

Bournemouth University – Written evidence (NPS0044)

Written evidence submitted by **Dr Raffaele Nicholson**, Senior Lecturer in Sport & Sustainability at Bournemouth University, on behalf of **Bournemouth University**, to the House of Lords National Plan for Sport and Recreation Committee's call for evidence into a [National Plan for Sport and Recreation](#) on 29th January 2021.

About Dr Nicholson: Dr Raffaele Nicholson is one of the world's leading experts in the history and sociology of women's cricket. She has been researching women's cricket for over a decade and recently published *Ladies and Lords* (Peter Lang 2019), the first ever history of women's cricket in the UK. She is currently writing a book on gender issues in sports governance in the UK, covering the period since 1980. She also writes on contemporary women's sport for publications including *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*.

Dr Nicholson is available to provide oral evidence or expand on any of the points made through further correspondence if it would be beneficial to the Committee's inquiry.

Executive Summary

- **Unequal pay** is a key issue in elite women's sport, and there is a risk that the Covid-19 pandemic may widen the gap between elite men's and women's salaries. The UK government should therefore **remove the legal exemption of sport from the Equality Act 2010**, to ensure necessary progress towards equal pay between male and female athletes.
- Merged governance (where men's and women's sport is governed by the same people, in the same organisation) is problematic for women's sport because it leads to a loss of autonomy and less women involved in sports governance. Future mergers should not take place, and serious consideration should be given to **a model of devolved governance of women's sport**. The way in which government funding is allocated should reflect this possibility.
- A National Plan for Sport and Recreation is a good idea as long as it prioritises the above areas. Current policies are disjointed and a National Plan would help eliminate unhelpful different practices between sports and encourage better communication between National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs).

Question 8. The opportunities and challenges facing elite sports in the UK

1. Elite women's sport lags behind men's sport in terms of pay, prize money and media coverage. Though the precise nature of the disparity differs between sports, **the pay gap is widest in sports which have traditionally been male-dominated** and which have a history of treating female participants with suspicion and hostility (for example football, rugby and cricket). My research shows that this history has created a cultural legacy where **it has become an accepted norm in sport to treat women differently to men.**¹ We need to challenge this.

¹ Nicholson (2019). *Ladies and Lords: A History of Women's Cricket in Britain*.

2. Cricket is a good example of these disparities. The captain of the England Women's cricket team, Heather Knight, earns c.£50,000 a year, while leading male players can earn in the region of £1 million. The players union, the Professional Cricketers Association, mandates a minimum wage of £27,500, but **many of the England Women players earn less than this mandated minimum**. The ECB's flagship new competition, The Hundred, will see some women players earning just £3,600, while male players will earn between £24,000 and £100,000.
3. Additionally, there are just 41 professional female cricketers across the UK, compared to more than 400 professional male cricketers. The lack of professional contracts on offer has led to many women giving up promising careers because they cannot afford to continue with cricket.² This also serves to make women's cricket a **socially exclusive sport**, where only those with parental support can afford to continue.
4. Though it is too early to assess the full **impact of the Covid-19 pandemic**, there is a concern that women's sport will be disproportionately affected, and experience slow recovery compared to men's sport.³ Many National Governing Bodies and clubs are undergoing severe retrenchment and looking to implement cost-cutting measures. **The pay gap may therefore widen over time. There is a need for a clear directive from government to instruct that National Governing Bodies do not prioritise men's sport at the expense of women's sport when formulating recovery strategies.**
5. Inequitable treatment of elite sportswomen does not only affect elite sport. There is strong evidence to suggest that the presence of strong sporting women role models is linked to **greater female participation in sport** at the grassroots level.⁴ The visibility of elite women's sport is essential in normalising sport more widely for women and girls, inspiring them to be active, healthy and empowered. Additionally, our treatment of elite female athletes in terms of pay parity sends a clear message about **the value we attribute to men's and women's sport**, which filters downwards and affects the choices made by young women.
6. In sectors other than sport, **equal pay** between men and women has been enshrined as a principle of UK law since the 1970 Equal Pay Act. The Equality Act 2010 states that men and women in the same employment performing equal work must receive equal pay. However, professional sport is specifically **exempted from this legislation**. The Act states that in sports which are "gender-affected activities" i.e. where physical strength, stamina and physique can advantage one sex over another, unequal pay is permitted because it is difficult to determine whether the work is of "equal value". The implication is therefore that the work of an elite female cricketer is not of the same value as that of an elite male cricketer, despite the fact that both train equally hard.
7. If one accepts that the work of female and male elite athletes is of equal value, there appears to be no case for the continued exemption of

² Nicholson (2019). *Ladies and Lords: A History of Women's Cricket in Britain*.

³ Bowes, Lomax and Piasecki (2020). '[The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on elite sportswomen](#)', *Managing Sport and Leisure*.

⁴ Women in Sport (2017). '[Measuring the impact of the FA player appearances programme](#)'.

professional sport from the 2010 Equality Act. The Committee should therefore recommend that the UK government **remove the legal exemption of sport from the Equality Act 2010**, to ensure necessary progress towards equal pay between male and female athletes.

8. Additionally, if there is to be a National Plan for Sport and Recreation then **achieving equal pay between men and women** across all sports in the UK should be prioritised as a fundamental tenet of the Plan.

