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MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

*Contestation, disruption and legitimization in women's rugby league*

This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Taylor, Tracy, O'Connor, D and Hanlon, Clare (2019) Contestation, disruption and legitimization in women's rugby league. *Sport in Society*. ISSN 1743-0437

The publisher's official version can be found at  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17430437.2019.1631803>  
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

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rugby league**

Journal:	<i>Sport in Society</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Special Issue Paper
Keywords:	women, professional leagues, women's sport, gender, sport organisations

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Manuscripts

Running Head: WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE

## Contestation, disruption and legitimisation in women's rugby league

Men have to play well to feel like they belong, women have to feel they belong to play well

-Alan McConnell AFL Women's head coach Greater Western Sydney Giants

### Introduction

Women have fought long and hard for greater opportunities in sport with respect to participation and inclusion (Connell, 2009; Taylor and Toohey, 1999); leadership roles (Burton, 2015); rights and recognition (Andersen and Loland, 2017); media coverage (Musto, Cooky and Messner, 2017); sponsorship (Fink, 2015); appropriate definitions of gender (MacKay and Dallaire, 2012); and access to professional sport careers (Rosner and Shropshire, 2011). Women's professional leagues in sports that have long been considered male-appropriate (e.g. football codes) are increasing. Women's leagues in male-dominated sports offer sites for disrupting traditional gender hierarchies (Joncheray, Level and Richard, 2016; Willson et.al., 2017), and for contesting values inherent in the definition of sport by challenging the hegemonic masculine approaches to competition (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015). However, on the other hand research has found that women playing sports such as football, have also been subject to social interpretation and judgement (Devonport, Russell, Leflay and Conway 2018), and labelled with a perceived sexuality and associated behaviours (Caudwell 2011).

In Australia, the instigation of professional leagues for women in team sports in basketball, football, rugby and cricket have been met with much anticipation, hope, concern and scepticism. This range of emotional responses is no doubt related to issues of interactional justice and legitimacy related to the continual struggle of women's teams/leagues to obtain: adequate spectator attendance; media coverage and sponsorship (Allison, 2017; Fink, 2015); equal/equitable remuneration and treatment (Andersen and Loland, 2017; Hendrick, 2017); job security/ playing contracts (Willson et. al., 2017); and community concerns about women's physical capability and the risk of injury when women compete at a professional level

(Joncheray and Tlili, 2013). The sustainability of women's professional team sport has been questioned in light of the failure of many new leagues (Allison, 2016). Micelotta, Washington and Docekalova's (2018) recent examination of the struggle of women's team sport leagues in the United States and Canada found that women's leagues in professional team sports experience incredible challenges, despite being founded with great hope. As they noted, "efforts to start a women's league were guided by two deep-seated beliefs: that women's professional team sports did represent a profitable market with strong growth potential; and that the founding of each league was seizing the opportunity in a timely manner" (p.114). These two reasons were also precipitating factors in the NRL decision-making to start the women's league. Notably, the WNBA was one case of a women's league created by the men's counterpart in their study, and they found that these ventures were regarded as less credible and within this context "the patronage of a male's league, their value and likelihood of success are discounted" (p.115).

One component absent in these examinations is the voice of women athletes sharing their experiences of the transition from amateur to professional status and the associated management considerations. In particular, the considerations for career pathways, employment arrangements, support needs, structural aspects and the inclusiveness of culture of the clubs. There is an allied body of work examining the transition from junior to professional level sport (mainly of males), which suggests the development of sport-specific talent and expertise is not a good predictor of success in its own right (cf. Roynesdal, 2015). Psychological and behavioural development and problem-solving abilities are equally critical (Van Yperen, 2009), together with organisational, environmental and socio-cultural considerations (Roynesdal, 2015). There is also clear empirical evidence pointing to the importance of appropriate support mechanisms, including social support (Mills et al., 2014) and the development of an athlete's mental toughness and resilience (Cook et al., 2012). Notably, when

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3 Rugby Union professionalised in 1995/96 the focus of much of the research was on the  
4 organisational, commercialisation and globalisation aspects (Slack and O'Brien, 2004) and not  
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6 on how professionalisation would impact the players.  
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10 In taking advantage of the creation of a women's professional rugby league competition,  
11 the objective of this research was to explore the sociocultural and organisational workplace  
12 conditions and requirements of women entering a new environment of paid employment in a  
13 semi-professional team sport. Henriksen and Stambulova (2017) call for a shift in research  
14 attention from the individual athletes to the broader developmental context or environment,  
15 thus requiring studies of specific environments that can establish factors associated with  
16 successful transitions. In particular, we investigated the cultural aspects associated with the  
17 inclusion of women's teams in clubs that to date had only catered for professional men's teams,  
18 elements associated with conditions for the legitimacy and success of the women's  
19 competition, transition considerations and the gender specific requirements thereof. This  
20 research extends sport management scholarship through its investigation of a women's sport  
21 in transition to semi-professional status, the associated implications for designing a new  
22 workplace that meets the needs and requirements of the players, and a conceptualisation of this  
23 process. Management strategies for inclusive strategies, structures and policies to sustain the  
24 co-existence within team professional sport for women and men are proposed in the concluding  
25 sections of this paper.  
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#### 46 **Literature Review**

