

FORGING A NEW PATH TO SUCCESS FOR WOMEN IN PROFESSIONAL TEAM SPORTS: RESEARCH FOR EVIDENCE-BASED ACTION



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Women's professional team sport leagues are achieving impressive growth across the world, but while they are celebrated by their supporters and the media, women still do not have a playing field level with their male counterparts. Women athletes often earn less than male athletes, and women's teams frequently do not receive similar sponsorship, media and other opportunities.

Many physical, social, cultural and organisational elements shape women's professional team sport leagues in ways that ignore or even widen the gap between women and men in professional sport – but these factors are not always clear.

To better understand how women's professional team sport leagues are viewed by women athletes, coaches and managers, a team of Victoria University and Griffith University researchers have investigated what shapes success in women's professional team sports.

Through a series of studies, this research highlights the debates, dilemmas and potential actions for women's professional teams to be inclusive, sustainable and successful.

Funded by an ARC Discovery grant¹, the researchers worked with various professional sport governing bodies to uncover innovative management strategies, structures and practices for women's professional sports workplaces. In practice, this meant:

- empowering women athletes in professional team sports by listening to their experiences
- documenting the factors that indicate success and sustainability in women's professional team sports
- gaining insights into the management of national women's team sport leagues
- sharing their discoveries and analysis through a range of dissemination methods.

WHAT WE FOUND

To build knowledge and action to advance women's professional sport leagues, our extensive findings can be summarised into main four areas:

1. Existing research into women's professional sport leagues and future directions
2. Relationship-based expectations (psychological contract) with women athletes in professional team sports
3. How current of career support (continuum of care) is perceived by women athletes in professional team sports.
4. Legitimising women's professional sport leagues through research, policy, and practice (knowledge translation)

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WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL SPORT LEAGUES: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Women's professional team sport has grown in strength and popularity in recent years, offering more professional league competitions for women athletes and challenging gendered ideas of professional sports. Leagues including the Australian Football League Women's (AFLW), National Rugby League Women's (NRLW), the Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) and The Hundred women's cricket league in the United Kingdom increasingly contribute to the brand value, appeal, reach and influence of their sport, teams and athletes.

Women's professional team sports have also been associated with positive social change, female role models and inclusive fan cultures. 'Such association has highlighted gender inequality in sports, including the limited opportunities for women in leadership and coaching, lower investment and pay rates for women's sport, greater difficulties in attracting sponsorship, and limited career progress for women.

As women's professional team sport has expanded, researchers have started to explore the many factors that influence or impede the success and sustainability of women athletes in these sporting leagues, taking into consideration gender identity, diversity, inclusivity, and other organisational and social factors.

Fifty-seven academic peer-reviewed journal articles on this topic were published between 2000 and 2019. Together, they offer a wide range of insights. A review of these journals identified patterns and gaps in the research signalled future research directions that could be useful for evidence-based policy and management practices.

The articles shared five key themes:

1. The design and implementation of **sport governance models** for women's professional sport leagues
2. The unique opportunities women's professional sports provide to promote **inclusion and diversity**
3. The importance of the quantity and quality of **media coverage** of women's professional sport
4. The experiences, expectations, and **gendered roles** of women's professional athletes
5. The role of **talent development and retention** in the growth and sustainability of women's professional sport leagues.

Research to date has shown that when governance models (Theme 1) were diverse and relevant to local circumstances, women's professional sport thrived, however it was hampered when expected to follow the traditional conventions of men's sport. Analysis also identified strong expectations for women's professional sport to promote values of inclusion and diversity (Theme 2). Opportunities were identified for media professionals and academics to

collaborate on re-imagining how the media could influence the promotion and distribution of women's professional sport (Theme 3), and women's sport contributes to broader gender equity and equality agendas (Theme 4).

Researchers identified four key future research directions into women's professional sport which will be better placed to support leagues and sporting organisations to make more targeted and effective positive change.

1

Include diverse approaches that:

- reflect and understand the issues of gender, diversity, difference and the way these issues intersect (intersectionality)
- challenge the taken-for-granted sports power structures and stereotypical gender norms.

2

Draw on theories and conceptual frameworks that:

- are innovative and enabling
- deal with the uniqueness of women's professional sport leagues
- support growth and development.

3

Deploy 'transdisciplinary' research approaches that:

- bring together researchers from different disciplines, working in partnership with sports practitioners
- enrich the understanding and nuances of sustainable development in women's professional sport leagues
- provide opportunities for important advancements in the management of women's professional sport leagues.

4

Identify fit-for-purpose sustainable business models that:

- incorporate emerging and unique research designs for women's professional sport leagues
- challenge traditional structures and practices in sport management.
- grow and develop women's professional sport leagues.

