

1 An institutional analysis of gender (in)equalities, covid-19 and governance of elite women's  
2 football in Australia, England and the USA.

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12 **Abstract**

13 **Purpose:** Women's football faces an existential threat from covid-19. Using case studies, we  
14 explore the covid-19 responses of three highly-ranked national football associations  
15 (Australia, England, and the USA) and their professional women's football leagues to: (a)  
16 compare and shed new insights into the wide range of phased responses, and (b) establish  
17 recommendations for other nations to navigate major crises with their social and ethical  
18 responsibilities to women's football.

19 **Methodology:** Drawing on institutional theory, a framework analysis was undertaken  
20 examining 71 articles to analyse the gendered global impacts of covid-19 on women's  
21 football.

22 **Findings:** Results highlight several important recommendations for nations to consider  
23 during the pandemic: (1) maintain active communication with the community to allay worries  
24 about the future of women's football, (2) gather support from health and government  
25 officials, (3) seek out commercial and broadcasting partnerships to drive revenue, and (4) the  
26 interests of women's football are best served when responsibility for the elite women's  
27 league does not rest (solely) with national football associations.

28 **Originality:** The study is first to explore institutional pressures and football governing bodies  
29 during covid-19 and provides a framework for nations to manage major crises.

30 **Social implications:** We argue sport is an interwoven part of society and cannot be separated  
31 from gender equality issues irrespective of the pandemic.

32           The effects of coronavirus (covid-19) have laid bare the fragilities of women's sport  
33 when governing bodies' surpluses shrink (Clarkson et al., 2020). This study examines the  
34 global reactions of governing bodies to covid-19, using women's football as a vehicle to  
35 uncover variations in the response of national football associations (NFAs), revealing new  
36 understandings into gender equality. By taking a case study approach that analyses the  
37 responses of three highly-ranked countries and their professional leagues (Australia, England  
38 and the United States of America (USA)), this article aims to (a) compare and shed new  
39 insights into these wide-ranging phased responses, and (b) establish recommendations for  
40 other nations for navigating major crises with their social and ethical responsibilities to  
41 women's football.

42           The covid-19 pandemic presents a complex, unprecedented challenge for nations to  
43 preserve all aspects of society. The prioritisation of returning sport to television schedules  
44 highlights sport as a crucial aspect of society, and the resurgence of sport at all levels requires  
45 careful planning and implementation by national governing bodies (e.g., NFAs) globally to  
46 ensure future prosperity (Parnell et al., 2020a). The global economic downturn caused by the  
47 pandemic has exposed gender inequalities - with women disproportionately affected by unpaid  
48 duties and economic hardship - and hence this has implications for gender equality (Alon et  
49 al., 2020). Like other fundamental aspects of society, sport has not been immune to these  
50 gendered effects and pandemic-driven inequity has occurred with the context of existing  
51 inequalities such as the United States Women's National Team's (USWNT) pay dispute  
52 (Archer & Prange, 2019). While governing bodies have an ethical and social responsibility to  
53 advance gender equality, they must also consider the pandemic's economic impact and how  
54 their finite resources are distributed (Nicola et al., 2020). In an analysis of National  
55 Basketball Association's (NBA) covid-19 response, decision-making was driven by  
56 economic pressures against other factors (Hindman et al., 2021). The England Cricket Board

57 revealed covid-19 led to a £380m shortfall and openly stated that commercially-driven men's  
58 cricket would take priority in a bid to mitigate financial losses (Sky Sports, 2020). Elsewhere,  
59 The Australian Football League (AFL) immediately cancelled the women's competition in  
60 the face of the pandemic without awarding a winner (Canil, 2020). Contrastingly, the men's  
61 competition was suspended and subsequently resumed. In the USA, women professional  
62 basketballers not participating in the restarted Women's National Basketball Association  
63 (WNBA) were not financially supported by their governing body and were later funded by an  
64 individual donation (Roscher, 2020). In comparison, absent NBA players incurred small  
65 salary deductions (Elkins, 2020). Hence, covid-19 has prompted a wide range of phased  
66 responses by national governing bodies (NGBs) that have impacted gender.

67 Association football (soccer) is arguably the world's biggest sport – over half of the  
68 world's population (3.6 billion viewers) watched the 2018 Fédération Internationale de  
69 Football Association (FIFA) World Cup and over 1 billion watched the 2019 FIFA Women's  
70 World Cup (WWC). Given its popularity and ability to provide mental health and social  
71 relations benefits, football could play an important role in societies' recoveries from covid-19  
72 (Parnell et al., 2020b). Common covid-19 measures implemented by NFAs for elite men's  
73 football included financial support and a communicated plan for restarting competitions  
74 (Parnell et al., 2020b). Measures in elite women's football varied. Common 'responses' were  
75 inaction and a lack of communication, leaving the game clouded in uncertainties (Clarkson et  
76 al., 2020). Even economic help from FIFA, specifically for the women's game, has not  
77 always benefitted footballers who, in Columbia for example, were sometimes left without a  
78 playing contract (Biram & Martinez-Mina, 2020). Furthermore, the world players' union  
79 FIFPro (2020) reported that 47 per cent of women players have had their wages cut or  
80 suspended since the pandemic. In comparison, some clubs in the English men's elite league,  
81 The Premier League (PL), furloughed non-playing staff but did not cut high player wages

82 (BBC, 2020a). Historically, women's football has been treated in different ways around the  
83 world, for instance by struggling to overcome active opposition and discrimination  
84 (Australia; Downes et al., 2015), to being 'culturally superior' to men's football (USA;  
85 Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). Thus, differing NFA's responses are likely to be highly  
86 contingent on the local historical, political and social contexts of women's football. This  
87 study aims to: (a) compare and shed new insights into the wide range of phased covid-19  
88 responses, and (b) establish recommendations for other nations to navigate major crises with  
89 their social and ethical responsibilities to women's football.