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48 Challenges and stereotypes associated with women's sport participation (Knight and Giuliano,  
49 2003) continue to shape and influence the professionalisation of women's sport. Universally,  
50 women and girls participate in sport at lower levels than men and boys (Hall and Oglesby,  
51 2016), drop out at higher levels during adolescence – especially in 'masculine' sports (Plaza  
52 and Boiché, 2017) and have fewer opportunities for paid careers in sport (Leberman and Hurst,  
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3 2017), whether as administrators/professionals (Hancock and Hums, 2016), in leadership roles  
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5 (Burton, 2015), as coaches (Norman, Rankin-Wright and Allison, 2018) and/or as professional  
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7 athletes (Agergaard, 2017).  
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10 Individual sports such as the Ladies Professional Golf Association, founded in 1950, and  
11  
12 the Women's Tennis Association, in 1973, have been professionalised for many decades. Of  
13  
14 particular note is the lengthy and well-documented struggle that both sports went through to  
15  
16 achieve professional status and recognition. While much has been achieved, the fight for equal  
17  
18 pay and conditions for women is still ongoing (Flake, Dufur and Moore, 2013; Rowan, 2017).  
19  
20 Arguments about the differential pay have been linked with the lower levels of sponsorship  
21  
22 and game attendance of women's sport (Fink, 2015), and a lack of media coverage (Musto,  
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24 Cooky and Messner, 2017). Data clearly show that equal rights and recognition for women in  
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26 professional sport is still a long way from being achieved (Andersen and Loland, 2017; Fink,  
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28 2016), and the sustainability of women's sport leagues has been questioned (Allison, 2016).  
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30 Micelotta, Washington and Docekalova (2018) noted that while the North American women's  
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32 teams and leagues they investigated were promoted positively around gender, the sport industry  
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34 projected onto this negative associations about the potential success of female ventures in  
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36 professional team sports.  
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42 Societal scepticism of women's professional leagues has been associated with the athletic  
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44 quality of female competitors and has been fuelled by way of (illogical) comparisons of  
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46 strength, speed and 'talent' to their male counterparts (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015; Micelotta,  
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48 Washington and Docekalova, 2018). Furthermore, when women compete at a professional  
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50 level in 'men's sports' such as rugby, social apprehension is elevated due to concerns of their  
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52 physical capability and the potential injury (Joncheray and Tlili, 2013). However, recent  
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54 increases in the number of women's pro-leagues, across a range of sports, is challenging  
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3 societal views about the relevance, success and sustainability of women's professional team  
4 sports (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015).  
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8 The rise in community consciousness of new, expanded and/or re-branded women's  
9 teams and competitions has placed equal/equitable remuneration and treatment (Hendrick,  
10 2017) and the tenuous nature (job security) of playing contracts (Willson et. al., 2017) at the  
11 forefront of discussions. In Australia, the growth of established women's sport competitions in  
12 netball, football (soccer) and basketball, together with emerging new leagues such as the  
13 Australian Football League Women (AFLW) and the rugby codes provide a basis to challenge  
14 past inequities and societal views of what sports women can/should play. Research to date has  
15 indicated that women's professional sport has the potential to: showcase successful women  
16 athletes (Hickey et al., 2016); present a consistent message to schools and clubs that encourages  
17 girls to take up sport (Meier, 2015); challenge stereotypes of women athletes through  
18 appropriate imaging (Allison, 2016); positively influence systematic aspects such as an  
19 inclusive culture and sporting policies (Martindale et al. 2005; Mills et al., 2014). While these  
20 women's competitions can help provide a platform for gender inclusion and positive identity  
21 formation (Willson et. al., 2017), recent research has indicated women's team sport leagues  
22 have not always succeeded in this regard (Micelotta, Washington and Docekalova, 2018).  
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42 Our study of women's expectations and requirements in preparing for the new league, and  
43 for the shift to a new 'work' environment in semi-professional sport, considers environmental  
44 and organisational culture factors, aligned with conceptualisations from transition to  
45 elite/professional sport models. The literature review draws on work on gender in sport  
46 organisations while also acknowledging the centrality of each sport's context and environment  
47 within holistic approaches to talent development, including transition to elite sport (Henriksen,  
48 Stambulova and Roessler, 2010; Henriksen and Stambulova, 2017).  
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### *Professional team sport culture*

There is a substantial body of literature on the gendered nature of organisations (Acker, 1990; 1992), and particularly on sport and its relationship to the extent and nature of female involvement as athletes, coaches, leaders, employees, and volunteers (Caudwell, 2011; Watson and Scraton, 2017). The seemingly irrepressible patriarchal dominance of sport has been a focal point of study of feminist sport scholars for several decades. Sport has been identified as a site of domain hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), which has shaped sport and gender relations for many years (Bunsell, 2013; Connell, 2009). The role of the ‘powerful’ in the creation and evolution of institutions and organisations, and the role of dominant logics on organisational activity has been well documented (cf Washington and Patterson, 2011) across professional sports, and more recently in relation to entrepreneurs seeking to establish women’s leagues in professional team sports (Micelotta et al., 2018).

Much of the research on women in professional team sport suggests that social barriers to participation are present in male-dominated professional sport organisations (Joncheray and Tlili, 2013). In studying women’s professional soccer in the USA, Allison (2016) found that collective actions are still needed to break down the barriers that exist due to gender inequality and its associated stereotypes and assumptions. Sibson (2010) likewise pointed out that the culture of sport organisations is not always female friendly and may lead to women feeling like outsiders. Numerous researchers have noted the persistence of cultural values, beliefs, norms, and orientations associated with masculinity or femininity (Norman, 2010; Sagas, Cunningham and Pastore, 2006; Sartore and Cunningham, 2007).

Furthermore, Sibson (2010), Stronach and Adair (2009) and Velija, Ratna and Flintoff (2014) all argue that instead of achieving gender equity, bringing together male and female sport governing structures may accentuate the gendered nature of that sport’s organisation and culture. Velija et al. (2014) found that in UK Cricket the women’s game was still perceived as



