

Written evidence submitted by Dr Hanya Pielichaty

UK Parliament Call for Evidence – Women’s Sport

1. Author Information

- 1.1. I am an Associate Professor within Lincoln International Business School, University of Lincoln and have over 20 years of football playing experience from grassroots level through to the higher tiers in the English league. My research expertise relates specifically to girls’ and women’s football in connection with identity, inequity, family relationships and gender (in)equality. My publications cover identity work and navigating gendered football spaces (2015; 2018), freedom and constraint in girls’ and women’s football (2019), sibling relationships in girls’ and women’s football (2021a) and a macro and micro analysis of women’s football in England (2022). My sole authored book, *Football, Family, Gender and Identity: The Football Self* (2021b) is an in-depth examination of the barriers and opportunities in place for girls and women footballers.
- 1.2. I am also the Director of Student Inclusion with the Eleanor Glanville Institute whereby I manage University-wide projects which aim to embed equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) at the heart of process and practice. The University of Lincoln was named ‘Modern University of the Year’ in 2020 (Chambers, 2020) and it is highly regarded for both teaching (rated Gold in the Teaching Excellence Framework) and research (79% of its research is considered internationally excellent or world leading in the Research Excellence Framework). I am situated within the Department for Marketing, Languages and Tourism and our subject discipline is currently ranked third in the UK for student satisfaction (Complete University Guide, 2023). Furthermore, I am the Programme Leader for our MSc (Hons) International Sports Business Management degree and teach sociology of sport modules within our sports business programmes.

2. Rationale for Submission

- 2.1. I am submitting evidence for this call because I believe I have both the personal experience and research expertise to make a valuable and significant contribution to this inquiry. Furthermore, I am dedicated to facilitating social and cultural change to ensure that every girl and woman feels like they *belong* in and around the football

environment. I will be drawing upon my academic knowledge, research and personal lived experiences of playing football to respond to this call for evidence.

- 2.2. Furthermore I feel compelled to address this call for evidence due to the urgency of these issues that should be viewed as a national priority. It is essential that the government utilises the recent European success of the Lionesses to broker broader social change to tackle gender inequities that exist in our society. Sport can be used as a source for good, to challenge and transform culture and society more widely. Facilitating better, safer and more enjoyable spaces and opportunities for girls and women to foster and sustain a love for sport and physical activity will have positive benefits on individuals, communities, services and the economy more broadly. It is time to create a meaningful legacy for everyone.

3. Introduction

- 3.1. Society is a gendered social construction whereby behaviours, process and practices relating to individuals and groups are monitored against a perceived gender binary. The western notion of 'sex' considers that men and women are separate categories, whereby to be a man is to be masculine and to be a woman is to be feminine. This restrictive viewpoint has shaped the way British society has developed and is judged; making life difficult for those who do not neatly 'fit' into this binary conception.
- 3.2. This sets the broader scene for the societal challenges girls and women face when playing the traditionally masculine sport of football. It is this seemingly inappropriate 'fit' of girls and women to football that has fostered many of the challenges we see today. Women playing football is not a new phenomenon and records of women's teams playing in the late 19th Century document its popularity (Williams, 2014). This popularity, however, was cut short when the Football Association 'banned' women from playing on League affiliated pitches in 1921; it was not until 1972 when this ban was 'formally withdrawn' (Williams, 2014, 128-129). Arguably, the repercussions of this structural discrimination have continued to cause issues for women's entry to, and acceptance within, football today.
- 3.3. Global benchmarking measures demonstrate that the footballing picture is one of progress (FIFA, 2022). It is now vital to look beyond data and statistical analysis to uncover the depths of the footballing ecosystem that continues to privilege boys' and men's engagement. Girls and women still experience gender-based 'banter' for participation (Pielichaty, 2019), precarious and fragile professional conditions (Culvin,

2021), face harassment in coach education (Lewis et al., 2018) amidst a backdrop of general sexism and misogyny (Pope, 2022). Fundamental social and cultural change will only happen if wider social, economic, political and cultural factors are addressed, as it is these that operate football and football business. I am instilled with hope that this call for evidence is a step forward in addressing the wider structural and gendered barriers that impeded the progress of girls and women in football. The following section will address each of the five points in the terms of reference.