### 90 **The disproportional effect of the pandemic on women's sport**

91 Every sport faces financial disruption and uncertainty for the future of their elite  
92 leagues due to covid-19 (Parnell et al., 2020a). Initially, the pandemic's impacts were  
93 predominantly distributed evenly between men's and women's competitions with suspension  
94 to competitive fixtures and events across the world to curb the spread of the disease (BBC,  
95 2020b). However, multiple governing bodies (e.g., Rugby Football Union, International  
96 Cricket Council) recommenced men's sport whereas women's sport was predominantly  
97 cancelled, significantly postponed or players received inequitable treatment once resumed.  
98 This is exemplified by the effective abandonment of women's sport (see above), the  
99 postponement of the women's football European Championship (Euros) to 2022 to allow the  
100 postponed men's competition to take place first in 2021, and the vast differences in the  
101 quality of working NBA and WNBA 'bubble' conditions (Dator, 2020). Media coverage of  
102 women's sport has also remained low in countries such as Australia (Symons et al., 2021).  
103 The lack of equitable funding and treatment is indicative of women's subordinate position in  
104 sport (Bowes et al., 2020). Elite sportswomen are often on semi-professional or low value  
105 fully professional contracts with geographically dispersed competitive schedules and thus the  
106 different lengths of seasons (and contracts) compared to men presents a significant challenge

107 to gender equality for NFAs (Bowes et al., 2021). This is exacerbated by traditional views on  
108 the ‘superiority’ of men’s sport (Allison, 2018) and resistance to change at a governance level  
109 (Parry et al., 2021). These difficulties in the way that women’s sport can be viewed by NGBs  
110 has made maintaining gender equality in the pandemic extremely difficult (Clarkson et al.,  
111 2021). Yet NFAs have a responsibility to protect overshadowed areas of football; FIFA  
112 recently committed \$1.5bn in its Covid Relief Plan with NFAs able to apply for \$1m to  
113 protect and restart football and an additional \$500,000 available specifically spent for  
114 women’s football (FIFA, 2020b).

### 115 **Women’s football – a social and ethical responsibility?**

116 As a global male-dominated space, football has been a site for the construction of  
117 hegemonic masculinity both on the pitch and in stadiums. Football is also an arena to contest  
118 the construction of gender identities (Richards & Parry, 2020) and recent rapid growth of  
119 women’s football has heralded a ‘new age’ of the game (Petty & Pope, 2019). While on the  
120 surface, the future of women’s elite football is bright, women still have to contest traditional  
121 notions of femininity and prejudices about women’s abilities (Pfister, 2015). Coupled with  
122 poor work conditions, inferior funding and inconsistent broadcast coverage and marketing of  
123 events, the inequalities between men’s and women’s football are stark, irrespective of  
124 country (Ellis & Leopkey, 2018). As not-for-profit governing bodies of football, NFAs can  
125 exert pressure on professional leagues and clubs (who are typically independent businesses)  
126 to ensure equitable treatment of professional players. We contend that NFAs have a social  
127 and ethical responsibility to ensure that women are given access to equal resources and  
128 funding to align with men’s support. This is especially required as players’ unions are not  
129 always well-equipped to adequately support women members and protect their rights (EU  
130 Athletes, 2018). Common criticisms of this viewpoint are that, in comparison to the men’s  
131 game, women’s teams in countries such as Australia and England are mostly financially

132 reliant on their men's 'parent' clubs preventing independence and thus being viewed equally  
 133 (Welford, 2018), while also citing examples such as the USA where men's and women's  
 134 football clubs are separate and the women's elite leagues are financially unsustainable  
 135 (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003). These perspectives, however, neglect how women's  
 136 football has been marginalised in many countries throughout much of its history and has not  
 137 had the same development opportunities – or indeed media profile – as has been the case in  
 138 men's football.

139           Nevertheless, women's football has become a global driving force for gender  
 140 equality, participation and fan interest (FIFA, 2018); we argue NFAs must play a crucial role  
 141 in protecting women's football (ethical responsibility) and eradicating gender inequalities  
 142 (social responsibility) over time to continue its trajectory. However, significant investment is  
 143 required to achieve these aims, and NFAs are facing large covid-related deficits (e.g., £300m  
 144 in England), staff pay cuts (e.g., 50 per cent reductions in the USA) and redundancies (70 per  
 145 cent in Australia; Reuters, 2020). NFAs have to, therefore, navigate the potential economic  
 146 repercussions of covid-19 with their social and ethical responsibilities to women's football.  
 147 We adopt institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) as a lens to compare and shed new  
 148 insights into these wide-ranging phased responses and establish recommendations for other  
 149 nations navigating major crises with their social and ethical responsibilities to women's  
 150 football.

## 151 **The research**

### 152 **Theoretical framework**

153           Institutional theory is an effective underpinning for studying the evolution of sport  
 154 institutions and their environment (see Nite & Edwards, 2021). This framework proposes that  
 155 institutions respond to environmental pressures and adopt structures and/or procedures that  
 156 are socially accepted as the appropriate institutional choice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

157 These pressures can be at individual (e.g., key decision makers' values), organisational (e.g.,  
158 power and politics), and organisational field (e.g., regulatory [FIFA] pressures, public  
159 pressures, norms and values) levels. Strong and diverse sets of institutional pressures exist in  
160 women's football, especially at the organisational field level making institutional theory an  
161 ideal study framework. We contend that these institutional pressures (e.g., calls for greater  
162 funding, broadcasting and for the game to be better resourced) are derived from the historical,  
163 political and social contexts that women's football operates within and has influenced NFAs'  
164 covid-19 responses.

