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International Women's Day 2021: How women's sport can regain momentum after the pandemic

22-28 minutes

With International Women's Day landing at a crucial juncture for women's sport, several key figures from across the industry share their views on the road ahead as organisations of all kinds work to regain momentum after the coronavirus pandemic.



As the world marks another International Women's Day on 8th March, it is clear that the coronavirus pandemic has thrown a curveball in the direction of women's sport and businesswomen working in the broader sports industry.

A year of cancellations, financial hardship and personal strife for many has knocked efforts to improve gender equality, whilst also shining a light on the uglier attempts to hold women in sport back.

Progress for women in work could return to 2017 levels by the end of this year as a result of the pandemic, according to analysis conducted for PricewaterhouseCoopers' annual Women in Work Index. Between 2019 and 2020, the annual unemployment rate for the 33 countries comprising the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) increased by 1.7 percentage points among women, rising from 5.7 per cent to 7.4 per cent during that time.

For nine years, OECD countries have made consistent gains in female empowerment but, due to Covid-19, such progress has been halted. PwC's annual index - which measures the gender pay gap, female labour force participation, the gap between male and female labour force participation, female unemployment and female full-time employment rate - will fall 2.1 points between 2019 and 2021, and will not recover until 2022.

On the competitive side, apart from some notable exceptions like the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), women's sports were the first to suffer cancellations last year as many rights holders looked to protect the larger commercial revenues brought in by their male equivalents.

In Europe, English soccer's top-flight Women's Super League (WSL) was cancelled, a familiar story across the continent where the Frauen Bundesliga in Germany was the only women's domestic competition to complete its 2019/20 season. In rugby union, the same efforts were not made to protect the semi-professional Women's Six Nations last year as were made for the men's tournament.

According to Deloitte's 2021 predictions report, women's sports revenues will be 'well under a billion dollars' in 2021, a fraction of the global income generated across all sports, which in 2018 reached US\$471 billion. However, Deloitte predicts that the long-term outlook will be more positive once women's sport recovers the momentum it built prior to the onset of Covid-19, which had seen female leagues and events benefit from growing attendances, as well as an increase in the number and value of sponsorship and media rights deals.

As the sports industry vies to tackle these challenges, *SportsPro* canvassed the opinion of several senior female figures on the most pressing issues. Below are responses from:

- **Marisa Reich**, SportsPro Columnist and Chair, SheSports
- **Laura Owen**, Chief Operating Officer, Mongoose Sports and Entertainment
- **Rachel Jacobson**, President, Drone Racing League
- **Elsa Memmi**, Europe and Middle East Vice President, Global Media Distribution, NBA
- **Terri Lynam**, Customer Director, Rugby League World Cup 2021

How can the disruption to women's sport caused by the pandemic be course-corrected quickly this year?

Marisa Reich: We need good leadership from the top to correct the course. A true leader doesn't just talk, but acts and sets an example for what they believe is right and important.

Women's sports are part of society and we have seen that Gen Z and Alphas in particular are no longer as biased. We need to give them the chance to engage with and consume women's sports, and see this as an opportunity to showcase women's sports for other generations as well.

Laura Owen: The biggest thing here is that the pandemic cannot be used as an excuse for women's sport to take a step back.

Many sacrifices had to be made in the world of sport with cancellations, job cuts and furloughed players and staff across the board but it did seem more of women's sports were sacrificed and the cancellations lasting longer than the male equivalent. This wasn't always just a solution to save money when ticket sales weren't coming in or to protect the opportunity around the men's games as it might have appeared. Take rugby's Six Nations, for example: the women's was cancelled whilst the men's was played behind closed doors, due to the fact that the majority of competing nations teams are amateur and this creates an issue around testing and the creation of secure bubbles for the women's tournament.

So, I believe the pandemic highlighted the issues in women's sport that made them the easy victim of Covid-19, not necessarily created new ones. There is not a quick fix, but everyone involved in sport - brands, broadcasters, governing bodies, governments, teachers, and coaches - need to hero female athletes and sports on an equal basis with men's sports.

As a minimum there should be a timeline for equality in professional sports; if it's a professional game it should be for men and women.

Terri Lynam: Women's sport, in a similar vein to any sport that has been disrupted in the last year, needs to focus on getting back up and running in the first instance. As most women's sports are not yet considered elite, resuming full training programmes will be the first real and crucial milestone.

When the time is right, all sports can use the momentum of desire to see live sport again, so women's sport needs to ride that wave and use the messages they have been used so successfully in the past – communities, togetherness and inclusivity – to help continue the growth we saw pre-pandemic.

