important.
 - Capitalise on the strong social message within women's football.
 - Build new ways in which fans can engage with the personalities, characters and rivalries that really drive passion in competitive sport.
 - Ensure that all people connected to the team are incentivised to seek out and produce content around women's football, not limiting this to journalists
 - The recent frozen pitch which forced Chelsea v Liverpool to be postponed after 8 minutes (live on the BBC) highlights the need to level the playing field with Live Match support and infrastructure
- Gather quality insight, and data that we can use as leverage to help us drive numbers, (i.e., not expect the numbers to drive themselves)
- The creation of a clear business case is essential to attracting investment – understand how to articulate the value of women's sport to different stakeholders.
- Highlight the impact of unconscious bias on decision making across the business
 - With many of the WSL clubs sitting under their male-club umbrella, there is a danger the men's blueprint will simply be applied to the women's teams. Yet differences can also lead

to opportunity e.g., at Arsenal v Chelsea (15/1) Chelsea requested their away ticket allocation on behalf of their supporters to build atmosphere and allow their fans to sit together yet the non-segregation across the rest of the stadium maintained the family-friendly atmosphere which was frequently referenced at the Euros as less intimidating

- Ensure the right resource and funding goes to the right outputs; WSL teams should be seen as a standalone entity not a byproduct of the men's teams.
- Women's football is a more nuanced 'sell' than the traditional men's game and there is a real opportunity for brands to be innovative around how they activate their sponsorships. However, we are often seeing commercial teams simply replicating the sales decks that they produce for the men's side. Selling women's football requires creative and experienced commercial teams who can convince brands to engage more and produce activation that will help build the culture of the sport versus simply buying rights to use of logos or perimeter boards.
- Understand how to leverage existing platforms and infrastructure (e.g. stadiums used by men's teams) in the growth of the women's game
- Improve clubs' marketing, activation and community outreach. Each club has got its own identity, so it is important to understand the culture of the fans at each club.

2. What should other sports be learning from the growth of women's football leagues in the UK?

Growth of a sport/league demands a long-term vision/investment. Short term there will be losses, but in the long-term there is potential for high rewards through new partners, differentiated fan base and increased participation.

Key lessons include

- Buy-in at a leadership level is essential
- A strong business case is needed to attract partners, with targeted investment
- Strong marketing commitment is essential to understand the audience, drive ticket sales, understand the channels that will drive engagement and creating campaigns that will ensure publicity. This is not a part-time role.
- Male allies are critical.
- Build robust data to sharpen the value proposition
- The growth of women's football hasn't happened over night. Visibility drives engagement – importance of growing audiences and attendances to become sustainable. Although balancing audience and attendance is challenging.
- Importance of leveraging existing infrastructure
- The power of players and athletes is growing across all sports. Understanding the role of female athletes as content creators and role models that inspire generations of young women.
- The equity in venues – when Premier League clubs have committed to WSL teams playing in their stadiums it reaffirms the importance the club(s) sees in its WSL team and unsurprisingly has led to an increase in attendance
- Do not assume cheaper tickets sell more. Perception of value is extremely important – Chelsea's mistake of doing free tickets for their opening WSL game in 2021 which they positioned as 'sold out' but then had a much smaller attendance demonstrates the danger of undervaluing your product

It should also be noted that football might be the most visible sport, but it isn't the only sport that is growing – important to draw out the successes from across the sporting landscape.

3. What is needed for women's sporting organisations to grow audiences and revenues?

Visibility and value. (And data)

For sport to grow it needs to reflect the world it operates in, both on and off the pitch; and sporting organisations need to actively demonstrate that they value their women's sport commercial inventory.

Greater visibility of women's sport is one important way that will drive engagement and by extension commercial investment and increased participation at every level.

