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A VIEW FROM THE TOP: Women Leaders and Contradictory

Constructions of Gender Inequality in English Football

A VIEW FROM THE TOP: Women Leaders and Contradictory Constructions of Gender Inequality in English Football

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Abstract

Through biographic interviews with 23 women leaders in English football, this paper examines how women leaders make sense of ongoing inequalities in football and under what conditions they challenge or repudiate gender inequalities. With reference to feminist critiques of neoliberal feminism I find that women challenged the perception of football as a sexist industry while acknowledging gender inequalities in football leadership. Women also made sense of their own success through the neoliberal rhetoric of hard work but also acknowledged that success was uneven for different women and so sought to remove barriers for other women through 'quiet resistance'. In order to resolve these contradictions, women leaders swung back and forth between making gender invisible through neoliberal discourses and making gender matter through feminist discourses. This created an 'ideological dilemma' which resulted in anxiety and additional pressures for women leaders as they navigated these opposing demands. I argue that women leaders in football occupy a complex and contradictory middle ground between 'agents of change' and 'cogs in the machine' literature and that more work is needed to understand the complexities of women's leadership experiences if we are to moves beyond gender quotas and leadership courses as remedies for inequality.

Introduction

The relative lack of women leaders in English football compared to men has become a pressing issue for the industry (The FA, 2018a). Despite significant growth in women's participation as players (UEFA, 2017) and spectators (Pope, 2017) in recent years, they remain underrepresented in positions of power within the industry. For example, a recent report found that just 7 percent of directors in men's professional club

football[1] were women (Farrer & Co, 2019). While the reasons for women's underrepresentation in football leadership remains unexplored, there is a burgeoning body of literature that explores barriers to leadership for women in sport (Aicher & Sagas, 2009; Burton, 2015; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2011; Leberman & Burton, 2017; Whisenant, Pederson, & Obenour, 2002) and the wider business world (Auster & Prasad, 2016; Chizema, Kamuriwo, & Shinozawa, 2015; Heilman, 2001; Oakley, 2000; Tutchell & Edmonds, 2015). Most of this research is predicated on the notion that adding more women into leadership roles will lead to positive changes for all women. However, this literature sits apart from a contradictory body of work that suggests women leaders, under the conditions of neoliberalism, actually repudiate gender inequality (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Gill, K. Kelan, & M. Scharff, 2017; Nash & Moore, 2018; Rottenberg, 2014) and act in ways that impede the advancement of other women (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015).

The tendency to position women leaders as either good or bad for organizational equality – as 'agents of change' or 'cogs in the machine' (Cohen & Huffman, 2007: 682) – grossly oversimplifies the complexities of being a woman leader in a male-dominated industry and neglects to consider the conditions under which women leaders are able or willing to challenge inequalities in the neoliberal workplace. For example, women are more likely than men to be placed into insecure leadership roles and are at greater risk of losing their jobs (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Women leaders also face heightened scrutiny and greater performance pressures than their male counterparts (Glass & Cook, 2016). As such, attempts to highlight inequalities or challenge the status quo threatens the already precarious position of women leaders. Therefore, I argue along with Baker & Kelan (2019: 3) that alongside 'adding more women' approaches 'there is also an ethical responsibility to understand at a deeper level how women manage the effect of neoliberalized organizational systems and cultures that continue to exclude them from equal opportunities'. However, very few studies have attempted to understand the experiences and perceptions of gender inequalities from the point of view of women leaders in sport (for exceptions see: Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Pfister & Radtke, 2009) and, to date,

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[1] It is important to note that while women's teams in the WSL are now fully professionalized and have their own boards of directors, most men's clubs still oversee the women's game at club level.

no studies have explored this issue in football. This paper addresses this gap in the research by presenting original data on the experiences of women leaders in professional football in England.

This research is especially timely given the English Football Association's (The FA) strategic priority to increase the number of women in football leadership by 2021 (The FA, 2017, 2018b). This strategy also coincides with the government-led introduction of 30 percent gender diversity targets for boards of national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport in the UK (Sport England & UK Sport, 2016). In the drive to diversify football leadership, women leaders in the game come to symbolize the possibility of gender equality while, paradoxically, the lack of women around them exemplifies deep and persistent inequalities. This contradiction, ubiquitous in sport and the wider business world, has come to exemplify the challenges feminism faces in a climate of neoliberalism (Gill et al., 2017; Rottenberg, 2014). It is within this contradiction that I ask how women leaders make sense of continuing inequalities in football despite their personal success and under what conditions do they challenge inequalities or repudiate them? Drawing on findings from biographic interviews with 23 women who have worked in leadership positions in men's professional football and football governing bodies in England, I explore the answers to these questions with reference to feminist critiques of neoliberal feminism.

This research finds that women leaders in football discursively construct football as a positive place for women to work despite acknowledging discrimination within the industry. However, I find that these constructions are not just the result of a neoliberal sensibility (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Nash & Moore, 2018), they are strategically deployed by women to encourage gender diversity in the game. I also find that women's neoliberal narratives of success are complicated by an acute understanding of the structural inequalities women in football face when they have children. Finally, findings demonstrate the ways in which women leaders 'quietly resist' the status quo to support other women in the workplace. These findings contradict existing literature on women leaders as non-agentic neoliberal subjects by evidencing the ways in which women leaders use their positions to challenge inequalities. However, they also highlight the persistent challenges women face 'above the glass ceiling' and the fine line they must tread in order

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to push a feminist agenda without rocking the boat. Because of this, I argue that women leaders in football exist in a messy, complex, and contradictory middle ground between 'agents of change' and 'cogs in the machine' literature. Crucially, I argue that this middle ground creates an 'ideological dilemma' (Kelan, 2009) that results in anxiety and additional pressures for women leaders as they navigate these opposing demands. That said, women acknowledged that football and sport, unlike other industries, provided unique opportunities to improve the lives of women and girls. Ultimately, this provided the motivation for women to stay in football leadership and challenge longstanding inequalities between women and men in the game.