Watching women's sport is a fantastic family day out, and as sports fans we are all desperate for those opportunities again.

Rachel Jacobson: We need a change in narrative and new sports media outlets focused on celebrating and amplifying voices of women athletes. I'm so thrilled that Olympians Sue Bird, Alex Morgan, Simone Manuel and Chloe Kim recently launched a new media and ecommerce company, [Togethxr](#), that is centred on rich, diverse and inclusive storytelling about women in sports. They're four of the best athletes in the world, and they're using their influence to set an example for the next generation of girls to be seen and heard.

Elsa Memmi: It may well be a slow recovery, but while women were forced to stop playing sports, they continued to raise their voices. There are numerous examples of female leagues and individual players who have used this obligatory pause in play to advocate for social justice fight inequality and to champion other causes close to their hearts. The WNBA, for example, chose to collectively dedicate its season to #BlackLivesMatter, and #SayHerName to honour Black women, specifically Breonna Taylor, and to combat police brutality, racial violence and demand justice.

Their collective voices built powerful awareness which has deeply resonated with sports fans, both in the US and internationally. In a very positive way, they have expanded their

audience and it is up to the whole sport ecosystem to acknowledge this change and make their sports more accessible to all.

I am confident this can be done, the same way these players did – with positive determination and a willingness to address the challenges ahead.

The interest, and therefore the investment, into women's sports at every level needs to be sustained on a consistent long-term basis if we want to get close to parity.

What concerns for women's sport do you have in 2021 that are not being addressed?

MR: It's very simple: not being taken seriously. Women's sports are neither charity nor decoration. We are missing out on huge potential. Yes, women's sport is different from men's sport and the KPIs will be different. But we also have these differences in society and sport should be able to reflect society as a whole and appeal to everyone.

RJ: Last year was a very tough year, but we can't let it roll back positive change for women and underrepresented groups. We need more brands supporting opportunities for women starting at a young age to participate in sports. A big shout out to the P&Gs and Johnson & Johnsons of the world that have been standing up for young girls, mums and female athletes for years, and I hope we see more brands following in their footsteps this year and beyond.

EM: The same concern I have had for many years: namely the inability for broadcasters to build upon the success of major women's sports events. There have been many successful women's championships which drew big audiences, yet there has been no visible strategy to continue to show and promote that sport following the conclusion of these events.

The Fifa Women's World Cup 2019 is a great example: 1.1 billion viewers tuned it to watch, yet women's football leagues were completely absent from sports media coverage the season which kicked off after the summer of 2019. This also happens after every Olympic Games, where there is tremendous interest around female athletes and female teams and yet no increase in media coverage of women's sports follows after their conclusion.

The interest, and therefore the investment, into women's sports at every level needs to be sustained on a consistent long-term basis if we want to get close to parity, which only tennis is currently close to achieving. Let's not forget that particular battle started in the 1970s and we have the great Billie Jean King to thank for it.

LO: The constant negative comparison to the men's game needs to be addressed. Women's sport, athletes and officials should be celebrated and supported for what and who they are, for the skill and expertise involved. The fact is people, everybody, not just women and girls, need to see, experience, and understand women's sport so it becomes the norm.

We will only inspire young women and girls to achieve their sporting dreams with a collective push to break down the barrier's women are facing in sports, and it needs to be its own right not as a comparison to the male equivalent.

TL: The concern for me is that momentum could be lost. Women's sport had made huge strides in the years leading up to the pandemic and it is important that the commercial value and media interest is not lost, and the pandemic can be used as an excuse.

Just before the national lockdown, we all applauded the ICC and Cricket Australia for getting 90,000 fans in the MCG for the Women's ICC T20 World Cup Final and now with events which were due to be played this year postponed - and in some case cancelled - it is important that the momentum from these show piece events are not lost.

This starts from the government support which is needed to allow more women's sports to be seen as professional, so all those top tier athletes who are currently managing jobs and everyday lives can train full-time and focus on their personal and as well as team growth.

We have an exceptional opportunity later this year to optimise the positive success of women's sport in recent times and set the new standard.

We need champions in the industry to constantly remind organisations that women sports cannot be relegated.

What is the single biggest challenge in your sector of the industry that women's sport needs to overcome?

MR: Similarity bias. If you look at most teams, you very often see the same 'type' of people at the top. It's a natural trait that people feel safer and more secure with like-minded and look-alike people. It's an evolutionary protective behaviour, but we need to learn to adapt and overcome this unconscious self-constraint to allow that 'different' is okay and brings value.