165         Additionally, underlying institutional logics (i.e., the systems of cultural elements;  
166 Seo & Creed, 2002) may also explain and shape different clubs', leagues' and NFAs'  
167 agendas, practices and structures. As Allison (2016) notes, there are conflicting institutional  
168 logics in women's football, where institutions may view it as a 'cause' or as a 'business'.  
169 Logics originate from different central assumptions which then form the basis for  
170 institutions' agendas and practices. Thus, NFAs can come to difficult conclusions when  
171 facing a crisis, like the pandemic, based on their underlying institutional logics.

172         Thus, institutional theory can be used to explain similarities and differences between  
173 institutions. We use this framework to analyse the latter, by highlighting how our  
174 understanding of institutional actions can be expanded by examining differences in temporal  
175 focus - i.e., how past experiences, current (covid-19) situations and future expectations  
176 influence responses. A temporal focus is crucial – by considering past experiences (i.e.  
177 historical, political and social contexts) we can situate the NFA responses in the country's  
178 women's football landscape. We also bring attention to the historical, political, and social  
179 factors that change institutional practices in women's football, as called for by Washington  
180 and Patterson (2011).

181 **Case studies**



182 ***Philosophical assumptions and design***

183 We approach case study research from a social constructivist viewpoint (Merriam, 2009)  
184 in that language and discourse are primary devices for the construction of social reality (Mills  
185 et al., 2009). Stake's (1995) collective instrumental case study design was adopted whereby  
186 multiple, related cases are observed together to provide insight on a particular issue.

187 ***Selection***

188 Three countries were selected as cases for investigation: Australia, England, and the  
189 USA. Specifically, the focus is on the actions of Football Federation Australia (FFA); The  
190 English FA; and, the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), hereafter U.S. Soccer, and  
191 their respective professional leagues.

192 These cases were selected for multiple reasons. The three countries are at a similar level  
193 regarding gender equality (United Nations, 2020) and the Global Gender Gap Index – all  
194 ranking in the top third of countries (World Economic Forum, 2020). In FIFA world  
195 rankings, an indicator of international prestige, all were in the top seven ranked teams (FIFA,  
196 2020a). Hence, these countries act as industry role models to lower-ranked countries due to  
197 perceptions of their effectiveness, strong football traditions and attitudes towards, and support  
198 of, the advancement of women's football (Haveman, 1993). There is also worldwide attention  
199 on them: Australia as the joint host nation for the 2023 FIFA WWC, England hosting the  
200 delayed Women's Euros, and USWNT involved in a high-profile equal pay lawsuit against  
201 U.S. Soccer.

202 ***Assessment***

203 71 communications were analysed comprising official strategy reports ( $n = 2$ ),  
204 statements ( $n = 37$ ), and press releases ( $n = 32$ ) associated only with covid-19 and women's

205 football. All communications were sourced from NFA's websites<sup>1</sup> and official social media  
206 accounts. These data helped answer the research question as words take on meaning in the  
207 context of ongoing social relationships and the discourse about women's football from these  
208 institutions' communications were indicative of their covid-19 response. We considered a  
209 six-month period between 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020 when the World Health Organisation (WHO)  
210 advised against international travel to countries experiencing covid-19 outbreaks and many  
211 countries enacted restrictions, and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2020. Although restrictions varied, the initial  
212 period is a crucial time for institutions during crises (Goodhart, 2008) and observed in other  
213 covid-19 institutional response research (e.g., Ando et al., 2020; Loi et al., 2020). Sources  
214 outside of NFA communications in the covid-19 response sections were only used for  
215 necessary context to the responses. Critical discussion of the responses follows the  
216 presentation of case studies. Comparisons between men's and women's leagues were only  
217 made when season schedules were similar (e.g., England) to demonstrate similarities or  
218 differences.

219 A framework analysis, originating from policy research, was conducted to interpret  
220 events and consisted of: thematic framework; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation  
221 (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). After familiarisation with the documents, data were coded to  
222 uncover 25 key issues, derived from the literature and from the dataset (Figure 1). Specific  
223 sections were indexed and charted to a specific key theme (e.g., competition delay). Finally,  
224 data were mapped and interpreted to provide explanations and applied recommendations.

225 Reflexivity acknowledges the researchers' positions in research. Although now all  
226 based in England, authors one and two previously lived in Australia and the USA (totalling  
227 12 years) researching diversity and governance and/or working in women's football. This

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ffa.com.au> (Australia), <http://www.thefa.com> (England), and <https://www.ussoccer.com> (USA), and their respective leagues' websites: <https://www.w-league.com.au> (Australia), <https://womenscompetitions.thefa.com> (England), and <https://www.nwslsoccer.com> (USA)

228 cultural connectivity provided a richer lens to inform understanding of the historical, political  
229 and social contexts within each country. The team are also ideally suited to conduct  
230 institutional analysis, having published research widely within women’s football: [identifies  
231 authors].

## 232 **Results**

233 Figure 1 is a timeline of key NFA events and associated communications concerning  
234 covid-19 and women’s football. These events are placed next to enforced government  
235 restrictions in each country for context. We identify three phases that enables comparison of  
236 events across the three cases otherwise not possible due to different timelines with national  
237 covid-19 responses and league season schedules.

238 [INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

239 We have given a brief summary of the NFA communications to keep the timeline coherent  
240 and now expand upon these communications in the detailed case study descriptions below.

### 241 **Case study 1: Australia**

#### 242 **Past experiences: historical, political and social context**

243 Football in Australia has a chequered history. Given the country’s preference for  
244 physical sports (e.g., Australian football and rugby league), football has been deemed “the  
245 effeminate cousin in the hyper-masculine family of football codes in Australia” (Carniel,  
246 2008, p. 74). Former footballer Johnny Warren, captured the effeminate perception of the  
247 sport in the title of his autobiography highlighting issues of sexism, racism and homophobia –  
248 *Sheilas, Wogs, and Poofers*. However, the Australian women’s national team, ‘The  
249 Matildas’, have enjoyed considerable global success (Rowe et al., 2020).