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3 inferior to the men's, and that "gender equity was often peripheral to concerns about  
4 performance excellence and revenue generation" (p. 224). In their study on women's  
5 professional team sport, Micelotta et al. (2018) found that women's leagues were considered  
6 by the industry as inferior to those of their male counterparts. This occurs when women's sport  
7 is framed in direct comparison to men's sport and judged against masculine attributes and  
8 values. However, positive associations can be achieved when women's sport is removed from  
9 this binary and masculine based assessment, such as in Scandinavian countries where women's  
10 football is positioned within a 'new professionalism' (Kjær and Agergaard, 2013).  
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22 In a study of women's professional cricket in Australia Hickey et al. (2016) found that the  
23 presence of a female-friendly organisational culture was critical in ensuring women are  
24 attracted to and stay with the sport. While Australian women's elite cricket has made massive  
25 inroads in positively positioning the women's game, several significant challenges remained.  
26 These included: women's teams were still being coached and managed by men, players were  
27 provided few opportunities for meaningful education, and the level of resourcing was not  
28 optimal. These factors left the women players feeling peripheral and being treated as second-  
29 class citizens. A recent survey by Professional Footballer's Australia (2018) players reported  
30 a low rate of satisfaction with the level of integration between women's and men's programs  
31 at their club, and stressed the need for more female role models in all facets of the sport.  
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44 Hickey et al. (2016) also noted the importance of having female role models as well as male.  
45 Noting that 'high-profile role models, such as Ellyse Perry and Alyssa Healy, were seen to  
46 have enhanced the public perception of women cricketers by representing emphasised  
47 femininity – thus rendering it a less 'risky' identity space for young athletes' (p.2). However,  
48 some of their study participants did comment that the more attractive heterosexual women were  
49 mainly being used as role models and receiving the bulk of media attention, noting that this  
50 might lead to marginalisation of women who do not fit this categorisation.  
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3 The presence of role models who have similar characteristics to the individual athlete creates  
4 a positive influence on participation and considering sport as a career (United Nations, 2007).  
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6 However, in many countries, and in many sports, female role models are scarce or invisible  
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8 (Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006). The development of women role models has been  
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10 identified as a key action area by a plethora of international organisations from the Brighton  
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12 Declaration in 1994<sup>1</sup> to the 2002 Montreal Toolkit<sup>2</sup>, and the 2014 Helsinki Legacy<sup>3</sup> (IWG  
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14 2014). Women in leadership as decision makers and professional athletes can provide role  
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16 models to girls and women with sporting aspirations. Examples of women reaching the top  
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18 assists in building a more gender inclusive culture in sport (Meier, 2015).  
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24 Taken together, these studies have contributed to our understanding of organisational and  
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26 sociocultural factors related to women's professional team sport. There has been less focus in  
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28 the extant literature on the organisational and sociocultural dynamics associated with either the  
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30 sport or the athletes' collective transition to semi-professional status and recognising the  
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32 gendered dimensions of a new women's league. To date, research has not yet examined the  
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34 challenges for women who enter new women's team sport leagues that operate within a broader  
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36 sociocultural context characterised by gender hegemony (Knoppers et al. 2015).  
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### 40 *Transition to professional sport*

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42 While there is little research on women transitioning into professional team sport  
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44 environments, the body of work on transition from junior to elite/professional sport primarily  
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46 on career pathways, suggests complex, multifaceted and dynamic developmental phases  
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48 (Hollings et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2014). The development and success of elite athletes is a  
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50 dynamic and multi-dimensional process influenced by individual, environmental, system,  
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52 organisational and chance factors (Baker and Horton, 2004; Bergeron et al., 2015). The range  
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58 <sup>1</sup> [http://www.iwg-gti.org/@Bin/22427/Brighton+Declaration\\_EN.pdf](http://www.iwg-gti.org/@Bin/22427/Brighton+Declaration_EN.pdf)

59 <sup>2</sup> [http://www.canada2002.org/tool\\_eng.html](http://www.canada2002.org/tool_eng.html)

60 <sup>3</sup> IWG (2014). "Legacy Document of IWG Conference on Women and Sport Helsinki/Finland, June 12–15, 2014." Accessed July 23.  
[http://www.fisu.net/medias/fichiers/lead\\_the\\_change\\_be\\_the\\_change.pdf](http://www.fisu.net/medias/fichiers/lead_the_change_be_the_change.pdf)

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3 of challenges players can face when transitioning include: adapting to the new environment;  
4 coping with pressure and expectations; social competence; athletic performance; and social,  
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6 psychological, organisational, socio-cultural and environmental issues on and off the field  
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8 (Hollings et al., 2014).  
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12 In his study of junior-to-senior transition in football academies, Røynesdal (2015)  
13 investigated transition experiences and found that player adaptability, the ability of athletes to  
14 understand and respond to managers' requirements including playing philosophy, and  
15 development relevant social competencies were critical to success. Martindale et al. (2005)  
16 likewise highlighted the importance of setting clear expectations and goals; having  
17 individualised programs; role modelling and peer mentoring; informal coach-athlete  
18 interactions; and a focus on whole-person development. Similarly, Henriksen, Stambulova and  
19 Roessler (2010) argued that successful transition recognises the importance of role models,  
20 training diversification, development of psychosocial skills, a strong integrated group culture,  
21 and community inclusion. In women's cricket, Hickey et al. (2016) highlighted the need for  
22 appropriate tiered developmental competitions for women that provide a safe and supportive  
23 pathway for elite development, the development of a good working relationship between  
24 community and elite levels, and a female friendly culture in retaining women and girls in the  
25 sport's system.  
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44 Jones, Mahoney and Guddiardi's (2014) identified three transition phases in their research  
45 on junior to elite rugby league: (i) anticipation (players concerned about capability of  
46 reproducing the standards required of the professional level), (ii) encounter (players identify  
47 the requirements and confidently adapt), and (iii) adaption (players understand the importance  
48 of failure and its role in helping them improve both physically and mentally). Our research  
49 explores the first step of this transition, namely the anticipation phase, and delves into the  
50 expectations and requirements of the first cohort of semi-professional women rugby league  
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3 players. The overarching research question was, ‘what are the structural, cultural, employment  
4 and playing considerations that women rugby league players feel are critical to ensure the new  
5 league is successful?’ Success being for players, clubs, the league and the sport’s community.  
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## 10 11 **Method**

