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'Why now' for AFLW? providing a new affirmative narrative for women's football in the post-Covid world

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‘Why now’ for AFLW? Providing a new affirmative narrative for women’s football in the post-Covid world.

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Abstract

As with many other male-dominated sports, for over a century of its history, Australian Rules Football organizations resisted and undermined women’s participation in the game. The first league for women footballers commenced in Victoria in 1981. Since then, the growth in women’s participation has been substantial, and in 2017, a professional women’s Australian Football League (AFLW) commenced. The next phase of the participation of women in football is approaching, and heralds an opportunity for women to (re)gain power within the sport. In October 2019, thirty percent of women players rejected the proposed Collective Bargaining Agreement from the Australian Football League (AFL), with the underlying sentiment of wanting a stronger voice in the vision for the future of *their* game. This paper examines how changing participation rates in community football can transform the narrative of women’s football from one of subsidized welfare to women’s being necessary for the survival of football.

Keywords: Football, Justice, Neoliberalism, Feminism, Power

Introduction

In 2019 a group of players in the Australian Football League Women’s (AFLW) competition voted together to veto the collective bargaining agreement that the formerly exclusively male Australian Football League Players Association had negotiated on their behalf. The AFLW players were concerned about the short length of the season, the number of weeks they were to be contracted for each year, and the lack of representation of women players on the Players Association board and in these negotiations (Wood 2019a, 2019b). In response, the head of the Players Association, Paul Marsh, castigated the players for creating disunity and stopping other players from being able to sign contracts (ABC 2019; Wood and Warner 2019). The clear implication was that these women were being selfish and ungrateful for the hard work that the men leading the negotiations had done on their behalf. Yet as AFLW player Meg McDonald noted, the players were “moving beyond the ‘grateful’ and the ‘happy to be here’” narratives that had hitherto largely shaped discussions of the still relatively new AFLW competition. (Wood 2019a; also see Pavlidis 2020; Pavlidis, Toffoletti and Sanders 2021; Fisher 2018; Willson *et al.* 2018).

In clearly advocating for their right to have a say in negotiating the conditions of their employment, these AFLW players were seeking a return to the forms of agency of the first women to establish Australian Rules football competitions for women. Although women had played Australian Rules football from at least 1917, it took until 1981 for the

first enduring competitions to be formed. Run by women, these competitions were ignored, and at times actively resisted by the many layers of men's football competitions of Australian Rules football. Yet, when the elite national men's Australian Football League finally created a (semi-professional) elite women's competition for the 2017 season, it was accompanied by a process of men's competitions, clubs, and administrators taking over control of women's football. At the same time, the dominant narrative became that women should be grateful for their inclusion by men (Pavlidis 2020; Pavlidis, Toffoletti and Sanders, 2021) rather than seek improved conditions. The growth of the women's game depended on the generosity of the men in charge. Or so many men proclaimed (Pavlidis, Toffoletti and Sanders 2021). However, a counter-narrative is possible that it was actually the growth of girls and women playing football that has helped save men's football in many places throughout Australia. This paper explores the grounds on which this increasingly vital counter-narrative can be built.

The last few years have seen substantial research on the practices of incorporation and resistance that have occurred as elite competitions have been created for women in historically male-only sports like the major football codes. For example, Welford (2018), Culvin (2021), Bryan, Pope and Rankin-Wright (2021) and Woodhouse, Fielding-Lloyd and Sequerra (2019) have documented the changing gender relations in British football as the Football Association [FA] introduced the Women's Super League [WSL] in a manner similar to the introduction of the AFLW. At both grassroots and elite levels, members of women's sporting teams expressed an unease about being exploited by the linked men's clubs for both their membership subscriptions and for the political capital that women's sport now holds in accessing government funding. To a certain extent these developments have born out David Fairchild's earlier warning that such changes were one more method of incorporating existing women's participation whilst ensuring that men can continue to control both the organization and the discursive narratives around sports (1994). The political agency of women that was so important in building earlier competitions for women who wanted to play sports like the football codes, is in danger of being lost (Race and Chiera 2019). At the same time there is a considerable disconnect between the substantial growth in women's soccer at the community level in the UK (Pielichaty 2020), and the precarious and limited role for women in the "extremely gendered" public discourses around British football (Bryan et al. 2021; see also Woodward 2017; and Woodhouse *et al.* 2019). Adams and Leavitt (2018) note an analogous inconsistency between public narratives of triumphant progress and the experienced reality of subordination in elite and community ice-hockey for women in Canada despite the 10-fold growth in women's participation between 1990 and 2010.