250 The first national women’s league, the Women’s National Soccer League, introduced  
251 in 1996 had six teams, from six of the eight states and territories (Downes et al., 2015). This  
252 competition ran until 2004, alongside the men’s National Soccer League, under the control of

253 the Australian Women's Soccer Association. After a four-year gap when Australia's top  
254 players were forced to travel overseas to play, a semi-professional league, the W-League  
255 began in 2008. Now, owned and operated by FFA, it consists of nine teams; eight associated  
256 with an equivalent men's team. Given the organisational structure, communication is  
257 replicated across the FFA and W-League's websites and social media channels.

258 Although women's football in Australia has previously been described as "a case  
259 study in the failure of sporting prowess to translate into media coverage" (Caple et al., 2011  
260 p. 141), the W-League is enjoying a period of unprecedented popularity and media attention,  
261 fuelled by the success of the Matildas (McGowan & Downes, 2018). Nevertheless, the season  
262 is shorter than the male equivalent, has fewer teams, and typically receives 200 times less  
263 television news reports than the men's A-League per season (Caple et al., 2011). Prior to the  
264 pandemic, the league ran on a Southern hemisphere winter to spring schedule.

## 265 **The current situation: Response to covid-19**

### 266 *Alteration phase*

267 On 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the first covid-19-related FFA communication concerning  
268 women's football announced that the upcoming national game against the USWNT had been  
269 cancelled. Citing player, staff and fan health and welfare, it suggested the match would be  
270 rescheduled (FFA, 2020a). The following game against Canada was also cancelled soon  
271 thereafter. The associated press release promised:

272 Football's National COVID-19 Working Committee, comprising representatives from  
273 FFA, the Hyundai A-League and Westfield W-League, Member Federations and  
274 Professional Footballers Australia, will continue to give regular updates to the  
275 football community as it meets to consider advice on the COVID-19 outbreak from  
276 federal and state/territory governments. (FFA, 2020b, para 3)

### 277 278 *Decision making phase*

279 Initially, there were frequent FFA updates on the W-League. Again, on the 13<sup>th</sup> March  
280 2020, it was confirmed that W-League matches would go ahead as scheduled over that

281 weekend (FFA, 2020b). Although grassroots football in Australia was suspended on the 17<sup>th</sup>  
282 March 2020, the W-League was due to run until the W-League Grand Final on 21<sup>st</sup> March  
283 2020 and it was announced that the game would go ahead but ‘behind closed doors’, with no  
284 fans (FFA, 2020c). FFA, via their Chief Executive Officer, issued a press release on the 20<sup>th</sup>  
285 March 2020 that commented on the suspension of football but also highlighted the upcoming  
286 W-League Grand Final, encouraging grassroots players and fans to watch the game (FFA,  
287 2020d).

288           Press releases were issued in the following months discussing elite football, the  
289 impact of covid-19 on grassroots football and the successful bid to host the 2023 FIFA  
290 WWC. None were specifically focussed on women’s football and there was no explicit  
291 reference to the W-League until June 19<sup>th</sup> 2020 when FFA announced a new broadcast deal  
292 for football in Australia detailing that W-League and Matildas’ matches would continue to be  
293 aired on Fox Sports Australia. Johnson stated:

294           “The deal will see the professional game – for women and men – reactivated, and  
295 ensures that football at the heart of all our thinking in the future...We are equally as  
296 pleased to have secured the next season for the Westfield W-League to ensure we can  
297 continue to drive interest and growth in women’s football in Australia” (FFA, 2020e,  
298 para 8-10).

300           Subsequently, on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020, FFA published a press release and discussion paper,  
301 in light of “the most serious existential threat the game has ever seen” (FFA, 2020f, para 5)  
302 (covid-19), with eleven proposed ‘principles’ underpinning future development and growth.  
303 Reference was again made to the new broadcasting deal, which it was claimed “has secured  
304 the next season of the W-League and ensures that Professional Women’s Football has a  
305 platform to continue to grow” (FFA, 2020g, para 50). While women’s football was  
306 communicated as a strategic priority, reference to the W-League was otherwise limited; such  
307 as principle 10’s stated aim:

308 Continue the growth of the game by driving participation of women and girls and  
 309 enhancing existing competition structures to promote player development. (FFA,  
 310 2020g, para 12)

311  
 312 The paper also aimed to turn Australia into the ‘centre’ of women’s football in the Asia-  
 313 Pacific region and pointed to the development of a 10-year plan to drive investment. The  
 314 desire for the W-League to be “a ‘top 5’ global league which rivals its counterparts in the  
 315 United States and across Europe” was presented (FFA, 2020g, para 52). The lack of mention  
 316 of how the W-League would resume and to the specific covid-19 threats to women’s football  
 317 are noticeably absent. However, the paper also highlighted that:

318 [COVID-19] will place significant pressure on the games’ ability to invest in the  
 319 promotion of the A-League and W-League and other levels of the game, such as the  
 320 NPL competitions, to achieve the desired cut-through with fans. A concerted effort  
 321 will be required across all of football’s major products to rebuild revenues lost during  
 322 the COVID-19 period. (FFA, 2020g, para 25)

323  
 324 August communications related only to developments in international women’s.