4. Terms of Reference

4.1. This section will now address each of the terms of reference separately drawing upon personal experience and academic evidence to make suggestions. It is recommended that before implementing any changes, players and people involved in the changes are spoken with directly in a transparent and inclusive consultation process.

4.2. The growth of women's football can be accelerated in many ways but it is important that this happens in unison with changes to the socio-cultural environment. Growth must be supported by improved infrastructure, societal support, increased resourcing and better footballing environments. The following suggestions are provided:

- Utilise **advocates and allies** of girls' and women's football and create specific roles for them through an *advocate scheme* or similar. These could be active parents and siblings or members of the local and national sporting community who are allies and advocates. These advocates could help change the narrative around girls' and women in sport and create a member network with full UK coverage to improve support.
- Growth comes through the **removal of barriers** to participation, which commonly include:
 - **Access and opportunity**: ensure that football clubs are accessible in terms of location and inclusive in terms of ethos. Ensure there is a clear structure for development for all people to play football (grassroots, elite, youth, adult, dis/ability, gender diversity, walking football).
 - **Socio-economic barriers**: Be mindful of the cost implications for participation (direct and indirect) and consider bursaries and scholarship systems for some players/communities.

- **National curriculum:** Ensure football is available to all girls through the national curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities through schools. This may include looking at mixed-football, open-gender categories of football and recreational/informal football.
- **Bodies and surveillance:** remove gender-based pressure and monitoring of girls and women based on appearance and bodies from all football spaces and communities/clubs. Ensure football is a place that women and girls can simply play football and not have to face additional pressures linked to stereotyping and body image. Let football be a space of empowerment and place which prioritises skill and talent. Practically this involves reviewing policies on dress codes (prioritise comfort over uniformity where appropriate), considering the spaces in which football takes place, and ensuring changing facilities are appropriate.
- **Financing and resourcing** must be invested at every level of football to ensure the environment is professional and conducive to growth.
- All girls and women should have **access to a football club** to suit their level at a reasonably close distance to where they live.

4.3. Other sports can learn the following from the growth in women's football leagues:

- When implementing change, ensure that all partners in the sporting ecosystem are consulted in the process and ensure an **inclusive approach** is taken.
- Conduct an **Equality Impact Assessment** when implementing change to ensure equality and equity are considered at every level. This relates to creating inclusive and adaptive forms of sport, an example being walking football, to provide wider opportunities for involvement.
- Provide leagues and clubs with appropriate **finances and resources** to grow and sustain success.
- Create **regulatory structures** that facilitate belonging, inclusion and success. These may relate to fair pay, pregnancy, maternity and parental care, childcare, caring responsibilities, wellbeing support, menstruation, player welfare, and athlete development amongst others.
- Have clear **succession planning** and **robust evaluation and monitoring systems** to build a sustained platform for success.

4.4. The focus here should not be specifically on women's sporting organisations to grow audiences and revenues but rather a joint responsibility with wider sporting partners to benefit all. Fair Game (2022) report there is a clear commercial case for gender equality in football and this message can be transferred across all sports. Here are some ideas for business growth:

- **Sustained financial support** for women's sporting organisations will allow for long-term development.
- Work with local **universities** to provide evidence-based support to assist in strategy development and implementation.
 - This could be nationally governed by creating a '**Women's Sport University Network**', which could provide targeted research expertise, knowledge exchange, and engage students in project work to boost audiences and revenues.
- Continue to have **combined fixtures** between men's and women's sports so that matches can become more inclusive and offer fans more sport for a competitive price.
- Ensure professional women's sports are **played in stadiums/venues that fans want to visit**, often those with bigger grounds, better facilities and more inviting to the 'mutual' spectator.
- Ensure long-term commercial deals are made with appropriate partners, this may include part-sharing of commercial deals between different commercial and sector partners to **dual-fund projects** initially.
- Charge **ticket prices** at an appropriate rate that does not under nor over-sell. It is difficult to establish 'worth' of women's sports if ticket prices are very low; pricing provides insight into broader social worth.
- Ensure there are **robust and clear international partnerships** between UK and global sporting organisations to learn and share with others worldwide.
- A clear understanding of the **intersectional needs** that face people and groups is required. Meaning acknowledging that everyone's' experiences are different. Audience and revenue growth must be considered in relation to wider intersectional challenges that are facing people living in modern day Britain.