To read more about this topic refer to:

Alana Thomson, Michelle Hayes, Clare Hanlon, Kristine Toohey & Tracy Taylor (2023)

"Women's professional sport leagues: a systematic review and future directions for research", Sport Management Review, 26:1, 48-71, [DOI: 10.1080/14413523.2022.2066391](https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2022.2066391)

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THE "PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT" FOR WOMEN ATHLETES IN PROFESSIONAL TEAM SPORTS

The working relationships between athletes and their employer organisations are based on two types of contracts. The written contract reflects the up-front expectations and obligations of the job, including training, public relations and match day. However, all working relationships also include implied expectations and responsibilities based on mutual obligation, expressed through the employers' and employees' beliefs, ambitions, power dynamics, culture and society. In professional women's sport, these implied expectations – referred to as the "psychological contract" (PC) – are often steeped in the expectations surrounding men's sport and are not necessarily compatible with the needs and lives of women players.

For example, although pay equity policies address some of the gendered pay imbalances in women's professional and semi-professional team sports, women athletes still generally face numerous challenges in achieving equality, as existing policies do not necessarily include issues like maternal and family responsibilities.

I do find that it gets too stressful for professional athletes, especially women being able to balance their sporting career with their family, with work [it's] ... too overloading

Female Professional Athlete

Few studies have explored how PCs operate in professional or semi-professional women's sport. Now that more women athletes are competing in league sports, it is timely to examine how PCs work in highly masculinised sports workplaces and how those assumptions play out in women's sport.

The "Psychological Contract" research project aimed to examine women's leagues within two professional women's sports leagues to explore how gender affected the employment experiences of their women athletes. Players were asked how they perceived and experienced elements of their PCs, and both players and organisations were asked about their expectations of each other.

Our research indicated that these women athletes have complex experiences. When they feel supported, they often invest greater time and resources to develop their leagues so that future athletes might receive better pay and conditions. As a result, women athletes found that demands on their time, resources and emotional investment increased beyond appropriate financial compensation.

Some women athletes felt that entrenched masculine values persisted in their sport, and that they were expected to adapt to fit the masculine approach, as this was considered 'easier' than changing the organisation.

I was working washing cars because I needed a job that was flexible (to accommodate training and playing). It was just enough to keep me to survive

Female Professional Athlete

However, many women athletes indicated their employers were taking steps towards equality (some more slowly than others). In both leagues, the athletes' attitudes were generally positive about these steps. In exchange for producing a professional product, athletes expected organisations to provide good quality facilities, coaching, and psychological support. For their part, coaches and managers respected athletes' contributions, commitment, and passion, and leveraged these to benefit their leagues.

While notably one sport has steadily increased pay rates for women, the average player payments are still below a liveable wage for the majority. These offers signal that organisations are working towards reducing the pay gap and future equal pay and conditions for women.

We aren't there yet but let me tell you we have come a long way from when girls couldn't even play the sport once they turned 12. Change didn't happen for the men overnight either, so I don't think we are doing too badly. Improvements are all going in the right direction.

Female Professional Athlete

Central to creating positive change and improving the standing of women's sport and athletes is the need to challenge masculine culture and organisational processes that persist in these sports organisations – both on and off the field. Professional sports organisations may need to re-examine their processes and perhaps create new ones that are more suited to their women athletes.

WHAT WE FOUND

Women athletes would like to see:

1. Organisation-wide commitment to equality and improved financial investment
2. Collaboration between the athletes and sport organisations to create positive performance cultures, experiences and successes for all
3. Consideration of how to overcome gender based barriers—including ways to implement more gender friendly processes
4. Innovative practices to support women as professional athletes in professional team sports

To read more about this topic refer to:

Tracy Taylor, Wendy O'Brien, Kristine Toohey & Clare Hanlon (2023) "The psychological contract of women athletes in semi-professional team sports", Sport Management Review, [DOI: 10.1080/14413523.2023.2243110](https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2023.2243110)

EXPLORING (SEMI) PROFESSIONALIZATION IN WOMEN'S TEAM SPORT THROUGH A CONTINUUM OF CARE LENS

As women's professional team sport leagues grow in popularity, it is timely to explore whether existing management processes and practices, based on values developed through a long, male-dominated history of sport, are relevant for women's sport.

To better understand and evaluate this issue, Victoria University and Griffith University researchers interviewed both athletes and coaches/managers from three different sport leagues, drawing on the idea of 'continuum of care', which encompasses the values of affirmation, empowerment, and belonging.

In interviews, the athletes' everyday experiences of care were juxtaposed with how organisations administer such care – demonstrated through salary structures, contracts and facilities. Clearly, fair pay and good quality facilities can affirm and sustain an athletes' potential, recognise their work (or not), and signify women's place in the league.

*It comes down to sort of the culture . . .
So, what does the sport need to do?
It needs to create welcoming, safe,
remunerated environments so that your
talented athletes are choosing [this sport].*

Female Professional Athlete

When leagues improve salaries, contracts and facilities (even when inadequate), women can feel that their emotional and physical investment is justified and rewarded. When organisational care is lacking, persistent inequalities can result in a culture of exclusion, where women athletes feel less valued and experience a range of negative emotions.

A key issue affecting organisational care is the way that women are perceived as the primary family caregivers. At the time of research, the development pathways offered by the three leagues did not account for their women athletes' family responsibilities. Only two offered parental leave, although the third has now introduced a family leave policy.