I begin this paper by providing a brief context of football in England before presenting an overview and analysis of existing literature on women, leadership, and sport. Following this, I discuss feminist debates on neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities in the workplace and argue for the need to incorporate a nuanced understanding of women's lived experiences as leaders into these debates. I then outline the methodology for this study before presenting three key findings under the headings: *Challenging Perceptions of Football*, *The Uneven Pursuit of Success*, and *Quiet Resistance*.

English Football: A Male-Preserve

Football in England has traditionally been considered a 'male-preserve' (Dunning, 1986) and has a long history of formal, cultural, and symbolic exclusion of women from playing football (J. Williams, 2003a). The most notable example of this was in 1921 when The FA banned women from playing football on FA affiliated pitches, ruling that football was 'quite unsuitable for females' (J. Williams, 2003a: 66). The ban, which was finally lifted in 1971, can be viewed as an attempt by the FA to recoup and preserve the masculine image of football (J. Williams, 2003b). Although there has been a significant resurgence in women's participation in football in recent decades as players and spectators (Pope, 2017; UEFA, 2017), women have remained on the margins of the sport. That is, although formal bans on women playing football no longer exist in England, the lack of

professionalization and low wages has prevented women from playing on the same terms as men (SportingIntelligence, 2018; J. Williams, 2003b).

Off the field, experiences of exclusion, stereotyping, and sexism are often a normalized part of women's involvement in the game (Caudwell, 2011; Women in Football, 2016). Football, for example, has successfully constructed the view that women have a limited understanding of the game (Jones & Edwards, 2013). This view sustains practices and beliefs that exclude women from leadership roles in football, including coaching and officiating. In a study exploring the experiences of female football officials, Forbes *et al.* (2015) found that female referees were subjected to constant scrutiny by male fans, players, and coaches based on their gender and perceived lack of knowledge. A 2016 survey also found that 62 percent of women who work in football had experienced sexist jokes; 38 percent had experienced derogatory comments about their gender; and 15 percent had experienced sexual harassment at work (Women in Football, 2016). All of this functions to sustain masculine dominance as the norm and prevent women from participating on equal terms with men, especially in positions of power where they pose the biggest threat.

Gender inequalities at highest levels of football governance in are stark (Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg, & Mignon, 2014; Women in Sport, 2017). Before 2018, only 1 woman had ever sat on the board of The FA (Women in Sport, 2017). However, recently introduced governance reforms have marked a significant step forward for gender diversity in English football governance. In direct response to Sport England and UK Sport's Code for Sports Governance (2016), which required NGBs of sport in receipt of public funding to adopt a target of a minimum 30 percent gender diversity on their governing boards by April 2017, The FA increased gender diversity on its national and regional boards to 30 percent. However, most women appointed to their boards now hold non-executive roles – roles that have less power and influence over board decisions. In sum, men still dominate positions of power at the national level of English football in spite of these new rules. Crucially, these new governance reforms do not apply at club level, where gender inequality in leadership roles is more pronounced than the national level. For example, a report by Farrer & Co. (2019) revealed that just seven percent of director roles in men's club football were held by women and only 11 percent of men's clubs had a

woman on the board. Although the FA introduced a women's leadership development course to address this issue (The FA in Association with The Institute of Directors, 2017), these courses simply aim to 'fix women' rather than structural inequalities and so often fail to deliver tangible results (Piggott & Pike, 2019; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). As such, there is a pressing need to understand and challenge persistent inequalities in football leadership that moves us beyond gender targets and leadership courses for women. Exploring the experiences and perceptions of gender inequality from the point of view of women leaders in the industry opens up avenues to facilitate this understanding. In the absence of literature on women leaders in football, I turn to a review of existing literature on women leaders in male-dominated industries to elucidate some the challenges and opportunities for understanding women's perceptions and experiences of gender inequality in leadership.

Women, Leadership, and Gender Inequalities in Male-Dominated Industries

Scholarship on women leaders in male-dominated industries often dichotomously presents women as either 'agents of change' or 'cogs in the machine' (Srivastava & Sherman, 2015). For example, studies have found that having women in senior roles changes workplace cultures for the better (Huffman, Cohen, & Pearlman, 2010; Kanter, 1977). Indeed, efforts to increase the number of women in leadership roles are predicated on the expectation that women leaders will act in ways that change patriarchal structures from within (Srivastava & Sherman, 2015). Contrastingly, women leaders in male-dominated industries are routinely criticized for repudiating gender inequality or worse, actively preventing gender equality efforts within their organizations. As exemplified in the proliferation of metaphors such as 'queen bee' (Derks, Ellemers, Van Laar, & De Groot, 2011; Ellemers, Van den Heuvel, De Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004; Ely, 1994; Kaiser & Spalding, 2015), women leaders in male-dominated industries are often blamed for undermining the advancement of other women who they view as a threat. The problem with this existing literature on women leaders is that it presents women leaders as either good (agents of change) or bad (cogs in the machine) for gender equality, as if women hold a fixed position in one scenario or that the two possibilities are mutually exclusive. This either/or approach also places a disproportionate expectation on women leaders to

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advance gender equality without acknowledging the complex gendered context of leadership for women (Mavin, 2006).