4.5. It is important to recognise that if sexism and misogyny is tackled in society more broadly then this will also positively impact sport. In order for this to happen a multi-

layered approach to social change needs to be implemented. I discuss in my research a strategy for gender justice in women's football (Pielichaty 2021b, 133-135) which would assist in tackling this. The strategy covers areas of reflection, ethos, communities, education and language but it is important to also expand on this now to cover safeguarding.

- **Reflection** – a *reflection audit* should be taken by all sporting stakeholders (including governance, clubs, players, media, commercial entities) to understand where sexism and misogyny is taking place and what it 'looks' like. Be mindful that these can be both visible (easily recognisable) and invisible (behind-the-scenes, subtle and harder to identify).
- **Ethos** – this relates to the culture of football or women's sport in general. It concerns the need to be 'intolerant of intolerance' (Pielichaty, 2021, 133) and having a shared commitment to address inequities and inequalities.
 - On a practical level this could involve having a set of 'ethical gender equality' guidelines issued by the government that covers principles of fairness and inclusivity for broadcasters, media partners and commercial business to adhere to.
- **Safeguarding** – policies, practices and education should be robustly implemented to ensure girls and women are appropriately safeguarded against abuse, violence and discrimination. The Yates (2022) report should be used as evidence to better understand and also challenge the specific issues facing girls and women players.
- **Communities** – these are all of the communities that come together to form the sporting ecosystem (such as policy makers, family, clubs, business, broadcasters) to be pioneers and advocates for equity and transformation.
- **Education** – ensuring coach education is underpinned by notions of gender justice and equity and training to be provided to clubs and schools on gender equality and its importance. Ensure that Higher and Further Education providers of sports-based disciplines are offering socially responsibly education so that graduates can positively influence the male-dominated and masculinised sporting sector.
- **Language** – consider the way in which messages are communicated and prioritised. This does not just cover the spoken word but also messages that are shared through imagery and video across a variety of platforms. It is important to ensure women's sport is not 'othered' and by that I mean it is not

considered second place to 'sport' (generic term to mean 'men's sport') and then 'women's sport'.

These relate to sport but equally can transfer to other areas of society as ultimately social change comes from a unified social effort to change which are not simply targeted at pockets of inequity.

4.6. At a regulatory level women's sport needs to become culturally inclusive and aligned to contemporary agendas impacting on the everyday lives of girls and women. Regulations and governance structures must be inclusive and wide reaching to cover a full range of gender diversity. Suggestions are as follows:

- A **socially responsible governance and coaching education** system to facilitate women achieving leadership and coaching roles in football. Greater gender diversity in leadership and coaching roles will improve the footballing culture and parity.
- **Women must be visible** across leadership, management boards, sports punditry, journalism, academia and coaching. **Women's voices must be heard.**
- **Standardised and civilised robust policies and guidance** are required on issues relating to pregnancy, maternity and parental duties, care responsibilities, pay measures, commercial revenue and financing.
- **Professional women's sport must be professional in both name and practice** by ensuring secure contracts, fair working conditions and transparent lines of communication.
- **Funding and resourcing should be monitored for transparency and parity** across all sport.
- **Safeguarding** policies and procedures to protect all players involved in sport must be implemented to ensure all can play and flourish in an environment that is underpinned by care, transparency and collaboration.

5. Summary

5.1. Sport in general, and football specifically, continue to be male-dominated and masculinised. This call for evidence comes at a time of cultural significance in the hope that real, tangible change can be instigated from the Lionesses' European success. The sporting sector needs a revolution; to free it of its gendered past which has continued to stagnate its growth and inhibit its cultural acceptance. It is important

to realise that transformational change will only come at the intersection of wider societal change. For a true culture shift, every individual and community must come together and pledge for gender equality and equity. Every community group, whether that be families, players, fans, clubs, schools, media outlets, policymakers, regulators and leaders must work together, in unison, under a shared vision for a better future. This vision must be underpinned by meaningful financial support, resources, robust infrastructures and an ethos of inclusion. The complexity and nuanced relationship between sport, gender and society should not be overlooked whereby the intersectionality of each of us means that sport should be cognisant and welcoming of diversity. Excellent progress has been made in recent years in women's sport but it is time to look beneath the encouraging participation statistics and reveal and challenge the inequities that lie at the depths of sport. By using sport as an instrument to facilitate positive change we will create a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

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