Our paper builds upon this recent research in places like Britain and Canada by exploring how an examination of Australian Rules football at the community level can add to a retelling of the emergence of the AFLW competition. "Why now?" questions allow for politically transformative answers to be developed which place these women's leagues in a

greater position of power, in negotiations regarding contemporary access to resources and facilities, and to positions of political and cultural authority in the future of their sports (Burke 2019). The response to this question must begin with the history of inequity, exclusion, trivialization, ignorance, and disdain for women's football (Fisher 2018; Nicholson, Stewart, De Moore and Hess 2021). It is politically important to offset this "amnesic dislocation" (Lusty 2017, 220) of the past treatment of women in football from the current enlightened "boom" (McLachlan 2019), and not simply accept what Lusted and Fielding-Lloyd (2017, 56-57) refer to as the "liberal absorption approach to gender equality." We therefore begin this paper with an historical overview of the development of women's participation in Australian Rules football. This is followed by an analysis of the way the participation rates of both girls and women increased greatly through the 2000s. This increase contrasted markedly with a significant reduction in the number of community competitions and teams for men. While this decline in the men's game has generated significant media attention lamenting the threats to the valued cultural institution of men's football, we make the new argument that the increasing numbers of girls and women playing Australian Rules football have propped up the men's game. This counter narrative is then situated within Nancy Fraser's (2009, 2013, 2017) feminist critique of the shift in public investment narratives from justified subsidization of important [men's] community-building projects to the more recent neoliberal concern for return on investment in public investment. Such a neoliberal turn is an ongoing concern in the coming post-Covid sporting world, and may have implications for women trying to gain power within any historically male-gendered sport.

Overview of the Development of Women's Australian Football

The first documented game of Australian Rules Football occurred in Victoria in 1858. Men's competitions in Australian Rules Football began in the latter half of the nineteenth century in Victoria, and then in South Australia, Western Australia and some of the other colonies of Australia (Wedgewood 2005). For around 100 years, men's football clubs and leagues at all levels benefitted from public resourcing of grounds, facilities and club rooms, which produced historical ownership of football discourse and infrastructure for men (Jeanes *et al.* 2020). For much of this history, women were apparent in various supportive and spectating roles, but men had a proprietary role over the game (Pavlidis 2020).

Women's football teams flourished for brief periods around the wars, and teams of women played some exhibition football games from around 1917, commencing first in West Australia, and then appearing in South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and the other states (Lenkic and Hess 2016).ⁱ Teams were often associated with specific workplaces, and played for charitable fundraising, to build patriotism or for spectator diversion (Lenkic and Hess 2016; Sinclair 2011; Hess 2019). Day-long lightning premierships were occasionally run

for women football teams as part of a broader carnival day, but there was no opportunity for regular weekly participation as a woman player in the game (Lenkic and Hess 2016; Hess 2019). Attempts were made at various times to produce women's leagues but, despite significant interest and intent from women participants, these leagues did not survive for long (Lenkic and Hess 2016; Sinclair 2011; Hess 2019).

The "first stable and enduring women's league was not formed until 1981 in Victoria" (Lawrence 1998 cited by Wedgewood 2005, p. 398). The early years of participation were difficult and were only sporadically supported by men's clubs, leagues and state organizational bodies (Lenkic and Hess 2016). Women's Australian Rules football competitions and national championships that were played in this early phase of female participation, were organized and managed by women for women (Race and Chiera 2019; Nicholson *et al.* 2021). These competitions were largely unsubsidized by either the peak state organizing bodies for football across Australia, or the various levels of government in Australia (Lenkic and Hess 2016). Yet, women's football leagues and participation rates across Australia have been successfully expanding ever since 1981 (Lenkic and Hess 2016; "Football Participation Stabilizes" 2018; Nicholson *et al.* 2021). This paper will only discuss the expansion in playing numbers during the twenty-first century. Lenkic and Hess (2016) have described the much longer contested history of participation by women in Australian Rules Football competitions (also see Hess 2005, 2011, 2019).

Whilst there was substantial growth in women's leagues and school competitions during the late 1990s (Lenkic and Hess 2016), a significant turning point for women's football occurred when, on February 17, 2004, three adolescent female complainants in the *Taylor v Moorabbin Saints Junior Football League and Football Victoria* [2008] case defended their continued participation in the Moorabbin Saints Junior Football League (Nicholson *et al.* 2021; Willson *et al.* 2018). The complainants in the case were excluded from playing in a local football competition in 2003 by the *Female Participation Regulation*, which required that girls could not play with boys in junior football competitions after the age of 12. The *Female Participation Regulation* was defended by the league, supported by *Football Victoria*, as necessary in both protecting the safety of females and avoiding the possibility that male players would change their playing behaviours (Burke 2010). Ken Gannon, Chief Executive of Football Victoria, commented after the first VCAT case in 2003, that "we're very comfortable the rules (banning girls) are necessary and will be put in place permanently" ("Footy Girls Win" 2003).