LO: Sexism that goes unpunished or is accepted at a high-profile level. Whether that is through governing bodies or social platforms, where most of the sexism is unleashed currently.

Take the recent Leeds United retaliation on ex footballer and pundit Karen Carney. The lack of understanding shown by the club on the part they played in the abuse she received was completely dumbfounding. By releasing their 'official' reaction to the known sexist underbelly of football online they were allowing people to directly target her. And a statement stating that they didn't support the opinions of the fans or that they react to male pundits in the same way doesn't make it okay, it shows a complete lack of understanding of women in sport – they should have known the fact she was a woman would be the reason for the abuse. And that it in fact impacted all women in sport to see they accepted a sexist attack.

Until we are on a more level playing field, clubs, governing bodies, and social media platforms need to be accountable and not incite, support or accept this type of behaviour.

EM: Lack of prioritisation would be the biggest challenge. While there is a desire to show and promote women's sports, it still always sits at the bottom of the list and, as such, is the first thing to be sacrificed when things get tough. Very much like we do in sports, we need champions in the industry to constantly remind organisations that women sports cannot be relegated.

TL: Something I have always kept me with is the phrase 'you can't be what you can't see'. Visibility and support are in my view the two biggest challenges women's sport needs to overcome.

The impact of being on broadcast is huge, so impactful TV deals are crucial to growth and awareness. Impactful sponsors, such as Barclays and Vitality, have allowed sports like football and netball to make massive strides in recent years by opening so many opportunities for women to get involved in sport, at whatever level.

If women's sport can continue to attract big audiences on broadcast and sign up a few big-name sponsors along the way, that is half the battle.

I sincerely hope that at some point we can retire the word 'quota' and never need to talk about it again.

Following on from that, what single change in your sector of the industry would be the biggest game-changer for women?

MR: A quota at all levels of the sports industry to level the playing field. And not this made-up quota of 20 per cent, or even 30 per cent, but at least 40 per cent. And not in ten years, but by 2025, with an annual plan to increase the number of women at all levels.

We have more than enough well-educated and experienced women, it's just unfortunate that they are often passed over for leadership roles, or not given enough trust. Also, their type of leadership style can often be different and then we're back at the old 'similarity bias' problem. If we make every effort now to develop, trust and enable women to take on leadership roles, we will be able to drive change together.

But like any team, it takes everyone pulling on the same rope and believing in the goal. If you have one bad apple in the basket, the goal will not be achieved, and that is not the fault of the women, but of the men who secretly - and often not-so-secretly - don't want to see this happen.

I sincerely hope that at some point we can retire the word 'quota' and never need to talk about it again.

LO: Investment. Commercial opportunities should never be about the women's game being 'bundled' in with the men's sponsorship, as we have all so often heard. It should be about championing it for its own merits and reach. The fanbase and the appetite for participation will only grow if the opportunity is given and supported financially – investment and money have a knock-on effect to all aspects of sport. Broadcasters need to invest, so sponsors will see the opportunity. Governing bodies and governments need to invest to ensure the pathway is there for young women and girls. Businesses need to

invest in women's jobs to make sure women can be at the heart of decision making and development.

RJ: We need to find our first female DRL pilot! We know she's out there, and that there are women drone pilots across the world getting into FPV everyday.

Featuring the first woman drone pilot on our roster will empower women and girls everywhere to train and compete at the highest level - for not just a racing career in DRL - but also in the ever-growing drone and technology landscape.

EM: Data will unquestionably change the business of women's sports in two clear ways: it will give us the tools to measure its impact and its audience. Once women's leagues and competitions are promoted fairly and showcased on accessible media, we will be able to better grasp and understand its capacity for development and therefore drive its growth. However, the big opportunity lies in the extraordinary untapped potential of women who both play and enjoy watching sports. We can no longer ignore that there is half of the population that we often simply do not address. Since we're talking about data, I would like to highlight some impactful ones:

Only 24 per cent of all athletes who participated in the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 were female, however, this number should rise to 49 per cent at the Tokyo Games. Today, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality, 37 per cent of women practice a sport at least once a week. This positive trend is even bigger when it comes to the younger generations, as young girls feel more and more empowered to play and enjoy sports.

Big brands began to understand this a few decades ago, but sports organisations have been much slower to react. However, there are signs of change at this level as well. In my organisation, the NBA, 62 women serve as vice presidents or higher. In 2020, 47.7 per cent of the positions for the IOC's 30 commissions were held by women - a 124 per cent increase since 2013.