Question 8. What can be done to make national sports governing bodies more accountable?

9. Currently, almost all sports in the UK are governed by single, "merged" National Governing Bodies, which are responsible for both the male and female versions of the particular sport. For example, the ECB governs both men's and women's cricket, while the Football Association is responsible for both men's and women's football.
10. However, historically women's sport was governed by different governing bodies to men's sport. It is only in the period since 1985 that merged governance has become the norm. Of the major sports in England, for example, the dates of merger were as follows: Squash 1989, Football 1992, Athletics 1992, Lacrosse 1996, Hockey 1997, Cricket 1998, Rugby Union 2003. My research demonstrates that these mergers were not desired by the previously separate men's and women's NGBs, but instead were government-mandated. UK Sport's funding model is currently predicated on offering government grant-aid to one, merged governing body for each sport. During the 1980s and 1990s this model **forced NGBs into mergers** which they did not want.
11. These mergers have proved particularly problematic for women's sport. Women's sporting organisations outside the UK generally actively resist this kind of merger, because they recognise that they are unlikely to be seen by their male counterparts as an "equal" partner.⁵ Though the mergers which have taken place in the UK since 1985 have resulted in increased funding for women's sport, my research shows that there are now **far fewer women involved in the governance of sport in the UK than there were in the 1980s**. Sports leadership in the UK is now heavily male-dominated, especially at board level.⁶
12. A good example of the above is women's cricket. The previously female-led Women's Cricket Association was forced into a "merger" with the ECB in 1998, despite concerns from many members that women's interests would be sidelined. My research reveals that the WCA were promised a "women's cricket" seat on the ECB Board, but this never transpired.⁷ From 1998 until 2010, **no women at all sat on the ECB Board**. None of the women involved in governing the sport in the decades before 1998 have remained involved in the governance of the sport, and many feel they have been thoroughly **disenfranchised** by the process. The current

⁵ Velija, Ratna and Flintoff (2014). 'Exclusionary power in sports organisations: The merger between the Women's Cricket Association and the England and Wales Cricket Board', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 49:2.

⁶ Adriaanse (2016). 'Gender Diversity in the Governance of Sport Associations: The Sydney Scoreboard Global Index of Participation', *Journal of Business Ethics* 137:1.

⁷ Nicholson (2019). *Ladies and Lords: A History of Women's Cricket in Britain*.

make-up of the ECB Board is 4 women and 7 men. Perhaps more pertinently, only one of these 11 ECB Board members has a background in women's cricket.

13. This process was mirrored in numerous other sports, including squash, lacrosse, rugby and football. Women's sport in the UK is now **run predominantly by men whose background is in men's sport** and who therefore, consciously or unconsciously, prioritise the men's game.
14. UK Sport's 2017 Code of Governance requires all sports in receipt of public funding to have 30% of their boards made up by women. However, this does nothing to address the real issue which is **the normative priority granted to men's sport** by those sitting on Boards, whether male or female. Many of the female members of Boards are Independent, Non-Executive Directors who may have no background in the sport. While they bring a valuable perspective to sport governance, this is not the same as the situation which transpired in women's sport until the 1980s, whereby women who had spent years playing the sport in question felt they had a voice in the sport's governance. Government-mandated mergers have inadvertently created the current situation, whereby NGBs no longer grant women a voice in sports governance, and whereby NGBs therefore no longer effectively represent women's sport.
15. Merged governance appears to have become an accepted norm within sport in the UK, but this should be questioned. **Future mergers should not take place**, given that they are almost always a step backwards for sporting equality. The way in which government funding is allocated should be changed to reflect this, and there should be no undue pressure placed on sporting organisations to undergo mergers if they are not desired. A National Plan should have this as a core principle.
16. Additionally, serious consideration should be given to adopting **a model of devolved governance of women's sport**. Within cricket, for example, the ECB could remain in overall control, with a main Board made up of 50% representatives from the men's game (male or female) and 50% representatives from the women's game (male or female). However, the women's game could largely be run by a **separate Women's Cricket Board**, granted its own budgetary autonomy and with the ability to make decisions independently of those being made in the men's game. As has been the case in the political sphere with the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly/Parliament, **devolved governance would increase the accountability of Boards** to the athletes they represent.

Question 10. Should there be a national plan for sport and recreation?

17. Currently, the lack of a coordinated national plan means that **pay differentials vary hugely between sports**. Additionally, my research demonstrates that there is often a **lack of communication between different National Governing Bodies** with regard to governance issues. The most recent "merger" between two governing bodies in England occurred in 2011 between the men's English Golf Union (EGU) and the English Women's Golf Association. Lessons from previous mergers between men's and women's governing bodies had not been learned and research has shown that the merger has "conserved the position of men" at the expense of female employees.⁸

18. Therefore, there should be a national plan for sport and recreation. The Plan should address, as a matter of priority, the implementation of measures to decrease the gender pay gap and the introduction of devolved governance for women's sport. Representatives from NGBs should sit on a **national panel** which monitors progress towards these outcomes.

29 January 2021

⁸ Piggott (2019), 'Gender, Leadership and Organisational Change in English Sport Governance', PhD thesis, University of Chichester, p.137.