Oddly, the failure of the complainants to win the case seemed to produce the momentum to commence junior women's community football competitions and teams (Lenkic and Hess 2016; Burke 2010; Nicholson *et al.* 2021). Significant growth occurred in club football, junior football and primary school football in the first two decades of the 2000s, especially once community clubs and leagues recognized that there was a market for girl's football. This growth occurred because of the passionate advocacy of the volunteer

workforce of [mostly women] players and administrators (Lenkic and Hess 2016; Nicholson *et al.* 2021). As will be demonstrated in the next section of the paper, the explosion in playing numbers preceded the commencement of the semi-professional women's Australian Football League (AFLW), but participation has been accelerated by public recognition produced by the AFLW (Collins 2016; Navaratnam 2017). This could be considered a second phase of the development of women's football, and it shares several characteristics with the first phase. The significant new development of this phase was in the production of a talent pool of players from which senior footballers can be drawn from, and some sense of support for women's football by existing football clubs and leagues.

Again, the second phase was driven mostly by women and was largely unrecognized by the peak body of the AFL. The Chairman of the AFL in 2005, Ron Evans, explained in his annual report, the position of women in football:

One of the clear strengths of our game is the level of support and involvement we enjoy from women of all ages...At a community level, 35 per cent of the 60,000 volunteers who run local clubs are women...Importantly, women are involved at all levels of our game – as board members of AFL clubs and as administrators, doctors, trainers, physiotherapists and umpires. We also recognise that women have a significant influence over the sports their children play. (AFL Annual Report 2005, p. 23)

In the 2006 Report, the CEO of the AFL, Andrew Demetriou, outlined the future strategy for football, titled *The Goal is to Build the Game*. This strategy included developing more community grounds, more clubs, more participants, more penetration in New South Wales and Queensland, more indigenous players, more participation from current immigration groups and greater international participation, but no mention of growing women's participation. Lenkic and Hess (2016, p.233) state: "The AFL committed to the women's game formally in 2007", but the local competitions and national championships remained under the control of independent women's management structures for a period after that commitment. Women's active participation in football was not mentioned in any AFL annual reports before 2011. In the most successful women's football state, AFL Victoria took over the management of the Victorian Women's Football League in 2013, but relinquished ownership of community women's football back to local leagues in 2017 because of the massive growth in the game (Olle 2016; Nicholson *et al.* 2021). After the enormous growth in the junior women's game between 2004 and 2009, and ongoing growth in the senior women's game, the AFL finally included a photograph of a women footballer in the 2009 report, and began to specifically mention this growth in its annual development reports from 2011 onwards. But it was not until 2016 that there was a separate section in either the CEO's or Chairman's annual reports on the potential growth opportunities in women's football.

What was happening in community football from 2004 to 2019?

Aside from some relatively small primary and secondary school football competitions, participation in sub-elite Australian Rules Football occurs mostly at community clubs. A quantitative analysis of sub-elite participation in Australian Rules Football from 2000 reveals a sport partially in decline at the community level. An investigation of AFL annual reports from 2004ⁱⁱ to 2019 reveals the following trends in men's club football participation. Community club based participation increased significantly, but all of the increase occurred at Auskick (introductory program), junior (age 8-12) and youth (age 13-17) levels. There was no increase in men's community club numbers in the 18-21 age group level, and a significant decrease at the senior men's level. As detailed below, this decline in men's community football existed, was recognised and eventually required the AFL to understand that community football club expansion needed to include the participation of women, initially as netballers in amalgamated football-netball clubs, and then in women's football teams.

The analysis of the participation figures also revealed an enormous increase in women's participation numbers in all categories, including Auskick, junior, youth and senior community club football, such that the increase in overall female participants almost offsets the decrease in overall senior male participants. The numbers suggest that women's participation in Australian Rules Football has greatly increased since the development of junior women's football leagues in 2005. From 2016 to 2018, the entire growth in community club football participation is lower than the growth in community club women's football participation. This led Michele Levine, CEO of Roy Morgan Group, a leading market researcher in Australia, to conclude that: "The push to increase female participation is in fact vital to the continued health of all four sports [four major football codes in Australia] as long-term trends show a declining rate of male participation" ("Football Participation Stabilises..." 2018). Additionally, the AFL Chairman, Richard Goyder, stated at the end of the 2019 football year that, "the desire of women and girls to be part of our game at every level drives our [AFL] growth" (Whalley 2020). The participation figures from 2010 to 2018 are included in Table 1 demonstrating both large growth in raw participation numbers and in the proportion of women players in total club playing numbers.