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13 We explored the sociocultural and organisational workplace conditions and requirements of  
14 women entering a new environment of paid employment in a semi-professional team sport  
15 with a qualitative methodology. Interviews with NRL personnel, potential players and a  
16 comparative enterprise agreements/ contract analysis of other women sports were undertaken.  
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18 This qualitative approach enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of what was important to  
19 the women vying for selection into the new league, how they viewed the transition process  
20 and explored the rich stories of their journeys in the sport to this historic point in time.  
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## 29 ***Data sources***

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31 In order to provide a contextual grounding for the player interviews, our data collection  
32 commenced by conducting key informant interviews with six NRL staff, coaches and technical  
33 personnel involved in the women’s game at the elite level. These informants provided  
34 background information about the structural, environmental and socio-cultural challenges  
35 faced by current players, and outlined what they felt would be fundamental transition  
36 considerations.  
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45 This information was complemented with a review of publicly available policies and  
46 contractual agreements from women’s professional team sports. These documents have  
47 specific value, as documentation of histories, policies, and norms remain static and can be  
48 compared to the lived experiences of individuals in the context (Bryman, 2012). Seven  
49 agreements/ policies, primarily from Australian sports, were identified relating to major female  
50 competitions occurring in the sports of Australian Football League (AFL), Netball, Basketball  
51 (WNBL), Cricket, Australian Rugby Union, and Football (FFA). Only Australian sport  
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3 competitions were included due to the national industrial relations and employment  
4 requirements, and the uniqueness in the leagues' structure and player pathways in comparison  
5 with other national/continental leagues such as those in Europe and North America. The  
6 analysis of the women's professional team sports' enterprise agreements and employment  
7 policies highlighted six common inclusions: pay, pregnancy and parental leave, pathways,  
8 welfare, education and health care. These provided impetus for interview data interrogation  
9 and formed the basis for an examination of expectations, considerations and concerns common  
10 across the women's team sport sector.  
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21 Most centrally, the primary method of data gathering was through semi-structured  
22 interviews with prospective players. Specifically, interviews were conducted with all players  
23 (49) who attended a pre-selection training camp. The camp was held in the short period  
24 between the NRL's announcement (December 2017) that a new women's league would  
25 commence in 2018 and the determination of the marquee players, the structure of the  
26 competition, the number of teams, club selections and player contract inclusions (March-  
27 August 2018). Prior to the start of each interview, interviewees completed a participant  
28 background information sheet which captured their demographic data, including rugby league  
29 playing history.  
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42 We asked the interviewees about their sport biographies, experiences of gender in playing  
43 rugby league, expectations associated with a semi-professional team sport career, and areas  
44 of perceived challenges and support requirements for the league and club's (organisation).  
45 These physical, sociocultural, and organisational considerations voiced by women rugby  
46 league players transitioning into a semi-professional team sport provide a rich tapestry of  
47 views on gender, values and assumptions, and how these may contribute to gendered  
48 practices of homogeneity (Knoppers et al. 2015). The interview guide was also informed by  
49 the literature on organisational cultural values, beliefs, norms associated with masculinity or  
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femininity (cf Antunovic and Hardin, 2015; Connell, 1987) and the athlete transition literature (Jones, Mahoney and Guddiardi, 2014; Henriksen, Stambulova and Roessler, 2010; Hollings et al., 2014; Martindale et al., 2005; Roynesdal, 2015).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview protocols followed ethical requirements and approvals from the first author's university. The interviews averaged 30 minutes in length. The interview participants were: aged under 23 years (40%), 24-30 years (32%), and 31+years (18%). Rugby league playing experience ranged from 1 to 20 years ( $M=7.7$  years,  $SD=3.2$ ) with players averaging 3.8 years at the representative level.

### **Data analysis**

All three authors were involved in conducting the interviews and the material was initially coded independently. The three researchers then discussed their coding and revisions were made until a three-party agreement was achieved (Farmer, Robinson, Elliot and Eyles, 2006), we then continued the process of data reduction through axial coding (Bryman, 2012). Aggregate themes and sub-themes were subsequently identified to capture how women perceived the opportunity and challenges associated with the development and commencement of the new women's league, and the transition process to semi-professional employment.

### **Findings**

A summary of the cross-sport analysis of enterprise agreements and policies is firstly presented to provide contextual data, followed by the main data source the player interviews.

#### ***Policies and contractual agreements***

The agreements examined cover pay, pregnancy and parental leave, pathways, welfare, education and health care. For the purposes of this paper our analysis focussed on two aspects that were critically relevant to our study aim, namely: Pay Conditions and Education, Health and Welfare and examined agreements that were valid as of early 2018 and we note that these are subject to continual change. This analysis provided a useful overview of the progression

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3 of women's (semi) professional team sport in Australia. The payments across female  
4 professional and semi-professional sports demonstrated a clear trajectory of increasing  
5 salaries and payments for women's professional team sports, including for national team  
6 members (see Table 1).  
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14 Australian Cricket, AFLW and Football/Soccer codes have all adopted a tiered approach to  
15 player payments. Large increases were evidenced after a few initial seasons – typically after  
16 three years (once league has found its feet). As of 2018, Cricket players were the highest paid  
17 sportswomen in Australia and they are now considered fully professional (Cricket Australia,  
18 2014). In addition to salary, other benefits included camp payments, retainers, direct  
19 financial support for further education and health and welfare. All sports have policies  
20 relating to one or more of maternity leave, parental leave and childcare arrangements (see  
21 Table 2).  
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### 36 ***Results: Player interviews*** 37

38 The women we interviewed spoke at length about their experiences of rugby league as well as  
39 providing suggestions, recommendations and requirements for the development of a  
40 professional competition for women. The interviews took place before any confirmed details  
41 about the new competition were available: e.g. the structure, player selection process, number  
42 and location of clubs, duration, contract conditions. Five themes: *I am Woman (Gender)*,  
43 *Balancing Act*, *Relationships*, *Culture*, *Transition* emerged. All interviewees spoke of  
44 challenges and/or opportunities that were related to being a woman (gender); the need to juggle  
45 and/or balance work, education, family responsibilities, travel, training and playing  
46 commitments (balancing act); the importance of supporting other women players, and  
47 recognising those rugby league players who had worked tirelessly to develop the women's  
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3 game at the elite level (relationships); the inclusiveness of the club for women (organisational  
4 culture); and a multi-faceted (transition) aspect that comprised: physical requirements and  
5 technical support, wellbeing, and playing conditions, articulated within a gendered  
6 interpretation. Interview quotes are presented using the interviewee and interviewer number.  
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### 10 11 12 *I am Woman* (Gender)