Despite reaching the top, women leaders in male-dominated industries continue to face challenges and barriers to success. For example, the 'glass cliff' phenomenon demonstrates that women are more likely than men to be placed into precarious leadership roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). For example, Glass & Cook (2016) found that women were more likely to be promoted during times of crisis or scandal within an organization. This suggests that women's ability to challenge inequalities may be thwarted by the lack of security in their leadership positions. The same study also found that women leaders were less likely than their male counterparts to have access to support networks within their organization, making it harder for women to gather backing for their ideas. In sum, women leaders in male-dominated industries may find it difficult, if not impossible, to use their positions to challenge inequalities, even if they wanted to.

Making sense of inequality as a woman in leadership thus presents a dilemma for women who simultaneously represent the possibility of gender equality while their negative experiences and the lack of women around them represents deep inequalities. As such, it has been argued that women leaders rectify this dilemma by repudiating structural gender inequalities and internalizing inequality. For example, in one of the few studies to have looked at the experiences of women leaders in sport, Claringbould and Knoppers (2008) found that women directors, unlike their male counterparts, recognized the gendered meanings of the workplace and the impact that they had on women's success; however, they continued to present this as a woman's issue. The absence of a critique of structural inequalities by women leaders was also found in a recent study of women executives in the financial sector (Baker & Kelan, 2019). These women 'split off' the undesirable parts of their organization in order to present their workplace as gender neutral. Nash and Moore (2018), in their study of women leaders in STEMM industries, also found that women turned the focus of workplace inequality on themselves rather than structural inequalities. The authors argue that a neoliberal climate of meritocracy and competition renders structural gender inequalities inarticulable and attaches women to a 'cruelly optimistic' belief in fairness (Nash & Moore, 2018: 9).

Neoliberalism is a world view, prevalent in Western societies, which promotes state deregulation and free market competition. At the individual level, neoliberalism celebrates and promotes the autonomous and self-serving individual (C. L. Williams, 2013). Meritocracy – the notion that anybody who works hard enough and who has the right skills can achieve success – is based on this neoliberal ethos of individualism and self-regulation (Nash & Moore, 2018). The meritocratic ideal is that anyone, regardless of gender, race, class, or sexuality, can reach the top. Thus, a neoliberal reading of gender inequality in the workplace 'places the burden of responsibility for women's underrepresentation in leadership positions onto individual women rather than organizational inequality regimes' (Nash & Moore, 2018: 3). This is a concern for scholars and practitioners seeking to redress structural inequalities in sport because neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and individual choice dominate the narrative on women's underrepresentation in sport leadership (Knoppers, Hovden, & Elling, 2019). As I will discuss in the following section, there is a wider feminist concern that women leaders under the conditions of neoliberalism show solidarity with the same workplace cultures that discriminate against and exclude most other women (Rhoton, 2011).

Postfeminist and Neoliberal Feminist Sensibilities in the Workplace

Gill (2008: 17) argues that neoliberalism intertwines with post-feminism to reinforce a 'current of individualism' whereby women are expected to just get on with it, against all odds. 'Post-feminism' is a highly contested concept; however, I draw on McRobbie's (2009) conceptualization that views post-feminism as a movement to individualize the feminist project. This 'choice' feminism hails women's personal successes as markers of gender equality, despite the reality of ongoing inequalities (Budgeon, 2015). In a post-feminist world, women view themselves as having equality; thus, inequalities become harder to name and challenge (Lewis, 2014). However, Rottenberg (2014) argues that there has been a more recent emergence of 'neoliberal feminism', whereby high-powered businesswomen like Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, espouse feminist ideas whilst embracing neoliberal ideals:

'Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural, and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being...'

(Rottenberg, 2014: 420)

Neoliberal feminism is somewhat of an oxymoron in that neoliberal ideals of individualism and market competition sit in uncomfortable opposition to the feminist project of collective social justice. Yet, neoliberal feminism has found steady footing in the world of business precisely because of this paradox. In placing responsibility for gender equality onto individual women, neoliberal feminism removes the need for a critique of structural inequalities. As such, Rottenberg (2014) argues that neoliberal feminism presents women, rather than organizations, as flawed subjects in need of fixing or empowering if they are to become successful. Tailored leadership courses for women, such as those offered by the FA, are based on this very neoliberal feminist idea. This 'feminism' is predicated on the erasure of the structural issues that affect most women and instead focuses on individual female achievement as a marker of gender equality. So long as a few women make it to the top to act as markers of equality, it is business as usual.

Rottenberg (2014: 432) argues that 'ambitious individual *middle-class women* themselves become both the problem and the solution in the neoliberal feminist age'. Indeed, the most famous woman in English football leadership, Baroness Karren Brady, Vice President of West Ham United FC, has been accused of being a 'neo-liberal subject' who shows solidarity with the patriarchal structures of football (Wilkes, 2015), despite publicly espousing feminist views (Brady, 2012). However, while there is a need to be critical about a neoliberal feminist sensibility in the world of leadership and governance, critics seldom credit women leaders with any agency in their navigation of leadership and gender inequality in neoliberal world or consider the ways in which women leaders challenge neoliberal ideas. As Prügl (2015: 627) contends, 'the challenge for scholars is to better understand the conditions under which neoliberalized feminisms provide openings

to challenge oppressive power structures'. As such, I ask, 'how do women leaders in football make sense of gender inequality football leadership?' and 'under what conditions do women leaders in football challenge or repudiate gender inequality?'