Year	Total Club Players*	Total Women Club Numbers*	% Women Growth on previous year	% Women of Total Club
2010	305997	5486		1.8
2011	314290	7242	32.0	2.3
2012	314685	9529	31.6	3.0
2013	321280	11850	24.4	3.7
2014	331304	14820	25.1	4.5
2015	336108	17063	15.1	5.1
2016	360648	26589	55.8	7.4
2017	371311	44650	68.0	12.0
2018	386924	58465	30.9	15.1
2010-2018	+80927	+52979	+865.5%	

*Participation is measured as registered participant in program or competition that lasts more than six weeks.

Table 1- Reported figures for different participation categories in AFL Annual Reports 2010-2018.

In contrast to the rapid expansion in female participation, the period leading up to this expansion was not as successful for senior men’s football clubs. The number of football clubs operating in rural Victoria had shrank from a peak of about 1000 in the 1930s, to 464 by the early 2000s, with a number of cross-town mergers and club deaths (Frost, Lightbody and Halabi 2013, 454). Frost et al note that “losses in rural employment due to technological change, rising costs of farming, and increases in the size and capital-intensity of farms” combined with increasing ease of travel, communication, and relocation of families, youths and young adults, resulted in a shift of the population away from small country towns (2013, 454; also see Spaaj 2009, 1137-1138). Frost et. al (2013, 458) further state that such changes continue to accelerate in effect in country football: “Between 1990 and 2003, 66 Victorian clubs merged and a further 36 shut down altogether.”

Many of the remaining clubs have taken up the strong suggestions of State Football and Netball Associations to form merged football-netball clubs and leagues “to cater to the girlfriends, wives, sisters and mothers of players” with the hope of helping to “bring numbers back to the football” (Lewis, Jeffreys and Holt 2009 cited by Frost, Lightbody and Halabi 2013, 460). The Parliamentary Inquiry into Australian football in Victoria in 2004, concluded that “football/netball clubs are, to a significant degree, the ‘glue’ holding many small rural communities together” (cited in Spaaj 2009, 1134). Since there is a desire to increase the participation of women in these community clubs, then the development of women’s football teams would seem an obvious extension of this program, and the major beneficiaries are the existing, but now fragile, country men’s football clubs.

Despite the shift of population towards the cities, it was no easier in the expanding capital cities, coastal regions and provincial cities around Australia to successfully sustain men-only football clubs. While not the focus of scholarly research, there have been numerous newspaper articles in the last ten years that describe the slow and seemingly continuous decline of community football in Tasmania (West 2016), West Australia (Hayes 2018) and Victoria (Amy 2019: Boyle 2018). Martin Flanagan, writing in *The Age* newspaper in 2016, described the recent losses in Tasmania, a historically passionate football state of Australia as:

The Tasmanian North East Football Union will have only two teams next year. The NEFU, as it is known, has been going since 1938. The Leven Association, which was comprised of teams from small farming communities behind Devonport and Ulverstone, started in 1924. It folded last week.

What both country and city football clubs share are the changing economic forces that have increased costs, and therefore require an expanding club income. Most community-based football clubs remain reliant on member subscriptions and local sponsorships/fundraising for economic support. Their sustainability in the past was possible because of large mostly voluntary labour force of local players and staff, supported by generous subsidisation of playing grounds and facilities by local councils. But the competition for scarce grounds in an era of user-pays for councils has increased the venue costs on clubs. This is combined with “increased costs of insurance, ground maintenance, coaching accreditation, and compliance with the Goods and Services Tax and food handling and alcohol services regulations” to create increased economic demands on these clubs (Frost, Lightbody and Halabi 2013, 457). Also, whereas once clubs could rely on a voluntary local labour pool, they must increasingly find resources to pay for players and coaches that come from outside of the locality (Hayes 2018). These three sets of forces provoked the AFL to produce the *Community Club Sustainability Program* in 2015, designed to reduce player payments for male players, reduce fundraising stresses on local clubs, and to improve the sustainability of local community clubs in both metropolitan and country regions (AFL

2015a). Aside from the Victorian Amateur Football Association, where players are not paid, a survey of community clubs in 2014 revealed that 34% of clubs paid over \$100,000 per season to their male players. One club representative explained that: “The club may have a limited life span if player payments continue to increase for two reasons, the club will run out of money or if it doesn’t pay the payments it will not be competitive” (AFL 2015b). A position of weakness in the sub-elite men’s football economy, with many clubs failing, merging or shifting to different leagues to reduce costs, has largely been shrouded by both the economic and mediatized success of the elite AFLM competition, and the inclusion of women footballers as a growing participant group. Many of these clubs, through both female member subscriptions, and opportunities to access government grants associated with gender [women’s] inclusion, have a more stable economic future because of the inclusion of women footballers.