## 325 **Case study 2: England**

### 326 **Past experiences: The historical, political and social context**

327 English football is often positioned as a game played and invented by men (Pfister,  
 328 2015). However, women’s football was hugely popular at the start of the 1900s in England,  
 329 peaking during the first World War (Williams, 2014). The women’s game was a threat to the  
 330 FA’s ‘man’s game’ who consequently banned women from playing football on FA affiliated  
 331 grounds in 1921, initiating the decline of women’s football (Williams, 2006). This fifty-year  
 332 ban effectively marginalised women’s football socially, culturally and economically.

333 The FA reassumed control for women’s football in 1993; however, it was 2009 before  
 334 plans were announced for The FA Women’s Super League (hereafter WSL), a semi-  
 335 professional league. The WSL’s inception as a summer league in 2011 was critical and timely  
 336 for women’s football in England as it aimed to provide a commercially viable, competitive  
 337 product (see Dunn & Welford, 2014). This acceleration towards professionalisation meant a

338 turbulent process for many clubs, with some established women's clubs unable to compete  
339 financially. In 2017, a second league was introduced and the leagues were numbered, The  
340 WSL 1 and 2.

341 In 2018, The FA announced the forthcoming season would comprise a full-time  
342 professional women's league; a significant development for women's football. Proposed FA  
343 changes to club licences meant clubs were required to meet new investment, player contact  
344 time and financial fair play criteria to secure professional status. Both leagues were scheduled  
345 between winter and spring and were rebranded, becoming The WSL and The FA Women's  
346 Championship, which remained a semi-professional league.

347 The FA presented the two leagues as niche, modern products, separate from men's  
348 football (Dunn & Welford, 2014). However, WSL teams are parented by men's clubs. This  
349 contradictory cultural space (where women's football is considered separate but inextricably  
350 connected) means women's teams are enmeshed in deregulation and advancing neoliberal  
351 principles (i.e., turning surplus into generated profit) that dominate men's football (Kennedy  
352 & Kennedy, 2016). Although, women's football cannot be considered to operate in line with  
353 such objectives (Gayles et al. 2018), it could be argued that women's football teams added  
354 into men's clubs strengthens the club brand and more critically, public perceptions.

### 355 **The current situation: Response to covid-19**

#### 356 *Alteration phase*

357 The last WSL fixtures were played on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2020 and this league was  
358 officially suspended on 13<sup>th</sup> March, initially until 30<sup>th</sup> April (FA, 2020a). Upon the decision  
359 for The PL not to return until May, The FA revised and paralleled its postponement (FA,  
360 2020b). At first, The FA stated a desire to complete the remaining fixtures:

361 there is a combined objective for all remaining domestic league and cup matches to be  
362 played as and when it's appropriate to do so, enabling us to maintain the integrity of  
363 each competition. However, any return to play will only be with the full support of  
364 Government and when medical guidance allows. (FA, 2020b, para 5)

365  
366 Their stance soon changed, however, citing concerns over the financial, logistical, and  
367 operational challenges associated with continuing:

368       Every possible scenario has been meticulously analysed and evaluated in order to find  
369       a solution to meet the unique demands of the women's game. This includes a detailed  
370       examination of the financial, logistical and operational challenges that we face during  
371       this pandemic...Following an assessment of the protocols required to return to  
372       football and feedback from clubs, which is crucial to any decision making process, it  
373       is clear there will be significant challenges in completing the 2019-20 season...We  
374       are continuing to consult on the possibility of terminating the 2019-20 season. (FA,  
375       2020c, para 3-6)

376  
377 *Decision making phase*

378 The FA delayed decision making until 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020, choosing to end the season -  
379 supposedly in the interests of the women's game:

380       Following overwhelming feedback from the clubs, the decision to bring an end to the  
381       2019-20 season was made in the best interest of the women's game. This will also  
382       enable clubs, the FA Women's Super League & Women's Championship Board and  
383       the FA to plan, prepare and focus on next season when football returns for the 2020-  
384       21 campaign. (FA, 2020d, para 3)

385  
386 Yet it was another two weeks (5<sup>th</sup> June 2020) before The FA decided the outcome of The  
387 WSL 2019-20 season on a points-per-game method (FA, 2020e). In sharp contrast, The PL,  
388 with similar season scheduling, resumed fixtures on the 17<sup>th</sup> June (PL, 2020).

389 *Resumption phase*

390       Shortly after the 2019-20 outcome decision, The PL donated £1m for covid-19 testing  
391 for WSL players (FA, 2020f). Kelly Simmons, FA director of the women's game stated:

392       We would like to thank the Premier League for its support in providing crucial  
393       funding that will allow us to align with their testing protocols when we come back for  
394       the 2020-21 season. (FA, 2020f, para 4)

395  
396 The donation could have been made sooner and saved the 2019-20 season, nevertheless the  
397 financial gesture arguably secured the commencement of the 2020-21 season. The FA began  
398 testing WSL players on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020 and published details on the number (1) of positive  
399 covid-19 cases in mid-July (FA, 2020g). The 7<sup>th</sup> July 2020 equalled a phased return to



400 training for WSL clubs. Soon after, the FA announced resumption details of both the WSL  
401 (for 5<sup>th</sup> September 2020) and the Women's 2019-20 FA Cup (26<sup>th</sup> September 2020) (FA,  
402 2020h). A new head coach of the women's national team was announced in mid-August as  
403 well as governmental plans to pilot fan attendance at WSL fixtures in September (FA, 2020i)