Key lessons from our research include:

- Sports need to get ready to go to market
 - Build robust data to sharpen the value proposition
 - Gain better understand of the potential audience
 - The creation of a clear business case is essential to attracting investment.
 - Encourage commercial and media teams to work with brands and media to identify their needs and create bespoke packages that meet everyone's commercial aims
- Commit to consistent coverage
 - Better engagement to get more spectators into stadiums and more eyes on the game.
 - Enable greater visibility of a diverse range of female athletes. Sport and media do more to promote brilliant personalities.
 - Educate stakeholders on the role digital can play
 - Decent slots on free-to-air broadcast to build audience
 - The right stadium in the right location for the right size audience.
- Better brand activation
 - Align purpose and profit
 - Deepen sponsors' understanding of the landscape and the opportunities in it.
 - Develop a clearer understanding of the value of their audiences and the lifetime value of a women's sport fan
 - A focus on more in person activation that helps build culture and engagement around the clubs
- Important to embrace innovation
 - There is a flexibility that exists around women's sport properties because of the stage of growth they're in which can attract non-traditional sports sponsors and encourage new pioneering partnerships.
 - Willingness to question traditional practices and look at different models (formats, schedules, competition structures, etc.)
 - Consumption patterns are shifting – fan engagement practices need to reflect this.
 - Understand that women's sport is in a growth phase and will need to consistently use different approaches to move people along the stages of developing a habit of consumption.

4. What action is needed to tackle sexism and misogyny in sport?

Sport is one of the most important public arenas we have – which means that sport has a responsibility to reflect the best version of society. Male sport, however, can sometimes behave as a proving ground for masculinity, which then has the potential to supercharge misogyny. It's therefore impossible to properly tackle misogyny in women's sport, without targeting negative versions of masculinity in men's sport.

From an intersectional perspective – LGBT inclusion in men's sport also matters, as often sexism is rooted in the idea that women or a gay person is less than a man. One could argue that you won't fix misogyny towards women in sport, if you can't fix anti-gay sentiment in men's sport.

Secondly, the more we treat women's sport and professional women's sport at unequal levels (pay, staff levels, facilities, visibility, access to competitions, etc.) the more we set up the concept that men are better than women – and comparisons between men's and women's sport without taking into account levels of input is also unhelpful. The inequality of vision – means we perpetuate inequality. That underlying concept reinforces misogyny.

Thirdly, visible people in our society are more at risk of pervasive sexism and online hate. We need to be accountable in *how* we are making women's sport and female athletes more visible, i.e. imagery, kit choices, biased language, etc. Organisations have a responsibility to own the impact of the increased visibility they are driving, e.g. not just writing a policy, but having a clear operational response to tackle hate.

To better understand the severity and impacts of online abuse on high performance athletes, Women's Sport Trust partnered with Areto Labs in 2022 to monitor online sentiment towards athletes from our UNLOCKED programme on social media. UNLOCKED involves working with professional female athletes from across sport to help them promote diversity and inclusivity in their sport, find their voice and prepare themselves for senior positions within sport. The athletes who received abusive comments and/or gender microaggressions were the ones who either spoke out on issues around women's sports or got nominated for an award (i.e. more visibility = more abuse). The athlete receiving the worst comments was one of our Paralympic athletes; and abusive comments centred on her disability. It is important to also understand that the drip feed of negativity received can sometimes have a greater impact than a higher threat single abusive comment.

Additional actions could include:

- Any organisation i.e., governing body in receipt of funding over a certain level should have a proactive plan (not just a policy) to tackle not just sexism, but also homophobia and other areas of diversity. This should be a mandatory requirement, and these plans should be properly reviewed and feedback provided.
- Government should work with Ofcom, tech, media and social companies to continue to enhance anti-troll behaviour. It should be noted that this is experienced differently on different platforms.
- We need to diversify the people behind the sports.
 - More women in the senior operational positions, on boards and in the corporate suite of top clubs and national associations
 - Better pathways to retain talent and improve the workforce in the future.

5. What needs to change at a regulatory level to facilitate more parity between men's and women's sport?

Opportunity starts in schools. It's important to give boys and girls equal access of sport at schools and therefore stop the curriculum being gendered – girls and boys should get experience of the same sports, and the coaching and facilities they have access to should also be of the same quality.

Sport generates revenue – and men's sport (because of a legacy of investment and attention) generates more at present. However, recent years have proven that if you invest and professionalise women's sport, the growth will follow.

The importance of accountability can't be understated, but measurement can be difficult. We can improve what we measure, but we still need to understand more about how to measure leadership and governance

in a meaningful way. The Women's Sport Trust will continue to monitor and report on the visibility of women's sport acting as a significant catalyst for development within the industry.

From a government perspective, funding provided to sports needs to ringfence women and girls' activity to allow parity of provision (e.g. facilities, staff, pay, etc.). Government can play a huge role in the equality of provision and therefore reduce the second-class citizen status experienced by some women's sports and the women and girls that play them.

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Submitted Date: 31.1.23