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14 Family and childcare responsibilities featured as major considerations for nearly all of the  
15 interviewees, either due to their own current personal situation, their anticipated future  
16 obligations, or in empathy for their peers with young children. The interviewees explicitly  
17 highlighted areas where, by virtue of being a woman, they faced gender specific decisions  
18 related to their playing careers, physicality and employment conditions (e.g. the impact of  
19 pregnancy, career longevity).  
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29 *A big thing for me is wanting to have more kids .. but you've got to put that off for your*  
30 *career. So say I wanted to have another kid in a year or two when the competition starts*  
31 *flourishing, am I going to be out of the game because of that? The men don't ever have to think*  
32 *of that ... contractually what could that mean for us?* (Interview 2-4)  
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36 In a related vein, the interviewees spoke of the need for women's welfare support at each  
37 club, noting there were issues that women would not feel comfortable speaking to a man about,  
38 *'female to female would be preferred. (I would) feel more comfortable talking to a female about*  
39 *female issues'* (Interview 3 - 4).  
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45 Many of the interviewees noted that the top female players have high expectations of  
46 themselves and others. They felt that women were harder on themselves than men were, aa  
47 these interviewees didn't want to be perceived as being 'soft'; *'treat us like the men ... I*  
48 *wouldn't want them to treat us differently just because we're women'* (Interview 1-4).  
49  
50 Interestingly, in this same interview the interviewee said that she felt that being a female rugby  
51 league player was *'an advantage as the odds of being selected for elite teams was higher than*  
52 *for male players'*. (Interview 1-4).  
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3 Another player reflected on an experience that spoke about the different way women  
4 approach being part of the training squad, explaining:

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8 *I was actually talking to one of the coaches ... he was saying when they are telling us off*  
9 *for doing something, like leaving the water bottles around. Women have that mindset of every*  
10 *single one of us then goes, oh is that me? Where men kind of go, oh, that's not me. .. we think*  
11 *differently ... (so) there needs to be a different approach ... we're playing a men's sport, like*  
12 *we're a dominated men sport... but there are certain different ways we learn. (Interview 1-6)*

13  
14 Acknowledgement of their talent, prowess and differentness was seen as important in  
15 valuing and respecting the women that play the sport. The women spoke about being respected  
16 for who they are, not glamourising the sport or picking out 'pin-up girls' to be the public  
17 relations face of the new competition. As one interviewee stated:

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22 *I don't want sexualisation of our game. I don't want them to put up these women that don't*  
23 *portray what rugby league is. We are of all shapes, sizes, gender, you know, gender, sexualities.*  
24 (Interview 3-2)

### 25 26 27 *Balancing Act*

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29 The women's pathways to high-performance competition were strikingly consistent in terms  
30 of the sacrifices they made in order to play. All interviewees spoke about compromise,  
31 determination and dedication resulting in a *Balancing Act* of considerations: namely  
32 balancing employment, education, training, team and competition location, and family  
33 considerations. The following two quotes are indicative of this balancing act situation that  
34 they have lived and breathed in order to compete at the elite level:

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45 *(we have to do) so much training ... trying to juggle uni, full-time work and –*  
46 *family ... and club training ... I was working full-time, I'm doing uni and I've got*  
47 *club training on Tuesday and Thursday. I'm exhausted by the end of the week. So*  
48 *we have to fit club training, state training – National training. All into seven days.*  
49 *As well as your family, work and whatever else you have, any other commitments.*  
50 *... It's stressful. Like, oh my God. (Interviewee 4-5)*

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53 The pending introduction of a new league was welcomed by all interviewees, but there  
54 were also concerns the requirements associated with moving into a semi-professional (i.e.  
55 part-time) sport career might create further tensions and more juggling to make it work.  
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3 Many interviewees spoke of losing their jobs due to their playing commitments ... “*when*  
4 *you spend that much time off work and constantly taking time off work to play you face losing*  
5 *your job* (Interview C3)”, or having to make significant life choices about jobs and careers  
6 and give up the chance to play for the national team “*I had to put my career on hold last year*  
7 *when I got picked ... I was in a very high prioritised job, like it’s the hardest one to get into*  
8 *and , that’s when they wanted me to come And I just said, no, to amazing opportunity –*  
9 *Opportunity of a lifetime.*” (Interview 4-2).

10 The decision to keep playing rugby league also resulted in players changing jobs, choosing  
11 to work in part-time jobs with no career pathway for playing flexibility, dropping out of  
12 university or travelling long distances to train and play.

### 23 *Relationships*

24 The quote opening this paper suggests that women players place significant value on player  
25 relationships, and this emerged as a theme in our research. The level of awareness of not only  
26 their own personal circumstances but also that of the other players was striking. The women  
27 placed a high value on being together, and collegiality between teammates and coaching staff  
28 alike. As one woman revealed, “*with the women there’s always dramas and everything .. but*  
29 *at this club we all get along ... you always look forward to training*’ (Interview 1-5).

30 .. *even with our coaches they, they’re people that we can approach so easily and they*  
31 *actually care about you and then that makes you like improve your game. ... they actually give*  
32 *you a call, like hey how you going? ... They’re more, they’re our friends first and then they’re*  
33 *coaches .. they know the right time to switch on and off. And I think that relationship is so*  
34 *important because that plays a lot in your career as a footballer.* (Interview 1-5)

35 The interviewees expressed an overwhelming concern about ‘external’ (i.e. women from a  
36 sport other than rugby league) talent coming into the new league. They feared newcomers  
37 might ‘take away’ opportunities from players who had been part of the game throughout the  
38 last decade and have been loyal to their local clubs during that time.