The next section of the paper will situate this transformative narrative of women’s participation as saving community football within the previous public subsidisation of men’s football and the current subsidisation of both men’s and women’s football. This narrative will be informed by a feminist critique of the shifting discourses about subsidy from a state-capitalist economy to a neoliberal economy. This shifting politico-economic discourse makes it more difficult to reframe the sporting discourse towards either overdue justice for women or something even more powerful. But a recognition of the relationship between neoliberalism and patriarchy will help to produce an environment for a more affirmative narrative for women footballers.

Reframing the Discursive Narrative from welfare to saving men’s football

For around 100 years, men’s football clubs and leagues at all levels benefitted from public resourcing of grounds, facilities and club rooms, that produced a sense of historical ownership of the sport of football. This ownership thrived through a period of “state-organized capitalism” (Fraser 2009, 97) where governments and councils saw the provision of funds for men’s sporting clubs as a welfare responsibility in the social life of communities with a return of the promotion of “inclusion, social equality and cross-class solidarity” (Fraser 2009, 101). Many men’s football clubs benefitted from local councils providing fully-maintained playing and training grounds at very low cost.

Since 1981, women have been trying to sustain their professional football leagues and clubs in “the dramatically changed social context of rising neoliberalism” (Fraser 2009, 97). Rossi and Jeanes (2018, 386) refer to the global economic uncertainty resulting in a current Australian political climate that includes “a retreat from [the] purpose and spirit of welfare.” In this context, the various levels of government no longer adequately subsidise

community-sporting interests as a welfare issue. They now invest for return. So elite AFL clubs are able to garner large scale investment by federal and state governments for ground redevelopmentsⁱⁱⁱ, often justified by some form of investment return in terms of “outward-facing” educational/social cohesion programs “targeting culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous communities” (Rowe, Karg and Sherry 2019, 375). For example, the government investment in the Western Bulldogs facility expansion was tied to multiculturalism (Black 2020), the investment in the Richmond facility was tied to indigenous education (AFL 2008) and the investment in the North Melbourne facility was tied to youth in the community (NMFC 2020). All were considered as useful investments by the federal or state governments as community hubs. But each of these investments also resulted in expanded and modernised training facilities for elite AFL men’s clubs. Ironically, the large-scale funding invested to improve the training facilities for the Carlton Football Club at Ikon Park (Beveridge 2020) and the St. Kilda football club at RSEA Park (Amy 2018) are both partially justified by the need to open up these facilities to the women’s teams at the respective AFL clubs (Footy Industry 2018; Nicholson *et al.* 2021).

This does not mean that governments are not also investing in stadium and ground upgrades to support women’s football at both the elite and the community level. What is being argued is that the historically exclusive ownership of football by men’s leagues and clubs has meant that return on investment is considered more likely in the established men’s leagues than in the developing women’s leagues. Additionally, the changing context of government investment means that investment that could once have been considered a form of state-based justifiable community subsidy is now considered a form of welfare for a special interest group, women.

Women’s Australian rules football competitions that were played prior to the development of the AFLW were almost exclusively organised and managed by women for women, but were largely unsubsidised by either the men’s leagues/clubs or the government (Lenkic and Hess 2016; Sotiriadou and Pavlidis 2019). These women-managed organizations must now compete for teams, players and profile with the previously exclusively male, competitions and clubs. Furthermore, these self-governed women’s sporting clubs are additionally marginalized by recent government sports funding programs, ostensibly run to increase participation in sport amongst underrepresented groups, but having the effect of supporting facility and program development for women in previously male-only clubs. In introducing the program guidelines for the Australian Federal Government’s *Community Sport and Infrastructure Grant Program (CSIG)*, Senator Bridget McKenzie, the then Federal Minister for Sport, made the following statement:

Improvements to community infrastructure – such as lighting towers and expanded change room and toilet facilities, particularly for people with a disability, girls and women – will greatly increase participation opportunities. (Australian Sports Commission 2018, i)

Similar public funding programs to support community sports clubs have been applied at both the State Government and local council levels in Australia (Casey et al. 2019). At one level, it is fantastic that all levels of government are finally recognizing that *all* sports should be available to *all* people. However, for the women-managed football clubs, they experience a double dose of marginalization. Accessing grants from the finite amounts of government funding is competitive, and made difficult when funding criteria are written which favor football clubs that have historically ignored women participants. Of the 684 grants that were successful in winning the CSIG/Sports Rorts funding, an analysis by community club name suggests that the four football codes received approximately \$21.5m spread over just under 140 grants, with *none of these grants going to specifically women's clubs*.^{iv} In addition, these women-run clubs and leagues, which have survived for decades, must now exist within a broader public discourse that suggests women's football can only continue by receiving welfare from the government and men's football clubs and leagues (Race and Chiera 2019).