Methodology

This paper draws on biographic interviews with women leaders in football, conducted between August 2018 and August 2019, as part of an ongoing doctoral research project into women's experiences of working in leadership roles in football. Using purposive sampling to cover a range of experiences across the football hierarchy, I contacted 105 women who have worked in the leadership and governance of men's football in England via post or email to take part in this study. For the purpose of this study, I define leadership roles as those with management responsibilities (Klenke, 2018), for example, roles with 'director', 'manager', 'chief', 'head' or 'chair' in the job title. Twenty-three women, with ages ranging between 30-75 years, volunteered to be interviewed for this study. Eighteen were active in football during the time of the interviews. Seventeen were married, civil partnered or cohabiting, and ten women had children at the time of the study. Seventeen women held a degree or higher degree and seven women held professional qualifications. Twenty-one women identified as heterosexual and two women identified as gay/lesbian. Twenty respondents identified as white British and two women identified as Black British/African. Although white women were overrepresented in this sample, this broadly represents the population of women leaders in football (Bradbury et al., 2014).

Biographic interviewing 'emphasizes the placement of the individual within a nexus of social connections, historical events and life experiences (the life history)' (Miller, 2003: 15). This approach offers avenues to explore the construction of leadership journeys by asking respondents to reflect on and make sense of their past experiences within the present. This method is useful in exploring *how* people construct their experiences rather than focusing on the experience itself (Bornat 2012). Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 4 hours long and were audio recorded before being transcribed

verbatim. To protect the identity of respondents, real names and places have been removed or replaced with pseudonyms.

A Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz, 2008), which made use of Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2005), was employed to analyse interview transcripts. CGT adopts an abductive rather than purely inductive logic of enquiry. That is, data and theory are not simply discovered from the data, they are co-constructed by the researcher and participants, and are influenced by prior engagement with social scientific concepts. Constructivist GT also engages with postmodern concerns about difference, reflexivity, and researcher positionality (Clarke & Friese, 2007). Unlike traditional Grounded Theory, CGT 'starts with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed', as such, 'we must take the researcher's position, privileges, perspectives, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality' (Charmaz, 2008: 169). The use of situational analysis, which makes use of mapping to open up the data and see connections between concepts, aids this this process by encouraging researchers to place their own subject positions on the map to visualize how their position influences what is said, what is not said, and they interpret what this means. Clarke (2012) argues that this approach to data analysis is implicitly feminist because it acknowledges the researcher's situatedness; is grounded in lived experiences; and pays attention to different actors and discourses regardless of their power in the situation. As a feminist researcher concerned with exploring women's lived experiences and in situating my own position as a white, educated, woman within the co-construction of knowledge, this approach presented the most appropriate method of data analysis.

The data analysis process consisted of three phases: initial (open) coding (Thorberg & Charmaz, 2014), situational mapping, and focused (selective) coding (Thorberg & Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding involved line by line or incident by incident labelling of the data. This produced multiple codes that were then developed, merged or modified as more and more data were analysed and compared. The initial codes were placed onto a situational map to allow connections between topics and actors etc. to be drawn. This process aided the development of focused codes, which helped to *explain* what was happening in the data. For the purpose of this study, I present findings under

three of these focused codes: *Challenging Perceptions of Football, The Uneven Pursuit of Success*, and *Quiet Resistance*.

Findings

Challenging Perceptions of Football

Despite evidence suggesting that women working in football continue to face discrimination (Forbes et al., 2015; Jones & Edwards, 2013; Welford, 2011; Women in Football, 2016), most respondents were keen to challenge the perception that the football industry in England was sexist or unwelcoming to women. I identified several discursive strategies through which women challenged, what one respondent described as, a 'lazy perception' of football. These included the presentation of football as a gender-neutral industry; contending that football is the same as any other industry in its treatment of women; or focusing on positive experiences and silencing 'horror stories'.

Several women expressed positive views about the football workplace and its treatment of women. For example, Louise and Nicola both felt that the outside perception of football as 'old fashioned' or 'sexist' did not fit their experience:

> *... the culture is a really positive culture... a culture that's committed to equality and, you know, it's a supportive and positive culture to work in and I've never really come across sort of overt kind of blockages and barriers or negativity... I couldn't have got that job if people had been anti-women working in leadership positions.*
> Louise

> *... sexism just isn't an issue when we're talking about appointing people and all of that kind of stuff, it's just not on anyone's radar... I've never had any feelings that my gender makes any difference.*
> Nicola

Nicola and Louise both present an image of their football organizations as fair and gender-neutral, where sexism is not 'an issue'. Similarly, both women felt that their gender had never held them back in their pursuit of football leadership. Indeed, minimizing the role of gender was a common theme throughout my interviews. Helen, for example, when talking about a particularly negative experience with a male colleague felt that gender did not play a part. Instead, she attributed her negative experiences to the behaviour of individuals, rather than a cultural problem with women in football:

> *... it wasn't about sexism and it wasn't about gender, it was just this man is undermining me to the point where I'm not capable of doing my job properly... I've always been more focused on an individual regardless of gender or colour...*
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> Helen

Nash & Moore (2018) also found that executive women in male-dominated industries minimized the impact of gender on their careers. Crucially, they argued that this strategy was psychologically beneficial for women because a belief in gender neutrality and fairness 'allows women to survive in male-dominated workplaces' by binding women to a neoliberal 'fantasy of success' (Nash & Moore, 2018: 10). However, several of my respondents, whilst remaining positive about women's treatment in football, did acknowledge that women were treated differently in the workplace. Nonetheless, they continued to challenge the perception that the culture of football was to blame. For example, Melinda and Nicola suggested that the treatment of women in football was no different to the treatment of women in the rest of society:

> *Do you have to take a bit of flack occasionally? Yeah, but that's life ... you can't blame a sport or a business for a societal problem. And so, you know, is football a bit sexist sometimes? Yeah, but only in the way that society is a bit sexist sometimes.*
>
> Melinda

I kind of always feel that you need, as a woman in football, to just prove yourself a little bit more, but I don't necessarily think that's about football if I'm honest, I think that is just kind of life

Nicola

In these statements, the women shift the focus from the football industry to 'society' or 'life' in general. The consequence is that the football industry is presented as blameless or neutral in the maintenance of ongoing gender inequalities. The problem with this strategy is that it 'renders questions of organizational change redundant' (Nash & Moore, 2018: 10), meaning women leaders may be less likely to challenge or attempt to change organizational cultures from within. Even when women acknowledged sexism in football, most were keen to distance themselves or their organization from the 'horror stories':

… I heard some real horror stories about women who had worked in football and things that were just inconceivable that had happened to them and I thought, 'I will never work in that sport' and then actually, I've come here, and I'm not sure if it's because my expectations were so low (laughs), but now I just think it's the best place I've worked in terms of gender.
Megan

I've heard a lot of horror stories from people so [gender] clearly is an issue … I've been very fortunate not to experience it in day-to-day life.
Alex

I know someone in football in the Premier League in a similar position who was banned from going down the tunnel because she was a woman. I've never experienced that, and I think day to day absolutely not. I think if your function

and your role and yourself are taken seriously then it doesn't matter if you are
a woman or a man.
Karen

What is telling about these extracts is that they acknowledge how difficult it has been for *other* women to survive in football, but they maintain that football is a great place for women to work based on their *personal* experiences. The individualization of experience is a common strategy used by women in male-dominated industries to present the workplace as gender neutral (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Chapple & Ziebland, 2018; Rhoton, 2011). In the neoliberal workplace, where workers are responsible for their own wellbeing and success, there is little room for social responsibility (Rottenberg, 2014). As such, acknowledging inequalities poses a risk to women's careers by marking them out as troublemakers. However, this presented a point of conflict for my respondents, many of whom acknowledged gender inequalities in football but at the same time wanted to challenge the narrative that football has a problem with women. No more so was this conflict exemplified than in this excerpt from Melinda's interview:

I just wouldn't want to ever put anyone off. I wouldn't want to ever discourage
anybody. Which is why when I do talk about things, I'm not trying to minimize
the experience of being a woman, I'm just trying not to demonize it so that
somebody says, 'I don't want to do that' ... Like I can tell you 20 horror stories
but what's the point? ... everyone's got 20 horror stories ...
Melinda

Melinda, whilst acknowledging that she had 'horror stories' to tell, did not want her experiences to put other women off from working in football. Indeed, as successful women in the game, most respondents shared a sense of responsibility to other women and to the industry to encourage more women to get involved:

I am sort of quite positive about being a female in business ... I'll try and probably play down the kind of negative side of it, not to the point of covering it up or sweeping it under the carpet, but I just don't like to make a big thing of it...
Alex

... we're in these positions and we've got a voice and we've got to use it because if one 12-year-old hears you say something about 'oh just go do it' then you don't know what impact that's gonna have ... I do think that with seniority comes influence and it's then how you use that ... I think it's unlikely that I would be able to single handedly change a 12-year old's view, but what I can absolutely do though is put them off.
Melinda

These extracts suggest that attempts to minimize gender, rather than being strategies of survival in a neoliberal workplace (Baker & Kelan, 2019), are purposefully enacted to encourage more women to work in football. Indeed, there was a considerable strength of feeling towards the importance of encouraging other women into the game:

... part of my role I suppose, or little part of my role, as somebody who's been lucky enough to be a director in football, is to try and encourage and support other women to come through ... because we want women to come through in the future. I'm not one of those – I've never been one of those – that would sort of, what do they call it, pull the ladder up.
Louise

As Louise articulates in this extract, most women saw it as part of their job, as leaders in football, to support the next generation of women leaders. Crucially, football itself seemed to be the catalyst for women to want to make a difference. That is, most women felt a profound sense of injustice that women and girls could not play football on equal terms with men and boys. In fact, this injustice was deeply personal for some. For example, Claire, whose brother was a professional footballer, always had an interest in playing football but she never had access to play it at an organized level:

I did play [football]. I mean, I didn't play for a team because there just wasn't that kind of setup back then ... I wish there had been the kind of setup there is now cause' I would have... I'm sure I would've got involved.
Claire

For Louise, the fact that she could not play football when she was younger because she was a girl had driven her to create more opportunities for women in and girls to play football through her job:

... what drove me, it still drives me, is that I wasn't allowed to play football until I was 18 when I was at university. All I wanted to do was play football, cause I was massively passionate about football and if I couldn't play football I wanted to play the other sports that I watched with my family, cricket, rugby, etc. but I couldn't play any of those, it was netball, hockey – It drove me mad. So, that's my kind of real driver behind it. So, to just come in and be able to start to work on creating more opportunities for girls and women etc. I just found it so so exciting
Louise

Fran, who worked for a football governing body, also spoke very passionately about creating opportunities for women and girls through sport and admitted that, despite wanting to retire, this was the motivating factor for taking on the job:

I want to use sport to change the lives of particularly girls and women and to empower girls and women through Sport. Now, I've never joined the revolutionary you know burning my bra thing ... but every job I've done I've become very conscious of how I can make things better for girls and women in society... so when I was asked to do this I thought 'oh my god no I don't think I can go back to fulltime work' and so I said to the CEO 'I will do 3 days a week' and I said that the only reason that I'm going to do this is that I believe that the organization is the most powerful sport brand in the country and if I can get that brand to speak to girls and women, if I can get the men to respect girls and

women as players, as coaches, as referees, in the boardroom ... I'm going to write
you a strategy that isn't just about doubling participation, I'm going to write you
a strategy which I believe can change the lives of girls and women and that's why
I'm going to do it and that's the truth of it.

