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Social media and online activism in women's rugby: From #iamenough to #icare

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Introduction

It is taken as fact that traditional sport media such as radio broadcasts, television coverage and print news, has historically disregarded, downplayed and trivialised the achievements of women, and continues to do so to this day. Online media – media viewed and distributed on digital devices – and specifically social media has been identified as a space that provides opportunities for female athletes to increase visibility, and to self-represent on their own terms, whilst also presenting sportswomen, fans and commentators a space to share, debate and discuss women's sport (Bruce & Hardin, 2014). In many ways, online media has been co-opted as a space for activism, most notably with the #blacklivesmatter movement in 2013 (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020) but also in challenging the inherent sexism in sport media practices. Given the increasing significance of online media for athletes, it is unsurprising to see a wealth of athletes pushing for social change via this medium. As Cooky and Antunovic (2020, p. 694) note, the world of sport has historically 'served as a symbolic site for social justice, ushering change in the wider society and inspiring movements', in which female athletes – especially queer women and women of colour – play a leading role. Using a neoliberal feminist framework, we can understand the significance of female athlete activism on online spaces, in challenging systemic gendered inequalities within specific sport cultures.

One of the most prominent examples of feminist athlete activism in recent times has been the United States Women's National Team (USWNT) gender discrimination lawsuit and fight for equal pay, a high-profile case that has become symbolic for women's struggle for equality in sport globally (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Carrick et al., 2021; Culvin et al., 2021). Whilst football has seen a wealth of women athlete activism and increasing recognition and action to address gender inequality at an international level (Carrick et al. 2021), it remains that many historically male-dominated sports are still to catch up. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, although there has been *some* progress in football (for example, both England and Ireland now pay their international players the same) and cricket (for example, the 2021 domestic 'Hundred' tournament offered equal prize money for the men's and women's competitions), it seems that the sport of rugby has been left behind.

Rugby has often been characterised as a typically masculine sport, in both participation and in nature (Nauright & Chandler, 1996; Hardy, 2015), and women's rugby has often existed on the margins globally (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2019). Despite this, women's team sports are experiencing a period of growth internationally, with increasing (semi-)professional opportunities (Taylor et al. 2020, Bowes & Culvin, 2021), and this has extended to women's rugby union in England. An emerging era of professionalisation within women's rugby in the United Kingdom - which has brought investment, player contracts, increased visibility, and improved participation numbers – has not been without gender-specific challenges, though. These challenges have simultaneously not gone unnoticed by the increasing number of women who are playing the game, at all levels, who are often turning to social media to action for change and gender equity.

This chapter critically discusses the rise of online activism through the example of rugby union, as women players attempt to challenge their subordinate status in the sport. The chapter will start with a more detailed overview of women in rugby, before focusing on the role of the sport media and online media in the sport. The attention will then shift to two case studies from women's rugby, highlighting how women players and fans have responded to issues of gender inequality using activist hashtag campaigns via social media. The two campaigns, started by women players from within the game, snowballed, reaching the national press in the UK, prompting discussions and – significantly – change. As per Cooky and Antunovic (2020), who challenged the methodological approaches that have dominated sport media research, here we draw upon the collective action of female sports athletes within social media spaces. The analysis of these campaigns will draw upon neoliberal feminist discourse (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a) in making sense of the sociocultural conditions of women's rugby operating in the online media space. The chapter concludes by considering the wider implications of social media activism for women in sport.

Women in rugby

In some of the earliest writing in the field of the sociology of sport, rugby union was identified as being a 'male preserve' (Dunning & Sheard, 1973). The sport of rugby more broadly has a long history in various forms (see Dunning & Sheard, 1976; Raynor, 2018), but currently exists as we know it today in two forms – rugby union and rugby league. The origins of rugby stemmed out of various codes of mob and folk football prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries, with the individual codified sports of football, rugby union and rugby league being formed, as well as American football and Australian rules football in their specific geographical locations. The backgrounds of these sports in their modern forms, and prior to, were highly gendered, centring on the boys' public school system in

England at the time. The roots of rugby union are inherently tied to then-headmaster of Rugby School, Dr. Thomas Arnold, and a formalisation of mob football aligned with his vision of Muscular Christianity - the creation of boys with character and competitive drive, the future leaders of British society (Raynor, 2018). As such, the Rugby school rules of folk football led to the sport of rugby being created, and rugby union was formally codified via the formation of the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in 1871.