The final section of the paper will suggest that there is expanded political capital associated with the demonstration of the necessity of women participants to community club sustainability. This capital can be used to change the discursive tone from one of subsidization, support and welfare to one of long overdue justice, recognition, governmental redress and sensible investment. This change in the terms of the debate will become even more necessary as Australia, like much of the rest of the world, moves into a new age of public and private austerity after the Covid-19 shutdown and recession (Clarkson, Culvin, Pope and Parry 2020), and any perceived forms of welfare may "become a casualty of economic prudence" (Rossi and Jeanes 2018, 185).

What happens after the discursive narrative is transformed

It is now nearly half a century since the Iris Marion Young (1980), the prolific feminist author, first published the ground-breaking article, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Bodily Comportment, Motility and Spatiality." In it, she argued that young women are trained such that: 'Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned and objectified'. Twenty-five years later, a period spent under the affirmative action policy of Title IX in US educational sport, Young (1998) was encouraged to report that women in the United States were no longer as restricted in their forms of athletic embodiment, and that women are now able to escape those restrictions as respected female athletes. In the U.S. context, economic, and then cultural, support was provided that allowed for the presentation of female embodiment as athletic, powerful, competitive, strong, physical and combative. Green, Thurston, Vaage and Moen (2015) describe a similar trend in female sport participation in Norway as federal government

policies and second-wave feminist activism came together to encourage and support more female choice in sport.

Fraser (2009, 99) argues that the second wave feminist cultural transformation of society “legitimated the transition to a new form of capitalism: post-Fordist, transnational, neoliberal.” Unfortunately, this occurred at precisely the time that second wave feminists and women footballers both needed a “larger, holistic vision of a just society” (Fraser 2009, 99), one that “redoubled attention to the critique of political economy” (Fraser 2009, 109; 2013, 212). Fraser (2009, p14) concludes by suggesting that women must “become more historically aware” of both shifting economic discourses, and the alliance between neoliberalism and comfortable forms of “happy feminism” (Pavlidis 2020, 3) that have been “defanged of most... of its oppositional force” (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2019, 8). Once the fangs are back in, then far more powerful redistributory justice (Adkins 2018, 168) narratives can be developed in football, where a recognition of past injustice becomes the beacon for contemporary redress.

Explaining Fraser’s emancipatory goal, Orloff and Shiff state, “contemporary feminism should refocus its critique on the constraints on most women’s lives that *arise from* market-mediated processes of subordination” (2016, 123, our emphasis). At a theoretical level, equal opportunity legislation attempts to produce substantive equality between different groups (Thornton 2006; Burke 2010). If past inequality results in continuing injustice, then feminists need to encourage the state to intervene in ways that reduce, rather than increase, the inequality. As Fraser (2013, 210; also see Orloff and Shiff 2016, 124-125) suggests about the early second-wave feminists, their goal was “less to dismantle the welfare state than to transform it into a force that could help to remedy male domination.” As football remains a site of male domination, this early second-wave goal remains important. Funding of women’s football by public government, and by the men’s football organisations and clubs that have benefitted from exclusive access to at least partially publicly funded infrastructure, is not an issue of welfare, but an issue of redress for the systemic discrimination throughout history, that still impacts significantly on public and corporate investment decisions today.

Echoing Fraser (2017), economic redistribution and cultural authority are both goals of radical feminism. Redistributive interventions address the practical and personal effects of economic inequality, if they are allowed to be practiced in their ideal form (Burke 2019). However, according to Orloff and Shiff (2016, 117), legal rights including access rights to grounds, resources and public funding, operate in an “ahistorical, acultural and acontextual” vacuum, separated from practices and relationships that exist on the ground. And ‘the ground’ in football is a male dominated discursive space (Jeanes *et. al* 2020). What is produced by the liberal feminist intervention of women’s inclusion is both the appearance of reliance on the economic profitability of male sports, and women’s participation in this sport being controlled and limited by decisions made by men in authority positions at local

clubs, and in the broader football world (Burke 2019; Grange and Oliver 2014; Wedgewood 2005).