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*I personally will get frustrated and really annoyed at the game if you have other codes that come through and make it too, what we worked hard to get. Even if I don't get picked but there was talent coming through the ranks and they get picked over me then fair call. But if you have someone that just came to play for say two months of league, got the basics right and get picked because they're fit and then they play NRL, then that's when you start questioning why do I need to play my local comp, why can't I just go straight into NRL? (Interview 4-5).*

This was strong sense of social justice for players who had demonstrated career committed to high performance rugby league was espoused by a majority of the interviewees. The desire to support other players was evident, even if these interviewees were not chosen to be in the inaugural complement of teams. *'Even if you personally don't make the 40 or aren't NRL contracted, still helping those ones that you can, like encouraging people to come to your club, play club footie'.* (Interview 4-4).

The mindfulness of selectors and coaches in relation to family support was of concern for players. Particularly regarding moving away from home for a short period of time for the initial competition round, and the disruption this would cause for their families for small financial gain.

### *Organisational Culture*

The necessity of clubs, the league and broadly the NRL to be more aware of the inclusion of women/girls was raised by the majority of the interviewees. While very few interviewees identified experiences of abject exclusion or discrimination on the basis of gender, nearly all the interviewee narratives touched on the lack of active inclusion. Examples were provided of unconscious bias about the gendered nature of the sport, as one interviewee lamented: *'people need to get it in their heads that girls can play footie'* (Interview 2-5).

Most of the interviewees identified (mainly) men within their clubs or representative playing careers that had been exceptionally supportive and had encouraged them to develop as elite players. However, it was clear that many clubs in which the women played either experienced an underlying male hegemony or benevolent sexism which was ingrained in the club's culture.

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3 As Interview 1-5 explained, *'the club they always talk about culture (but) ...you can tell*  
4 *sometimes that there's a little bit of a divide between the men and the women ...they are very*  
5 *accepting and open and warm to us (but) .. it's an old boys clubs too ... it's very much ingrained*  
6 *in the boys mentality.*

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12 The importance of an inclusive culture was seen as vital not just for the women's teams in  
13 the new league, but also for the sport as a whole. We heard many stories of how the  
14 interviewees struggled to find clubs to play with as girls, the lack of opportunities to play the  
15 sport in schools, and the need to create deeper talent pools through a stronger development  
16 pathway. This means not just waiting for women to come to the club, but for the club to be  
17 proactive in attracting and retaining female players.

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22 *Encouraging the club to get 18, 16 year old girls to start playing footie... , if they can*  
23 *gradually grow it to where all girls play football and that's through all clubs, like all junior*  
24 *clubs, if we can get that then that's where it needs to start. (Interview 3-4).*

### 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 *Transition Training, Support and Preparation*

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37 This theme explores the expectations and requirements of becoming semi-professional  
38 women rugby league players. It comprised two sub-themes *physical preparation, training,*  
39 *coaching and technical support,* and *playing conditions.* Underpinning both these sub-themes  
40 was dominant argument for all personnel working in the women's game to be capable of  
41 tailoring services and requirements to meet women's specific needs.

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49 All of the interviewees spoke passionately about the importance of ensuring a high  
50 standard of play, and the need to support players with adequate pre-season preparation time.

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54 *... ideally clubs are picking girls way before the end of the season, and they're*  
55 *giving them programmes and saying, this is what we want you to do, this is the level*  
56 *we need you to be. So when they're coming into that comp, girls are fit, healthy and*  
57 *ready to go and the competition is going to be really good. (Interview T1)*  
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3 In particular, interviewees stressed that the clubs needed to be adequately equipped and  
4 knowledgeable in dealing with high-performance female athletes and able to ensure that the  
5  
6 players were properly prepared to step up to ‘play for pay’. As one senior player noted:  
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10 *The girls have to be fit. If girls are fit and playing football [it] will be exciting.*  
11 *... So we need to make sure that every club’s at that State of Origin level, to make*  
12 *every game a good spectacle. (Interview T3).*  
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16 Knowing how to coach and train female athletes, and appropriate injury management by  
17 sports science staff, was also seen as extremely important by many of the interviewees. The  
18 women were adamant that all of the players selected into the new league’s teams should have  
19 access to high quality support staff. This was a non-negotiable requirement for a successful  
20 transition, and the following sentiment was repeated by all interviewees:  
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27 *The NRL clubs that are going to join, the coaches need to be professional, they can’t*  
28 *just be anyone, they can’t be looking at the women’s game and say I’ll just fob this guy*  
29 *off to coach them. We need top level coaches, if we want to be playing top level.*  
30 *Medics, physios, and they can’t just be – leftovers. (Interview 1-4)*  
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34 The importance of teams having high-quality, knowledgeable coaches that were also  
35 experienced in coaching female athletes, was another consistent sentiment expressed by most  
36 of the women interviewed. Knowing the differences in training and working with women, “*Just*  
37 *understanding that you know, the needs of the female body compared to men, how their bodies*  
38 *are going to change if they’re training or if they’re eating these foods, taking these*  
39 *supplements” (Interview 1-5).*  
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48 Given the female teams were to be situated within existing clubs, and thus be exposed to the  
49 culture of current high-performance male teams there was an expressed concern that football  
50 staff assigned to the woman’s teams would be ill-equipped to appropriately manage the  
51 women’s teams and needs. As an interviewee stated “*I think you need to have a woman*  
52 *representing women because men don’t understand what we’re going through” (Interview 2-*  
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3 Regarding playing conditions, administrative considerations relating to the new  
4 league's policies and procedures of player pay, medical coverage, pregnancy policies and  
5 age and education frameworks were raised in all the interviews.  
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10 *Like costs, we pay for our own gym memberships and physios and it all comes*  
11 *out of our pockets, unless you've got private healthcare or something like that. I*  
12 *know that if we have a major injury, like I had an MRI a few weeks ago, and that*  
13 *was paid for by the NRL but if I'm just going for my check-ups, I'm constantly*  
14 *paying out money if my healthcare is over. I think memberships and all medical, all*  
15 *add up. (Interview 1-3)*  
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18 The focus on financial security or lack thereof was present throughout the player interviews.  
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20 In this context, players also discussed the challenges of team location, athlete relocation and  
21 relevant infrastructure requirements.  
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25 *... a lot of the girls wouldn't be in it for the money, because it is so new. But*  
26 *making sure we're looked after in all aspects because, obviously we do it for the*  
27 *love of the game. Even this weekend, we got money for being here and it was an*  
28 *honour to be selected for us girls. But it's still making sure if you get picked in the*  
29 *NRL that you're going to be able to look after yourself and have a decent salary to*  
30 *live off. (Interview 1-6)*  
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34 Interviews also uncovered the continual need and desire for player welfare support staff to  
35 assist with education and work placement guidance, as well as assisting with players who are  
36 required to relocate.  
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41 *Job placement would be really nice. ... sometimes it comes to a point where I*  
42 *have to say no to footie because of work. We want the freedom where we can just*  
43 *say yes, and not have to worry about work. And maybe that's only if they can*  
44 *relocate us, have something for us to do down there to help us through. Like some*  
45 *sort of – Job placement. (Interview 4-3)*  
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49 That said, for the large majority of athletes' money was not a limiting factor in terms of  
50 participation. Their motivations were more altruistic.  
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54 *I'd say 90% of the girls would do it for no money. It's not about money. It's*  
55 *about taking our sport to the next level, something is finally happening and I would*  
56 *happily pay to get myself to training. It's just about being part of something that's*  
57 *going to be pretty big. (Interview 2-3)*  
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## Discussion and Conclusions