### 404 **Case study 3: United States of America**

#### 405 **Past experiences: The historical, political and social context**

406 Unlike Australia and England, the USA's governance of its elite women's football  
407 (soccer) league is not wholly under purview of its NFA. The National Women's Soccer  
408 League (NWSL) is a professional league (i.e., players remunerated on full-time contracts)  
409 that is owned by the teams, under a management contract with U.S. Soccer and thus devolved  
410 from the association (Linehan & Rueter, 2021). This governance structure is notably different  
411 to Australia and England and enables the league to act independently. As a profit-making  
412 league, however, teams are under pressure to be commercially. It is perhaps unsurprising,  
413 therefore, that the top tier of women's football has gone through many iterations since 1995  
414 when the first women's professional league was created, the United States Interregional  
415 Women's League. Citing failures to produce a financially viable and stable market, women's  
416 soccer in the USA between 1995-2013 arguably failed to feed off the popularity and publicity  
417 of the USWNT's success (who reached the semi-finals of all FIFA WWCs, winning once)  
418 and the top tier of women's football changed six times (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). In  
419 2012, U.S. Soccer held roundtable discussions with eight clubs and agreed to fund the wages  
420 of USWNT players to reduce team expenses and support the financial viability of the newly  
421 created NWSL for 2013 (Lauletta, 2012). The NWSL has remained as the top tier league in  
422 part due to U.S. Soccer's financial backing and the advent of social media allowing women's  
423 football fans to connect with their teams (Coche, 2014). Before covid-19, the NWSL season  
424 ran on a spring through autumn schedule.

425 Recently, U.S. Soccer has been “besieged” with lawsuits, most notably facing two  
426 Equal Pay Act and gender discrimination lawsuits with members of the USWNT (Bank,  
427 2020, p.1). Critiquing the merit of arguments in these lawsuits is not the purview of this  
428 study, but we acknowledge this political context to situate U.S. Soccer’s covid-19 response.  
429 In March 2019, USWNT players sued U.S. Soccer for ‘institutionalized gender  
430 discrimination’, poor working conditions and violating the Equal Pay Act (ESPN, 2019).  
431 Previously, five members of the team filed a federal complaint commonly referred to as  
432 “Equal Play, Equal Pay” in 2017 over claims of wage discrimination by U.S. Soccer when  
433 compared to the men’s national team’s pay and was settled out of court (cf. Archer & Prange,  
434 2019). At the start of the pandemic, the USWNT’s 2019 lawsuit had yet to receive a  
435 summary judicial judgement. The judge in the case recently found for U.S. Soccer  
436 concerning pay discrimination but preserved the claims of USWNT regarding discrimination  
437 in working conditions (McCann, 2020). The events reviewed here speak to questions of  
438 (in)equality in sport, which are more openly and visibly contested in American society than  
439 ever before (Allison, 2018).

#### 440 **The current situation: Response to covid-19**

##### 441 *Alteration phase*

442 In March 2020, covid-19 cases in the USA sharply rose (McNeil Jr., 2020), there  
443 were multiple and consistent communications from the NWSL and U.S. Soccer. On 10th  
444 March 2020, the NWSL described:

445 closely monitoring the spread of the virus with respected to our preseason and  
446 regular season matches and will be in a position to make changes as necessary to  
447 respond to developments as they happen (NWSL, 2020a, para. 1).  
448

449 The NWSL and U.S. Soccer took immediate action, cancelling preseason and USWNT  
450 fixtures respectively (NWSL, 2020b; U.S. Soccer, 2020a). On 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020, NWSL  
451 Commissioner, Lisa Baird wrote to the NWSL community:

452 We are in active consultation with governmental health agencies, our NWSL  
453 medical task force and other sports leagues on the appropriate next steps and  
454 contingency plans for the resumption of our 2020 preseason and potential impact  
455 on our 2020 regular season. (NWSL, 2020b, para. 2).  
456

457 To support the USA’s medical efforts, U.S. Soccer launched the “Bend the Curve. Stay at  
458 Home” campaign with the NWSL and the men’s elite league, Major League Soccer to spread  
459 awareness of travel restrictions (U.S. Soccer, 2020b).

460 *Decision making phase*

461 On 4<sup>th</sup> May 2020, NWSL allowed individual training to resume (subject to state and  
462 local health mandates) if clubs followed their newly devised “Return to Play Phased  
463 Protocol” (NWSL, 2020c). This statement communicated the first phase of the Protocol for  
464 clubs and provided reassurance to the wider community of the NWSL’s commitment to  
465 prioritising the health and safety of players and staff. Later guidance on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020  
466 detailed the resumption of small group (phase two) and full team training (phase three)  
467 (NWSL, 2020d).

468 *Resumption phase*

469 With full training underway, on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2020 Baird announced a new competition,  
470 The NWSL Challenge Cup, to be played in Utah (NWSL, 2020e). The 25-game tournament  
471 would enable clubs to train within one “village” complex meeting housing, training and  
472 competition needs (para. 10). A tournament-format was preferred over a delayed version of  
473 the regular season schedule that would have required extensive non-essential travel across  
474 nine states, where different state social-distancing rules were in effect. Importantly, this  
475 tournament proceeded with endorsement from local and national officials (NWSL, 2020e). It  
476 was hoped that the Challenge Cup would generate much needed revenue, with the  
477 announcement of title sponsorship (NWSL, 2020e) and further multi-year partner deals.

478 Additional revenue came through a three-year broadcasting deal with CBS, who had agreed  
479 to show live games throughout the tournament (NWSL, 2020e).

480 The Challenge Cup was not without challenges, as the first professional football  
481 league to return. First, players expressed concerns about load management playing so many  
482 games on artificial turf over a short time period, and potential exposure to covid-19 for them  
483 and their families. On the 27<sup>th</sup> May 2020, contract guarantees (regardless of participation),  
484 insurance, tournament accommodations for families, and input on tournament procedures  
485 were secured for all NWSL players (NWSLPA, 2020). Second, eight days before the start  
486 Orlando Pride withdrew from the competition after staff and players tested positive for  
487 coronavirus (Orlando Pride, 2020). State regulations were not broken, but the actions of  
488 individual players did not adhere to the NWSL protocols. The opening game of the  
489 tournament was the most watched match in NWSL history with 572,000 viewers, a 201%  
490 increase on the previous record (Williams, 2020a). This was superseded by the final which  
491 drew 653,000 viewers (Williams, 2020b). To continue this “breakout 2020 season” (para 1),  
492 the NWSL announced on 25<sup>th</sup> August that a similar ‘Fall Series’ competition would launch in  
493 September 2020 with national broadcasting and commercial partners (NWSL, 2020f). An  
494 international broadcasting deal was soon announced (NWSL, 2020g).

