Transitioning Women’s Rugby League: Professionalisation Expectations, Opportunities and Challenges

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The number of women playing professional team sports has rapidly accelerated in the past decade. In 2017 the National Rugby League (Australia and New Zealand) announced their intention for an inaugural professional competition for women. This raised questions about what women aspiring to be the NRL’s first paid rugby league players felt was important for the success of this ground-breaking competition. This study aimed to explore these women’s expectations about the transition process and its associated management implications.

Women have fought long and hard for greater opportunities in sport across: participation and inclusion (Taylor & Toohey, 1999), leadership roles (Burton, 2015), rights and recognition (Andersen & Loland, 2017), media coverage (Musto, Cooky & Messner, 2017), sponsorship (Fink, 2015), and access to professional sport careers (Rosner & Shropshire, 2011). Sports that historically have only had men’s professional teams (e.g. football codes) now have women’s leagues, consequently disrupting traditional gender hierarchies (Willson et. al., 2017), and contesting hegemonic masculine values in sport (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015). However, evidence demonstrates that women’s teams/leagues have struggled for equal/equitable remuneration and treatment (Hendrick, 2017), contract security (Willson et. al., 2017); and some sports’ masculine culture has inhibited inclusion (Hickey et al., 2016). While organisational, environmental and socio-cultural considerations (Roynesdal, 2015), and having appropriate support mechanisms (Mills et al., 2014) have been linked to successful amateur-to-professional transitions in men’s sport, there is little research on women’s transition experience. This study investigated this issue by capturing women’s expectations and support requirements for a successful transition to professionalisation.

Method
First, an analysis of nine women’s sports Enterprise Agreements was undertaken across six key policy areas of pay, pregnancy and parental leave, pathways, welfare, education and health care. Second, interviews with women (N=49) aspiring to be contracted as professional rugby league players were conducted. Drawing on the literature and phase one findings, we explored their views about critical considerations for the women’s game as it moved into a new era. All interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis was undertaken.

Results
Four main interview themes emerged: physical demands (for elite female athletes); social/emotional/mental (well-being support, player/team relationship management); technical/tactical (specifics related to women’s requirements), and management/administration (female specific player rights and entitlements such as pregnancy policies). The overarching narrative was about how women could balance paid employment/study and family responsibilities with travel, training and playing commitments. The women were excited about the opportunity to play professionally, tempered by uncertainty about playing conditions.

Discussion
Professionalisation has legitimised women as rugby league players and challenged the sport’s gendered hierarchy and its masculine derived values (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015). The findings reinforce the criticality of equitable remuneration, employment security, female-specific contract provisions, access to appropriate facilities/staff, and gender appropriate socio-cultural support (Andersen & Loland, 2017; Hickey et al., 2016). The NRL used these findings for decision making about the league’s initial size, duration, and individual contract inclusions. The research findings have wider implications beyond rugby league, in terms of conceptually reconfiguring how we construct, value and legitimise women’s sport.