With more women in leadership positions, it will be easier to shape our products and content to be more attractive to this growing female audience. Data will enable us to do it faster and more efficiently – listening to the market and therefore being equipped to respond to its demand.

TL: Equal participation fees are a change I would like to see – let's put everyone, rightly, on the same playing field. I love what Lewes FC are doing in this space. They are paying their men and women's teams the same salaries to can you imagine the impact that would have if more football teams in the UK did this. That's why I am proud that my organisation will be paying equal participation fees to all players in the men's, women's and wheelchair tournaments at the trailblazing Rugby League World Cup to be played in England later this year.

Companies need to prioritise diversity in leadership, talent and participation.

More broadly, what strategies do businesses in the industry need to adopt to boost female empowerment?

MR: We don't need different strategies than for the development of men, but a commitment to trust women, to promote them equally and to encourage them to take the steps toward leadership roles.

A factor, of course - at least for me - is awareness of boys' club behaviour. It's often hidden and it often hurts when you realise you're very much living in a bubble. But once realised, you see the great potential that is hidden outside.

LO: In the business of sport the gender gap needs to be actively addressed, something that has only increased because of Covid-19. Research has shown that the burden of unpaid care for children, the elderly and the sick is disproportionately taken on by women and has increased during this past year.

Reports state that more women have lost their jobs than men during the pandemic with the burden of unpaid care being a key contributory factor. I can proudly say this is not a problem at Mongoose, but that is not true across the world of sports business. We need female leaders and therefore businesses need to be understanding of the work life balance, learnings from remote and flexible working patterns from the pandemic need to continue when we are allowed back into offices, with businesses designing flexible working strategies for everyone.

RJ: Before DRL, I served as the chief business officer at Landit, a career pathing HR tech company for women and diverse candidates, and one of the stats that I learned there and found so fascinating was that increasing the participation of women in the US workforce by five per cent can have a nearly US\$1 trillion impact on the economy. Companies need to prioritise diversity in leadership, talent and participation. It's empowering for underrepresented groups like women, and it's good for business.

TL: We've seen an increase in women in senior roles within sports organisations, but I think just as importantly the focus should be on strategies that support women and what they need in both their personal and professional lives. The sporting world is hectic and involves a lot of dedicated hours - how can we build strategies to support women. By building these strategies, naturally more opportunities for women will become available.

What we hear is more empty talk and what we see is pinkwashing and window-dressing, rather than concrete action.

Which organisations in the industry are getting it right when it comes to female empowerment and why?

MR: I would love to list many organisations, associations and clubs here, because then we will have accomplished our mission and can focus our energy on other problems, such as how to get young kids into sports or how to keep older people fit. I think there are some stakeholders who are making a decent effort, but what we hear is more empty talk and what we see is pinkwashing and window-dressing, rather than concrete action and proof that it's being taken seriously. But I always say that the first step to change is insight, and you have to acknowledge that.

LO: The ECB [England and Wales Cricket Board] are definitely on the right track, they appear to treat the women's game equally to the men's across their marketing and social

channels. The clients we work with in cricket, as sponsors use the female game alongside the men's game. For the first time ever, they announced that The Hundred will kick off with a women's game as the Manchester Originals face the Oval Invincibles.

Broadcasters throughout the pandemic have shown women's sport more prevalently, something that looks like it might continue even where airtime is more crowded, Sky Sports are targeting new audiences for women's sport in 2021 by showcasing live women's sport to a brand new audience via the Sky Sports YouTube channel, making it more accessible by investing in new, original, women's sport content and programming.

RJ: We loved Burger King's recent 'Burger Queen' campaign for Stevenage FC's women team following their sponsorship of the men's team the year prior. They changed their logo and sponsored Stevenage FC Women under the same terms and conditions, and at the same level as the men's team, sending a clear message that they support equality in sports.

TL: I think Clare Connor at the ECB has made some important strides when it comes to female sports leaders. Who would have thought that the MCC would have a female president before the United States? But Clare has been a trailblazer as England captain, head of women's cricket, chair of the ICC Cricket Committee and a member of the ICC Cricket Committee, as well as now MCC president. An astonishing career.

And we have seen other important women like Baroness Campbell who did so much as chair of UK Sport make a profound impact on sport but while both are high profile we should not forget, especially in my sport of rugby league, the number of female participants – players, volunteers and administrators who contribute so much. They are an inspiration to us all.