Building on the themes that emerged in our literature review, this study explored the sociocultural and organisational workplace conditions and requirements of women entering a new environment of paid employment in a semi-professional team sport. We found that women were emotionally invested in the new competition, and were both excited and anxious about the transition; for themselves, for their playing colleagues, and for the future of the women's game. In entering an arena that has to date been the exclusive purview of men, women's gendered experiences of being on the margins for so long (Agergaard, 2017) and having to 'balance' multiple commitments to play at the elite level have shaped expectations and requirements about the transition to semi-professionalism. Factors specific to women (Flake, Dufur and Moore, 2013; Rowan, 2017), the inclusiveness of club culture (Hickey et al., 2016; Martindale et al. 2005; Mills et al., 2014) and a focus on relationships were inlaid with transition training, support and preparation considerations. While other research has discussed women's overlapping identities as related to race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation and organisational oppression or discrimination experiences (Walker and Melton, 2015), these aspects were only tangentially raised by the women we interviewed.

Our analysis of the trajectory of the collective agreements in Australian women's team sports clearly shows vast improvements in payments, conditions and recognition. These women's leagues led the way in contesting the legitimization of their place in the sport industry as paid professional players. The pathway that these sports forged has disrupted societal views of the women's place in professional team sport (Norman, Rankin-Wright and Allison, 2018), and more generally legitimized the involvement of women in sports perceived as 'masculine' (i.e. Australian rules football, basketball, cricket, football, rugby). The women interviewed spoke passionately about their hopes, dreams and aspirations for women's rugby league to gain greater acceptance as a sport for girls and women, for the new



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3 competition to be of the highest quality so that it is taken seriously and develops into a  
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5 sustainable and successful league that avoids the pitfalls of the many failed women's  
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7 professional team leagues sport (Micelotta, Washington and Docekalova, 2018).  
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10 Research to date consistently points out how sexism remains uncontested in sport  
11  
12 (Fink, 2015, 2016) so that it was prevalent within the clubs was not unexpected given the  
13  
14 recency of the growth in the women's game. The inclusiveness of organisational culture has  
15  
16 been shown to have a major impact on women's engagement in careers in professional sport  
17  
18 (Norman, Rankin-Wright and Allison, 2018). The new women's rugby league teams are  
19  
20 located in men's clubs, that have a long history and pre-existing culture that will need to  
21  
22 grapple with how to accommodate women's teams and become inclusive rather than 'men's  
23  
24 clubs'. The culture of these clubs will no doubt change in response to this inclusion, and  
25  
26 clarity of communication about expectations of both men and women, with support to do so,  
27  
28 will be vital for the success of these ventures.  
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33 The need for women-specific support within the clubs and leagues reflects other  
34  
35 research on how to culturally facilitate the inclusion of minority populations within sport  
36  
37 (Stronach and Adair, 2009). Rugby league for example, has acknowledged the specific  
38  
39 requirements of Indigenous and Pacifica players in the men's game and introduced specialised  
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41 support services and personnel (McDonald, Rodriguez and George, 2018), and more recently  
42  
43 the importance of providing employment and leadership opportunities (Lakisa, Adair and  
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45 Taylor, 2014). Organisations that value gender diversity, provide relevant support,  
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47 opportunities and strengthen career pathways for women, and ensure that women are  
48  
49 represented throughout the organisation at all levels and roles (Pieters, 2012). The findings also  
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51 pointed to a number of practical areas for the NRL's consideration<sup>4</sup>. This included immediate,  
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58 <sup>4</sup> The recommendations that we made to the NRL included: player rights and entitlements, club provisions,  
59 creating a safe and appropriate workplace for women, player pathways and development, promoting the game,  
60 development of women coaches and high-performance support staff, dual career / career transition, education  
and training, and the establishment of a Women's Advisory Committee. The NRL has implemented most of the