### 495 Discussion

496 The study aims to: (a) compare and shed new insights into the wide range of phased  
497 covid-19 responses, and (b) establish recommendations for other nations to navigate major  
498 crises with their social and ethical responsibilities to women’s football. Accordingly, this  
499 section begins by exploring NFA covid-19 responses utilising institutional logics to address  
500 (a). Then, for (b), case study findings and resulting recommendations are organised under the  
501 three response phases of alteration, decision making and resumption (as identified by the  
502 framework analysis and shown in Figure 1).

503           According to institutional theory, homogeneity in predominant organisational values,  
504 norms and practices occurs with social pressures resulting in other organisations conforming  
505 to the dominant organisation's values, norms and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).  
506 Thus, the role that Australia, England and the USA play in shaping women's football  
507 practices of other nations is arguably vast. Covid-19 presents an opportunity for these  
508 countries to establish practice norms for NFAs navigating crises. However, we find variation  
509 in NFA responses to covid-19 rooted in their differing historical, political and social contexts  
510 and the prioritising of women's football. In light of this finding, institutional theory tells us  
511 that it may be the ordering principles and social structures of NFAs that shapes them rather  
512 than similar organisations (Washington & Patterson, 2011). These principles and structures  
513 are commonly referred as institutional logics and can be inherently contradictory, explaining  
514 differences in organisations' actions (Allison, 2016). We demonstrate that sports  
515 organisations are driven by a unique institutional logic and make a theoretical contribution by  
516 highlighting engrained social structures as a prevailing institutional logic in the governance  
517 of women's football. This finding corroborates the importance placed on social structures in  
518 understanding sport governance during the pandemic, as detailed in Byers et al.'s (2021)  
519 covid-19 commentary.

520           Next, we discuss the impact of institutional logics through the three identified phases  
521 (alteration, decision-making, and resumption), highlighting key recommendations for NFAs  
522 and leagues. Movement through these phases will have been influenced by the stage of the  
523 season, nevertheless differences in responses highlight diverse prioritisations of women's  
524 football and this study is the first to outline pandemic response phases of sports organisations.

#### 525 **Consistent communication during alteration phase**

526           The case studies highlight the importance of communication for reputation  
527 management in the alteration and decision-making phases. In England and the USA, where

528 most fixtures were unplayed, two different responses emerged. In England, there was a two-  
529 month delay between the pandemic and communication about how the 2019-20 season would  
530 be resolved, whereas in the USA, within this timeframe a new competition was launched with  
531 covid-19 measures in place, commercial partners and a new broadcasting deal. The FA  
532 attracted criticism for the lack of urgency in announcing the cancellation of 2019-20 season  
533 and is indicative of its lack of support for women's football - little solidarity was shown to  
534 women's clubs in England to assist with losses or to cover restarting costs (Wrack, 2020).  
535 This finding indicates the importance of clear crisis communication for reputation  
536 management (McGuire et al., 2020) particularly during covid-19 where a lack of institutional  
537 communication has been linked to community worse-case scenario anxieties (Wu et al.,  
538 2020). Women's football was prioritised in the USA as the first professional football league  
539 to restart, and dismissed in England with focus on the PL resumption. Specific case  
540 differences could be attributed to divergent governance structures where the NWSL were  
541 able to act independently of the NFA. In Australia, it was a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'  
542 for the W-League as there was little communication once the season ended in March (Figure  
543 1). While the off-season timing may impact the lack of announcements, clear crisis  
544 communication can instil confidence in the women's football community to be able to restore  
545 and recover from any pandemic effects (McGuire et al., 2020). Despite the award of the 2023  
546 FIFA WWC and the FFA's 'XI Principles' paper claiming a post-pandemic focus on growth,  
547 the lack of information on the resumption of women's football belie this claim. By the end of  
548 July 2020, there had been no update on the resumption of the W-League. These differences in  
549 NFAs communication point towards the influence of social and cultural value structures (and  
550 taken-for-granted norms) in the institutional environment (Joo et al., 2017). That is, the FA's  
551 neglect of women's football in the first months of the pandemic is consistent with historical  
552 injustices against it (detailed in the case study) and a taken-for-granted norm that men's

553 football is the popular focus. Institutional logics may also explain differences in  
554 communication where the NWSL's conception of a commercially-driven tournament show  
555 the logic of women's football as 'business' as prevailing in the USA, whereas women's  
556 football as 'cause' (i.e., to empower girls to participate in football via role-modelling) could  
557 explain the lack of FA action and communication.