I feel that women have a greater responsibility, you know? We [experience inequalities] because of personal things like those that are much older that have families, we commit ourselves to work because that's our source of income. We commit ourselves to . . . again, mainly that, work and family are our two priorities.

Female Professional Athlete

Changing views of men's and women's roles in caring for families offers an opportunity for organisations to create more inclusive values and practices. This includes the reframing of negative and potentially offensive comments aimed at women in the professional team sport domains that were previously male dominated.

Another issue affecting a sense of belonging is the dynamic of hope. Women, hoping for success in pay and equality, still sign up to sporting leagues. However, when hope is not realised it can fade over time. The research found that some staff responsible for the care of athletes either

did not acknowledge their hope for improvement or were unable to deliver improvement due to organisational practices. However, when organisations can make the most of women's goodwill, hope and trust to take tangible and practical steps towards change, everyone benefits.

The findings of this research, including the values of a continuum of care, may support future research to find ways to embed these values in the processes and practices of sports organisations and institutions, encouraging and allowing them to generate new thinking toward social justice and equity.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. Creating inclusive cultures which support a sense of belonging counters feelings of exclusion
2. Increasing the number of female coaches could change the gendered dynamic of sporting workplaces and help to reflect values of affirmation, empowerment, and belonging
3. Ensuring that male coaches have proper training and expertise in coaching women
4. Developing opportunities to provide girls and women with continuous pathways to elite level competitions



To read more about this topic refer to:

Wendy O'Brien, Tracy Taylor, Clare Hanlon, and Kristine Toohey (2022) " Exploring (Semi) Professionalization in Women's Team Sport Through a Continuum of Care Lens", Journal of Sport Management, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2022-0068>



WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL SPORT LEAGUES: LEGITIMACY THROUGH RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Australian women have been playing team sport for more than a century. In the last few decades, new professional leagues have provided women with the opportunity for paid careers in many sports. Women's participation in these sports is challenging stereotypes, and salaries, sponsorship and public interest are increasing. Yet debate continues about whether women's professional sporting leagues and athletes are 'legitimate': that is, are they seen as being desirable, appropriate, and normal?

One way of determining how socially accepted women's professional sport has become is to view it using the concept of 'legitimacy theory'. This breaks legitimacy down into three parts:

- Pragmatic legitimacy is based on public self-interest and the decisions made by an institution to be seen positively by its stakeholders.
- Moral legitimacy is based on standards considered to be 'normal' and an institution operating within norms defined by the broader society.
- Cognitive legitimacy is based on the extent a society takes an institution for granted.

To determine the levels of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy, the researchers reviewed how professional

women athletes' pay, health and welfare have changed in recent years, by analysing management practices and policies in the relevant sporting leagues. The researchers also examined academic publications and data from statistics, working papers, government reports and other non-peer-reviewed sources for material on pay and benefits, health and welfare practices in women's professional sports leagues.

Through these sources, the research identified the gaps between the research and the sports policies and practices to better understand what drives change in women's sports, and what creates barriers to legitimacy.

The research supported the presence of both pragmatic and moral legitimacy: the public was generally positive about women's professional sports and generally viewed the activities as socially appropriate.

However, women athlete's role in professional sport is yet to achieve cognitive legitimacy, that is, being taken for granted by society. This is the most powerful type of recognition and is the hardest to achieve.

Lack of cognitive legitimacy in professional women's sport, is due in part to current ideas of social power.

For example, creating an environment for success for women athletes can be difficult when existing assumptions perceive men's professional leagues as the norm and may not see how those assumptions contain issues of gender inequality. As a result, women's sport can be seen as a novelty rather than a normal part of society.

Existing power structures and knowledge can end up undermining the progress of women's professional sports leagues, because they lack input from outside the system which might highlight how assumptions based on male athletes affect women.

Notably, the research showed that the presence of multiple stakeholders – including athletes, player associations (PAs), national sporting organisations, researchers and the Champions of Change Coalition – have influenced the legitimacy of Australian women's professional sport leagues, including achieving longer

contracts for job security, better pay, and improved health and wellbeing.

Some of the positive outcomes of this collective influence include the milestone Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) achieved in 2017 for Netball (World Netball 2017), W-League (women's football/soccer league), Cricket (through a Memorandum of Understanding), and Basketball.

PAs for two popular sports collaborated on a whole-of-sport approach, encompassing both men and women athletes. Their CBAs provided athlete health and welfare benefits, including gender pay equity strategies, pregnancy policies, and parental and childcare policies.

This study's findings will support both future research and existing organisations to encourage knowledge sharing, networking, and mentoring and to identify practical opportunities to build on the successes of more established PAs.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. Progress across Australian women's professional sport is uneven in the areas of improved health, welfare and pay conditions, but conditions are improving
2. The legitimacy of women's professional sporting teams is still somewhat compromised by power structures and assumptions that influence the perceptions of women in sport
3. Further support could be given to Player Associations to facilitate athlete mentoring, networking and knowledge sharing
4. There is an opportunity for Player Associations and athletes experienced in improving conditions for professional women athletes to provide advice to other sports and Associations

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