As an example of the potential for comfortable incorporation of new or existing women's teams into men's clubs, Jo Welford has researched the tensions that have been produced in English women's football [soccer] with the integration of the Women's Super League clubs with existing men's clubs, as dictated by the organising body, the Football Association [FA]. At the elite level of women's soccer in England, she explained a recent history of withholding of FA financial support for clubs who were not linked to men's clubs as happened with the most successful club of the pre-integration period, the Doncaster Belles, and loss of men's club support for successful women's teams when the men's club was relegated, as happened with the very successful Charlton FC women's team. However, at the sub-elite 'grassroots' level, the effect of the integrative relationship between men's and women's clubs varied according to the degree of [mostly financial] independence that the women's club could sustain (2018, 111). Whilst the presence of women's teams and players helped these integrated clubs to gain other income streams, these streams only flowed through to women, or were equally shared by women, if women retained financial independence from the men's professional club. She concludes that integration has produced "a loss of measure of independence with very little gain in return" (119). Wedgewood (2005) has described a similar chronology of initial integration, a short honeymoon period, and then recognition of exploitation by the men's club before subsequent withdrawal from affiliation, in a local Australian Rules Football women's competition. The merging of existing women's clubs and leagues into local men's clubs and leagues meant that women's organizational decision-making roles in their own leagues are marginalized (Velija 2018; Lusted and Fielding-Lloyd 2017; Nicholson *et al.* 2021).

Women's representation on boards and in executive management positions in Australian Rules Football at both the elite and community level has mostly not reached the minimum of 30% that is required for critical mass (Adriaanse 2018), nor the minimum of 40% required of National Sporting Organizations by the Australian Sports Commission (Richards 2018). A review of the leadership structures of Australian football in Victoria, the largest football state and home of the national body, including those for the AFL, the metropolitan leagues and the country and regional commissions revealed the following numbers. Seventeen of nineteen Board Chairs were held by men, and men outnumbered women on boards by a proportion of three to one. Of the 17 boards that could be accessed, only five reached Adriaanse's (2018) 30% representation and a minimum of three women for critical mass to influence cultural change. The key management roles of CEO and Operations Manager were held by men in 33 of the 36 positions available. Executive staff positions in these organizations were held by 91 men and only 38 women. Recalling that the country commissions all support local football-netball leagues and clubs, and several of the metropolitan leagues also run netball competitions, this division in leadership power differential is remarkably persistent.^v

Brown argues that liberal feminist reform supported by male legal and economic support is more in line with “a politics of feudalism than freedom” (cited by Thornton 2006, 151). It produces what Orloff and Schiff (2016, 111) refer to as “perverse alliances,” where individual narratives of empowerment and opportunity from female participants are selectively used “by neoliberal and conservative elites in ways that undermine further movement toward gender equality” (113). Even further, the female athlete becomes a member of a stigmatized class of “vulnerable people perceived as beneficiaries of special largesse” (Fraser 1995, 85) within neoliberalism. New women’s professional football leagues have been suggested as the beneficiaries of welfare from the corresponding men’s leagues in the popular football media and in comments towards any opinion piece which challenges this hierarchical relationship (Riley 2019; O’Halloran 2018). As an example, in discussing the contractions to the highly-subsidised women’s leagues after the COVID pandemic, Roe (2020) states: “Many of the niceties willingly extended to the jenny-come-latelies of the women's game over the past few years may now be withdrawn.” Gender structures the hierarchy between self-funding male sports, even when supported by generous government investment, and subsidised female versions of these sports (Burke 2019). To address this disempowering discourse, it is important to devise a “new framing of old modalities of sexism and inequality, in a period characterised by neoliberalism” (Toffoletti et al. 2018, 8). Forensically investigating the conditions of male dominated football that precipitated the opening of the game to women footballers, at least in the public discourse, encourages this new framing.

Conclusion

The development of a professional women’s Australian Rules football league, played in the off-season of the AFLM has been broadly celebrated, especially by the AFL itself, as benevolently extending the opportunities for women in sport (Pape and McLachlan, 2020). Certainly, it has opened up economically rewarding athletic, coaching and media jobs for some women footballers.^{vi} At the same time, much of the work for women in football remains precarious, casualized and underpaid (Pavlidis 2020; Fisher 2018). The rapid expansion of opportunities available for women and girls in elite, sub-elite and junior competitions, has also been celebrated, but within a discourse that still privileges men and their perspectives. The patriarchal underpinnings of Australian football are found anywhere that commentators talk about the Australian Football League men’s [AFLM] competition financially supporting the women’s game without reference to the century-long monopoly that men had over the economic control and profitability of the game, the ongoing opposition to the women’s game until very recently, and the efforts of mostly women to sustain the earlier women’s competitions.