#### 558 **Multi-agency involvement during decision-making phase**

559 At the decision-making phase, this research highlights the importance of collaborating  
560 with stakeholders to support gender equality efforts. The NWSL's tournament approach was  
561 successful because of the open support from local and state health and government officials,  
562 in addition to coordination by the NWSL. Here, the geopolitical context caused differing  
563 institutional pressures, where Australia and England entered national lockdowns and the USA  
564 did not, thus NWSL benefitted from relaxed legal restrictions. In England, (financial) support  
565 from the men's PL was only granted to the FA after their decision-making phase and the  
566 NFA did not conceive an alternative revenue stream like the NWSL. Moreover, during the  
567 assessed period, the UK government had not committed financial support to women's  
568 football that had already been afforded to other sports such as rugby league (UK  
569 Government, 2020) – a sport that from a market perspective (turnover figures, club size,  
570 average attendances etc.) is perhaps a more realistic comparison for women's football than  
571 men's football in the UK. Both Australian and UK governments later provided financial aid  
572 in 2021 to support elite women's football (SportsProMedia, 2021; UK Government, 2021).  
573 The USA government provided a financial loan to the NWSL within the first six months as  
574 part of an initiative to support small businesses (New York Times, 2020). Sports governance  
575 have long been autonomous yet covid-19 has caused increasing government/regulatory  
576 supervision and NGBs are likely to need to work closely with these stakeholders, especially if  
577 requiring funding. Covid-19 may thus indirectly cause institutional (isomorphic) change, with

578 environmental pressures from governments forcing NFA's towards gender equality initiatives  
579 (i.e. equitable financial distribution between men's and women's football) in exchange for  
580 financial aid. Indeed, the UK government has criticised The FA's oversight of the game and  
581 in recent years recommended introducing legislation if it did not reform football governance  
582 (House of Commons Library, 2017). However, once the effects of the pandemic diminish  
583 consistent change and homogeneity is unlikely across NFAs in their governance of women's  
584 football without intervention from the world governing body who have authority over NFAs  
585 (Slack & Hinings, 1994).

586         The case studies also highlight differences in NFA and league actions in seeking out  
587 commercial partners and broadcasters in the decision-making phase. This was key to the  
588 NWSL's financially viable tournament (who acted independently from U.S. Soccer), with  
589 three named partners and a national broadcaster. A new broadcasting deal in Australia  
590 'secured' the W-League's short-term future, with providers set to cover the league until July  
591 2021. A longer-term deal had yet to emerge at the end of the assessed period and FFA points  
592 to "significant pressure" on investment in both men's and women's football. During the  
593 analysed period, English club owners pressured the FA to capitalise on "the massive financial  
594 opportunity" for broadcasting (Garry, 2020, para 1). In March 2021 the FA struck a £7m deal  
595 with broadcasters BBC and Sky Sports (Garry, 2021).

#### 596 **NFA stewardship during resumption phase**

597         The differing communication levels from NFAs concerning the resumption of  
598 competition highlights a key finding that the interests of women's football are best served  
599 when it is not solely under the stewardship of the NFA. In both Australia and England, the  
600 NFAs had attention divided between men's and women's competitions whereas the NWSL  
601 could focus solely on women's football. Consequently, it returned in a timely and highly  
602 visible manner in the USA. As such, institutional mechanisms within NFAs may indeed



603 influence their ability to act (ir)responsibly (Joo et al., 2017). Variation in governance  
604 structures of women's football contributes to why the NWSL were able to return quicker than  
605 FFA and The FA. The NWSL demonstrated an upward fluctuation in demand (as  
606 demonstrated by record viewership) for the resumption of women's football, and the swift  
607 involvement of commercial investors highlights a positive change in market dynamics within  
608 the USA. It is important to note that American sports had made significant gains in  
609 commercial and broadcasting partnerships prior to the pandemic (Allison, 2016) and so their  
610 crises responses could also reflect a different sports landscape to Australia and England.

611         Additionally, women's football operates in Australia and England within the powerful  
612 and highly constraining environment dominated by men's football and hegemonic  
613 masculinity, whereas the independence of the NWSL from U.S. Soccer means league  
614 organisers are not constrained internally by a powerful and highly constraining internal  
615 environment within the organisation (although these hegemonic masculinity constraints may  
616 be felt in dealing with external parties). Institutional theorists suggest that when operating in  
617 such a constrained environment, constantly fighting for legitimacy, organisations are more  
618 likely to conform to institutional norms (Parry et al., 2021), so with public pressure for  
619 televised men's sport to resume, in addition to the governance structures in both countries, it  
620 is possible to understand why women's football was not prioritised in Australia and England.

## 621 **Conclusion**

622         In the context of covid-19, we find that NFAs can impede gender equality, both in  
623 terms of management and communication. This study rationalises institutional logics (i.e.  
624 engrained social structures), constrained environments, and governance structures as  
625 explanatory variables of the differences between NFA actions. The new insights we generate  
626 (concerning communication, government and health support, commercialisation, and  
627 stewardship) establish recommendations for how NFAs can navigate major crises in the

628 short-term with their social and ethical responsibilities to women's football so that gender  
629 equality expectations are not diminished.

630         As NFAs continue to respond to covid-19, it is important to assess institutional  
631 actions concerning women's football and whether they advance or hamper its 'new age'. This  
632 study only covers the first six-months of the pandemic and how women's football community  
633 concerns could be alleviated in the short-term. Nonetheless it advances the small body of  
634 literature examining institutions governing women's sport; being the first to explore  
635 institutional pressures and football governing bodies during covid-19 as well as by providing  
636 a framework for NFAs' to manage major crises. We make a theoretical contribution to  
637 institutional theory in sport management by using women's football as a vehicle to uncover  
638 and bring attention to the past experiences (i.e., the historical, political, and social factors)  
639 that change practices, specifically by finding engrained social structures as an institutional  
640 logic in women's football that may influence crisis responses as well as the influence of  
641 constrained environments and governance structures in explaining differences. Future  
642 research should use interviews and observations to examine how football governance  
643 decision-makers respond to time-sensitive crises. While the assessment presented here cannot  
644 directly speak to the effectiveness of institutional actions, it will be useful to future studies  
645 seeking to better understand the historical, political and sociological effects of this pandemic  
646 on elite women's football in addition to providing NFAs with recommendations for future  
647 crisis management.

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937 Figure 1. Timeline of key NFA events concerning covid-19 and women’s football.