Fran

What is telling about these extracts is that the women recognized that football or sport, while serving corporate agendas, also provided unique opportunities to enact positive changes for women and girls. This perhaps sets the football, and the women who work within it, apart from other male-dominated businesses where tangible change is harder to realize. Indeed, I would argue that a neoliberal sensibility is only beneficial to women in leadership if the possibility of radical change remains unattainable for women. That said, women returned to neoliberal discourses of individualism and meritocracy to make sense of their *own* success as women in a male dominated industry.

The Uneven Pursuit of Success

Despite acknowledging the presence of inequalities for women in football in their constructions of gender inequality, most respondents continued to make sense of their rise to the top through the neoliberal principles of hard work, self-improvement, and competition. This is exemplified in an extract from Helen, who passionately discussed her journey from a council estate to becoming a director of a football club:

I'm from a council estate in The Midlands and most of my peers from my age
who I know because of Facebook or whatever had kids at 20... I just don't think
I ever wanted that life... I had this drive within me that I wanted to be successful
and I wanted that recognition for being successful.

Helen

Helen presents her leadership role as the inevitable result of wanting to be successful and wanting to live a better life. She goes on to say that she never set out to be successful in football but that her love of sports attracted her to the job. Indeed, very few women set out to work in football. For most, the pursuit of success was the most important thing to them whether they did it in football or not. However, as Nash & Moore (2018) also found in their study of executive women, very few women reflected on their privileged positions or on intersectional disadvantage and advantage in reaching the top. For example, the only woman who spoke about racial inequality in leadership roles was Alyssa, a Black woman working as a non-executive director. Alyssa felt that, as a Black woman, she had had to work twice as hard than anyone else to get to her senior position because, in her words, 'nothing is given to us on a plate'. In contrast, the white women I spoke to rarely acknowledged racial inequalities or white privilege (McIntosh, 1988). Women who had had privileged access to their roles also spoke rather uncritically about their opportune entries into football leadership:

> *I was lucky here that they didn't choose a person - and I don't think they were choosing between two people; I just think they found the role for me.*
> Leslie

> *I was working in another business of [the chairman's] so he just bought the club and then I ended up just kind of getting involved with it. And I guess we were in a relationship, erm we... I just kind of took it on.*
> Amanda

With the exception of three women who applied for their jobs in football, everyone I interviewed were either headhunted into football or were 'brought in' through existing business or family connections. These modes of entry, whilst widely used by businesses to fill executive positions, are notoriously exclusive and limit opportunities for organizations to diversify their workforce (Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Hall, & Hewitson,

2009). Nonetheless, few women acknowledged that this was problematic, and so continued to construct their success through a narrative of 'hard work against all odds'. However, in a departure from this narrative, most women recognized that having children held women back in the football workplace. For example, Melinda and Megan acknowledged that their career success had been due, in part, to being childfree:

> *Part of the ease with which I can do the thing I do is because I don't have children ... I haven't had to make some of those really difficult choices that I've seen my friends have to make... I have the advantage of living like a man (laughs). If we're really honest about it. As in, the system the system works for me because I'm acting like a man in the system, you know. I'm nice and senior, so I get to choose what I do (laughs), I don't have to worry about all of that stuff at home (laughs).*
> Melinda

> *I think just staying in sport as a female is extraordinarily difficult for the reasons that we've talked about but, you know, I haven't got married, I haven't had babies. Had I had children I can't imagine I would still be in sport. I don't know how readily high-performance sport will tolerate a maternity leave and a phased return to work and you know, flexible working hours.*
> Megan

Women who had children had mixed experiences of being working mothers in football. For example, both Leslie and Laura had found ways to make their work lives fit around family life:

> *I have a day off in the week, I do 8-4, which suits me perfectly. If I said, 'can I have tomorrow afternoon off to see my little boy', they would let me ... So, I'm*

really lucky with that. That surprised me a little bit because I didn't think I'd get that in a football club.

Leslie

I get to take my children to school 3 mornings a week and I'm at the school gates to pick them up 2 afternoons a week, which is really good ... if I don't get in till 10-10:30 one day because I've taken the children to school, then it's fine, I make up the hours on a Friday when I'm not paid to work ... it goes in swings and roundabouts.

Laura

Both Leslie and Laura had flexible working hours, which enabled them to fit their work around childcare. However, for Leslie, her arrangement was informal and dependent on the chairman's discretion. For Laura, while her hours and flexibility were formally built into the job, she admitted that her specific role enabled flexible working i.e. she did not need to work matchdays and that it would not be the same for other roles in the organization. Other working mothers, like Harriet, found it more difficult to take time away from work to look after their families:

I remember the first day here in the job my son fell over in the playground at school and knocked his front teeth clean out of his mouth ... I remember getting the call and my husband went because it was my first day and I felt like I couldn't go and be with my son because I was in this new job and all of the pressure that brings ... because I was in this new job I was also not going to the assemblies at school ... I almost put my family life completely on hold.