Encel (2020) has challenged the idea that success in women's football in Australia needs to be a 'copy-paste' of men's football. Success must be understood differently to the current male standard, because of both the very short period of public consumption of the women's game, and because of the changing economic conditions for all levels of sport in the post-COVID environment. The impact of the COVID crisis is a significant threat to continued participation growth and government funding for women's versions of all these sports, as precarious women's leagues must find a way to coexist with long established men's leagues (Pape and McLachlan 2020; Bowes, Lomax and Piasecki 2021; Clarkson *et al.* 2020).^{vii} Fisher's (2018) argument about the possibilities for women's soccer to resist the commodity logic of the dominant neoliberal model of enclosure in men's soccer is also pertinent to women's Australian Rules Football. Fisher (2018, 76-77) states:

Women's football has not yet been as commercialised and commodified as men's football. Passion, loyalty and dedication to the game, along with sportsmanship and fair play, flourish. This is arguably because commercial interests are not in large part yet a driving force; the game has not yet been fully 'enclosed'. The women's game, in many parts of the world, remains nourished by its connection to the grassroots and local communities—who can still afford match tickets. Can we find a way to hold onto and ascribe more value to these self-organized community-oriented, bottom-up, collaborative elements still present in the women's game, while also paving a path for professionalisation?

The question that this paper dealt with is how the development of women's community football leagues can become sites for resistance to male control in the sport of Australian Rules Football. The control is challenged by re-telling the story from a welfare narrative of new opportunities being *provided by* male sport organisations (Jeanes *et al.* 2020; Pape and McLaughlin 2020), to an empowering [for women] narrative of women's sports leagues *saving* male organisations from the consequences of their historical sexism. An ideological mixture of affirmative action justice and independent discursive control, supported by a recognition that women's football has saved football from its previous sexist decline, could drive the politically powerful narrative of women's football for women, something that will become a necessity in the likely coming post-Covid world of economic austerity.

The growth of women's participation in traditionally male sports like the football codes and ice-hockey (Adams and Leavitt 2018; Adjepong 2017; Allison 2017; Bryan *et al.* 2021; Culvin 2021; Furze 2021; Pielichaty 2020; Taylor *et al.* 2020; Woodhouse *et al.* 2019), although uneven across the globe (Kanemasu and Johnson 2019), may allow for women accessing greater power within community clubs and elite competitions, as the mens' sports continue to shrink. Our analysis has suggested that a focus on only the sustainability or growth of the elite level women's competitions in these sports ignores the power that can be generated by investigating the conditions of change that exist at community club levels of sports. At the same time, it is acknowledged that this is only a starting point, and that continuing to appropriate more positions of authority in leadership structures of these

sports, and their supportive media, will be necessary to force more politically powerful narratives into any male-dominated sporting discourse.

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ⁱ As Hess (2019, 1) explains: “explorations of women’s football (in the general) are still in their infancy and there remains substantial gaps.” This is certainly the case for women’s participation in Australian Rules Football, and we rely heavily on the research produced by Lenkic and Hess (2016) in describing the early history of women’s participation.

ⁱⁱ The 2004 annual report was the first to provide participation figures for women.

ⁱⁱⁱ The ABC-RMIT Fact Check (2013) calculated that the state and federal governments’ investments in AFL Ground Redevelopments between 2004 and 2013 was “well over \$1.5b.”

^{iv} The 144 grants to councils have been ignored because they could not be assigned to a specific sport, but we would suggest that many of these grants also went to updating ground facilities for the football codes. This assumption is made because most basketball, netball, gymnastics, and athletics clubs do not use council financed facilities. Football and cricket clubs do.

^v This idea is the commencement of a larger research project on the strategies that can be used in the football world to produce greater numbers of women in football governance positions at both the elite and local club/league levels. We would suggest a structural approach to producing changes, but, given the long history of male control, acknowledge that such an approach will “face considerable organizational resistance” (Hovden, Elling and Knoppers 2018, 195).

^{vi} It should be emphasized that the binary discourses that are emphasized here are with regards to discourses about the leagues, and not the individual players. We agree with Toffoletti, Francombe-Webb and Thorpe (2018, 3; also see Pavlidis 2020; Willson *et al.* 2018) that: “...the multiple discourses circulating around women in sport [Australian football] generate complex and often contradictory messages that belie binary understandings of women as ‘empowered’ and ‘equal participants’ in sport, or as ‘victims’ of a patriarchal sports industry.” Our point is that the binary does apply to discourses around the different descriptions of government and private financial support for men’s and women’s football leagues.

^{vii} Yet, in another way, economic downturn may result in greater opportunity for organizational and discursive control for women over their sports. Allison (2017) observed this in an ethnographic study of a professional women’s soccer team in the United States before COVID, where a fall in revenue and the departure of male staff facilitated the takeover of control of the women’s club by women staff and players.