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3 short and longer-term actions to ensure that the women's competition is successful both on and  
4 off the field. Women rugby league players were excited about their semi-professional status  
5 and the opportunities, respect and recognition that this creates for current and future  
6 generations of girls and women.  
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12 Our primary contribution is to the emerging body of literature on women's professional  
13 sport. We offer a rich contextualized account of how transition to paid employment for the first  
14 time provides unique opportunities and constraints for sports that have to date been men  
15 dominant. Whereas much past research has focused on gender under-representation  
16 'masculine' sports (Joncheray, Level and Richard, 2016; Plaza and Boiché, 2017; Willson  
17 et.al., 2017), or how sport can challenge the hegemonic masculine approaches to competition  
18 (Antunovic and Hardin, 2015), the investigation we undertook highlights the key role of  
19 sociocultural aspects and industry-specific challenges and cultural barriers where social  
20 considerations are particularly salient. Our findings reveal novel insights about how women's  
21 experiences of the hegemonic masculinity of sport (Connell, 2009), have shaped their quest for  
22 legitimacy, recognition and resources.  
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58 short-term recommendations and in September 2018 the inaugural women's Premiership commenced with four  
59 NRL clubs fielding teams.  
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## Running Head: WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE

Table 1: Pay conditions<sup>1</sup>

Organization	Min. Payments (\$AUS)	Total Team Salary Cap	No. contracted teams/or in Squad	Average Income	Retainers	Notes
AFLW	2017: \$5,000, \$10,000 to a priority signing and \$25,000 for two marquee players (\$10,000 for ambassador work)		8 teams	\$6,667	NA	Training & meetings: 9hrs/week Competition = 7 rounds
	2018 <sup>1</sup> : Three tiers: Rookie \$8,500; Tier 2 \$12,000; & Tier 1 \$20,000 (\$40k for 2+ ambassadors)		8 teams	\$10,500	NA	Training: Pre-season =13 hrs/wk; In-season = 10 hrs/wk + match day hours Competition = 7 rounds
	2019: Three tiers: \$10,500; \$14,500; & \$30,000 (\$20,000 playing + \$10,000 ambassador)		10 teams	\$18,333	\$8,500	Same hours as 2018 Relocation expenses; \$127,500 divided between players of 4 teams in finals.
Basketball Australia (WNBL)	2017/2018 season: \$10,287	No cap	8 teams	\$33,660	2017: \$10,000 2018/19: \$12,200 <sup>2</sup>	A few international players earn >\$100,000. Comparison: WNBA average salary is US\$71,635 (max US\$110,00)
Cricket Australia	National players 2017/2018: \$72,076 2021/2022: \$87,609			2018: \$179,000 2022: \$211,000	2016: \$40,000 2017 – 2022 same as min. payment	380% increase in minimum payment in 2008 to 2017. Retainer doubled from 2013 to 2017.
	State players 2017/2018: \$25,659 2021/2022: \$27,287			2018: \$55,000 2022: \$58,000		
	Big Bash 2018: \$36,000		8 WBBL teams	\$46,000		
Football (W-League)	2015/2016 season: \$10,000	\$150,000	23 per club 9 teams	\$6,522		
	2018/2019 season: \$12,287	\$350,000	20 per club 9 teams	\$17,500		
Netball Australia (Super Netball)	2017-2018: \$27,375	\$675,000	10 per club 8 teams	\$67,500	\$500,000	
	2019: \$30,000					
Rugby Union	Rugby 7s 2018: \$44,500	NA		\$35,000	Wallerroos (National Rugby 15s) \$1000 per match	Parity in entry level pay between men's & women's seven's players.

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14 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-12/female-cricketers-seeing-benefits-of-new-pay-deal/8893850>  
15 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-03/aflw-players-earn-new-pay-deal-for-2018-season/9114618>  
16 Nov 2019 CBA - AFLW, pay rise of 38% per club, plus prize money for top four teams  
17 Tier 1– \$24,600 Tier 2 - \$19,000 Tier 3 - \$16,200 Tier 4 - \$13,400 Minimum tier on pro-rata with men's minimum Contracted 13 hours  
18 training pre-season, 10 in-season <https://thewomensgame.com/news/basketball-delivers-pregnancy-policy-514882>  
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For Peer Review Only

## Running Head: WOMEN'S RUGBY LEAGUE

Table 2: Education, Health and Welfare

Organization	Education, Health and Welfare
<b>AFLW</b>	Medical insurance; Income Protection; Pregnancy/early childcare 2019 Collective bargaining agreement: coverage for football related injuries extending 18mths post contract; \$335,000 allocated by AFL for education, wellbeing, support and research into the needs of AFLW players.
<b>Basketball Australia (WNBL)</b>	2017 - Set training periods/hours (10am-4pm) to allow for work and study A childcare policy and parental considerations were included in the negotiations for the 2018+ Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) <sup>1</sup> .
<b>Cricket Australia</b>	2017 Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) Gender pay equity approach Gender-neutral parental leave policy Flexible work hours Private health insurance
<b>Football (W-League)</b>	Income protection in the event of injuries up to \$1500 per week. No private health insurance provided. However, minimum A-league medical standards are now implemented at all W-league clubs (medical testing, club doctor, club trainers, club physiotherapy). Early Childcare policy (airfares and room if player is travelling with a child under 4 years) 23 weeks/multi-year contracts possible; grievance procedure for dispute resolution
<b>Netball Australia (Super Netball)</b>	National squad members: Education & employment \$150,000 Health and wellbeing \$25,000 Super league: Private Insurance; Income Protection for up to two years in the event of injury or pregnancy; early childcare (game day travel provisions for children under 12 months and a carer)
<b>Rugby Union</b>	Pregnancy policy introduced Medical, insurance, image rights

Data from Cricket Australia 2016, *CA's landmark deal for women: Payment pool jumps from \$2.36m to \$4.23m for Australia's elite female cricketers*, Cricket Australia, viewed 22 January 2018 <https://www.cricketaustralia.com.au/news/womens-cricket-australia-player-payments-huge-increase-lanning-perry-southern-stars/2016-04-06>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thewomensgame.com/news/basketball-delivers-pregnancy-policy-514882>