Harriet

Like Harriet, most women felt an enormous amount of pressure to perform well at work and be present. While this culture of presenteeism affected all employees, women felt an additional pressure to have to prove themselves:

> *I do feel a pressure because I'm a woman, but the pressure is not necessarily... it is on me, but it's because I feel a responsibility to other women because I just think if I fuck this up (laughs), I mean, that's just it isn't it? You can read the press headlines now of [organization] puts woman, who is not from football and knows nothing about the game, into a job and surprise surprise it all goes to shit. And that's it. And then they can never employ another woman ...*
>
> Megan

As demonstrated by Megan, the pursuit of success was not just an individual pursuit, it was complicated by a responsibility to not let other women down. Indeed, all the women I interviewed, in making sense of their success, swung back and forth between an individualistic desire to be the best they can be and a collective desire to make the football industry better for the next generation of women. As I will discuss in the final findings section, several women found ways challenge inequalities by quietly resisting the status quo.

Quiet Resistance

Women in leadership roles in male-dominated industries are often criticized for showing solidarity with patriarchal structures and for not challenging gender inequalities within their organizations (Baker & Kelan, 2019; Derks et al., 2011; Kaiser & Spalding, 2015). While there was some evidence of this in my interviews with women leaders in football, what was more apparent were the small but meaningful ways in which women resisted gendered stereotypes and sexist cultures. Megan, for example, spoke about making 'little rules' for herself when it came to her treatment of women and men in her department:

...you end up making these little rules for yourself so erm I won't let any women make tea in the building and I know that sounds really daft and such a pathetic thing, but I don't ever want it to get to place where the woman gets the food or she makes the tea or she types up the notes or, you know, if there is someone who needs to take notes, then it will be an equal share of – it might be a woman sometimes – but it will also be the men that do it.

Megan

Others spoke about setting a good example for women in the workplace. For example, Louise and Karen were careful not to engage in 'bad' working habits, such as working late in the office, because they did not want their staff, especially women, to think that that was expected of a leader:

You wouldn't see me, even if I was working late, I wouldn't get into a habit of sitting here until late because I think that's sending the message that it's expected and it's not. You know, I want people to, you know, for us all to work hard in the day and go home in the evening.

Louise

... back to the point about other people looking at you and thinking, you know, I don't want people to think you've got to kill yourself to do this job because you don't.

Karen

These smalls' acts demonstrate an acute awareness of the ways in which workplace cultures can disproportionately disadvantage women. Not only were women aware of

these challenges, they actively sought out ways to make small changes to their workplace cultures. Meyerson (2008) refers to these incremental changes as a 'quiet resistance' within the workplace, arguing that small acts of resistance may seem limited in scope on their own but they can add up to significant change when they accumulate over time.

Some women also discussed their desire to create bigger changes to the workplace cultures of football. Gemma, whose partner also worked in football, acknowledged how difficult it would be for her to keep her job if she had children. However, instead of planning to leave football, she was pushing for onsite childcare facilities:

> ... something that I am sort of working on in the background is trying to push to have childcare on site because it's something that we've never done as a club and it's something that not many other clubs do... I don't have it all quite mapped out yet but I want to try and talk to clubs that do it, but my proposal would potentially be that like you have a paid for service, is not free, but 5 days a week you pay for it and then if you are required to work over and above 5 days a week the other two days free ... it's really difficult to put a business case together because you don't know how much people would use it that's the thing

> Gemma

Although Gemma was actively pursuing this change in her workplace to provide better opportunities for women, she still felt the need to put a business case together. This is especially notable given that she worked for a very wealthy club. Again, this highlights the complexities of navigating inequalities in a neoliberal environment. Gemma recognizes that that the best way to achieve a culture shift is to play the corporate game. While feminist have been vehemently critical about this approach for not being radical enough, Meyerson argues that a 'tempered radical' approach to creating changes is needed if cultures are to change from within. However, women leaders who wanted to support other women often did so on their own time. As Sophie notes, helping other women required going 'over and above':

> *I have always gone over and above ... and football gives you that forum, you know, so if my mentee has got an advisory board meeting, I'll be sat by her side ... I'm mentoring on Saturday; most people doing the job I'm doing wouldn't be bothered.*
>
> Sophie

Although Sophie frames this additional work in a positive light, pushing an equality agenda is a physical and emotional demand for women leaders, especially if this work is expected of them:

> *I didn't always want to have to be the one that pushed the [equality] agenda in a way but nobody else would and I don't think there was anybody else who understood it and they would say openly ... 'I think you get this, and I think you get why people feel disadvantaged or are disadvantaged in football and why we need to change things'. You know, so in a way for a long time I tried to resist having that as my main focus, partly because it was just never what I got into it for ... I suppose because I almost felt as well that you could sort of be stereotyped into that role a little bit you know. It's almost like, well you are a woman so you must understand about discrimination or something, well not necessarily. But on the other hand, I think I suppose I was keen on doing it you know, I was passionate about making sure that people weren't excluded.*
>
> Tracey

Here, Tracey is trying to reconcile her frustrations at being expected to push an equality agenda because she was a woman with her genuine passion to make football a fairer place for everyone. This perhaps encapsulates some of the complexities of being a woman leader in a male-dominated environment. If women do not push the agenda, the

fear is that nobody else will; however, this comes at a price for women who must navigate this additional workload along with the existing challenges of being a woman in football.

Discussion

This paper advances our understanding of persistent gender inequalities in English football leadership by being the first to consider the issue from the point of view of women leaders in the industry. This research finds that women leaders discursively construct football as a positive place for women to work despite acknowledging discrimination within the industry. By challenging perceptions of football as a sexist industry, women leaders were actively redirecting criticism away from the industry. This strategy, which may partly reflect real change within the industry, is also symptomatic of 'cruel optimism'(Nash & Moore, 2018) – the condition of maintaining an attachment to 'compromised conditions of possibility' (Berlant, 2006: 24). Indeed, what is striking about most women's constructions of gender inequality is that they acknowledge wider problems for women within the industry ('I've heard some real horror stories'), but they maintain , based on their own experiences, that football is a great place to work ('it's the best place I've worked in terms of gender'). On the surface, this This reflects Baker & Kelan's (2019: 12) observation that executive women 'split off' the undesirable parts of their organization in order to maintain 'the idealization of the neoliberal workplace as fair'. However, I found that attempts to minimize negative experiences of gender, rather than being strategies of survival in a neoliberal workplace (Baker & Kelan, 2019), were purposefully enacted to encourage more women to work in football.

Instead of repudiating gender inequality, women leaders acknowledged that 'horror stories' functioned to put women off from working in football in ways that it would not men and so they chose not to tell those stories in an attempt to open the door for more women. This finding contradicts existing critiques of women leaders as handmaidens of neoliberalism (Fraser, 2013; Gill et al., 2017; Rottenberg, 2014) by demonstrating how women leaders exercise agency to tune gender in and out of their stories. Crucially, I argue that this tuning can be read as a feminist act when its purpose is to help other women

succeed. Contrary to existing literature on women leaders as neoliberal feminist subjects, this research also finds that women's neoliberal narratives of success are complicated by an acute understanding of the structural inequalities women in football face when they have children. That is, while most women viewed their success as being the result of hard work and dedication, several women also recognized that being childfree enabled them to achieve this success in football. This not only evidences continuing inequalities for women in football, it also evidences the ways in which women leaders break away from the neoliberal feminist rhetoric of 'having it all' (Rottenberg, 2019).

Findings also contradict existing literature on women leaders as non-agentic neoliberal subjects by evidencing the small yet significant ways in which women leaders use their positions to challenge inequalities. Examples of this included women 'setting rules' about not giving women feminized tasks or deliberately not working late in the office show that women do not have to 'kill themselves' in order to work in football leadership. Others took time to mentor other women the workplace or work on equality agendas, while one woman was actively pushing for onsite childcare facilities at work. Meyerson (2008) refers to these acts as a 'quiet resistance' within the workplace, arguing that small acts by 'tempered radicals' may seem limited in scope on their own but they can add up to significant change when they accumulate over time. Although many scholars have been critical of a moderated and incremental approach to achieving gender equality (refs), it is a mistake to situate this approach in opposition with more radical activism and neglect the valuable role of women leaders in the fight for equality.

Indeed, the women I interviewed were invested emotionally and physically in efforts to get more women into football, and they assumed a great deal of responsibility for 'doing a good job' and 'not pulling the ladder up' so that other women had an easier time than they did in breaking through the glass ceiling. Several women also spoke about their desire to create more opportunities for women in football. Ultimately, women leaders wanted to see other women succeed in the football industry and this was their motivating factor for taking part in this research. This finding contradicts the dominant feminist critique of neoliberal feminism that successful women are 'divested from any orientation towards the common good' (Rottenberg, 2014: 428). That said, football seemed to provide women with a unique motivation and opportunity to enact positive

changes in ways that other industries do not. That is, women felt a deep sense of injustice that women and girls could not play football on equal terms with men and boys, but they believed that football or sport provided unique opportunities to enact positive changes for women and girls. Ultimately, this provided the motivation for women to stay in football leadership and challenge longstanding inequalities between women and men in the game.

In recognizing the ways in which women leaders challenge inequalities and counter neoliberal feminist ideas, it was also evident that women maintained an attachment to neoliberal ideas. That is, although women were acutely aware of gender inequalities most had benefited from the existing cultures and practices within football, such as the 'old boys' network'. In order to resolve this contradictory position, women leaders swung back and forth between making gender invisible and making gender matter. This creates, what Kelan (2009) calls an 'ideological dilemma' for women as they attempt to navigate these opposing positions. Crucially, it is important to recognize that navigating this dilemma is a 'burdensome affective labour' for women (Nash & Moore, 2018: 10) as they make sense of their success and continuing inequalities. As such, I argue that scholars need to pay more attention to the messy, complex, and contradictory positions of women in leaders in football and avoid the temptation to situate women as feminist change agents or cogs in a neoliberal machine. Along with this, I argue that a neoliberal feminist reading of women and work may be reaching the limits of its ability to explain the complexities and contradictions of women's lived experiences under the paradoxical conditions of neoliberalism and existing inequalities.

Future research needs to better understand the ways in which women leaders affect change from within football, as well as other male-dominated industries, that acknowledges the complexities of women's lived experiences. This is not to say that incremental changes from within are enough on their own to achieve equality, but to move forward as feminist researchers future research needs to reconcile moderate and radical approaches to gender equality with organizations. Researchers and practitioners also need to find ways to support women and men to advance equality agendas in football. It is simply not enough to hope that having more women in leadership will inevitably lead to a positive cultural shift. We must acknowledge that placing the burden of responsibility

for changing workplace cultures on the shoulders of women leaders is an unstainable project.

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