The qualities associated with the game of rugby that Dr. Arnold wanted to promote are nearly always highlighted as being synonymous with what it means to *be a man*; physicality, competitiveness, strength, and aggression are values central to the sport and strongly associated with notions of masculinity (Schacht, 1996). Schacht (1996, p. 550) identifies rugby football as a quintessential example of how the sport, in both its creation and practice, creates an environment that 'both reflects and supports a hierarchical ideology of masculinity and the subordination of women'. In ethnographies of men's rugby union in the USA, Schacht (1996) and later Muir and Seitz (2004) highlight how (white, middle-class, male) rugby players *do* masculinity, reproducing rigid images of manhood which involves a subordination of femininity, often manifesting as misogynistic and/or homophobic behaviour. In doing so, the importance of masculinity to the sport is reaffirmed (Muir & Seitz, 2004). Unsurprisingly then, and as Cleary (2000) wrote, the notion of rugby becomes problematic when played by women, and the very marking of *women's* rugby with the qualifier immediately inscribes it as marginal. To this day, the sport is perceived as a masculine sport for male participants, and controversial as an arena for women's participation (Joncheray & Till, 2013).

In recent years, there has been an increasing presence of women in the sport of rugby, although Furse (2021) highlights how women and girls have historically been excluded from participating in the sport. However, this is not to say women were not playing the sport, and there has been a sporadic history of women's involvement in the game. This involvement has simultaneously challenged the association of rugby and masculinity as the only way of knowing and understanding the sport and served as evidence of it. In Furse's (2021) documentation of the history of women in rugby, she acknowledges the limited access women had to the sport prior to 1970 but notes that the earliest recorded women's rugby match took place over 80 years previous, in 1887. She then describes the infrequent examples of women's participation in rugby, from charity matches to more sustained participation during the World Wars, with women's involvement in the sport following similar trajectories of other male-dominated sports of that era, namely football.

Furse (2021) identifies 1970 as a watershed year for women's involvement in the sport, and since then there has been a raft of progress. The first World Cup competition was held in 1991. In the

UK, the first Home Nations tournament, now known as the Six Nations, was held in 1996[1]. The game has grown at recreational levels too – World Rugby (2015) claimed the sport was one of the world's fastest growing team sports, which 1.77 million taking part in women's rugby in 2014. Rugby Sevens - a shorter, 7-a-side format of the game - was introduced as an Olympic sport for men and women in 2016, which prompted further growth in the 15-a-side version. Heyward et al. (2021) note that the popularity and professionalisation of women's rugby has grown dramatically in recent times, prompting increased financial investment into the sport. This contributed to the launch of a new elite league in England, the Premier 15s, and also manifested into increasing professional opportunities for players. At the top level, England's national team members were awarded full time professional contracts at the start of 2019, and women players in the Premier 15s were paid for the first time in the following year (Rowan, 2019). In light of this growth, the global organising body for the sport, World Rugby, published its Women's Development Plan in 2017, outlining its ambition for gender equity. This includes becoming a 'global leader', with women involved on and off the field, 'making highly valued contributions to participation, performance, leadership and investment in the global game of rugby' (World Rugby, 2017, p. 3). The development plan has five pillars in its strategy: grow sustainable participation, high performance quality competition, inspirational leadership on and off the field, profile with impact inspiring engagement and strategic sustainable investment partners. Since the implementation of the development plan, women's rugby on a global level has experienced unprecedented growth with a reported 2.7 million women playing rugby in 2019 – a 28% increase from 2017 (World Rugby, 2019)

Despite the growth of the game at all levels and increasing professional opportunities and commercial advances in the UK and globally, at the very highest level many women operate on a semi-professional basis where women rugby players balance full- or part- time work with their playing commitments (Taylor et al. 2020; Clarkson et al., 2021; Snyders, 2021) It's apparent that the women's version of the sport remains on the margins of rugby culture more broadly. This was exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the UK (Bowes et al., 2020; 2021; Clarkson et al., 2021). For example, the 2020 Women's Six Nation's tournament was abandoned as the sports inherent amateur status made it 'impossible' to conclude the tournament (Hodges, 2020), while the men's tournament was postponed but later completed. At a domestic level, the England's women's Premier 15s competition was also paused in March 2020 at the start of the pandemic, as were their male

[1] The men's Six Nations started as the Home Nations tournament in 1883, the trophy contested by England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. It later became the Five Nations Tournament with the addition of France (1910-1931 and 1947-1999. Italy was then added as the competition became the Six Nations from 2000. The Women's Home Nations first featured in 1996 (some 103 years after the men's version of the competition launched), changing to the Five Nations in 1999, and becoming the Six Nations in 2001.

equivalent leagues (RFU, 2020). The elite men's Premiership competition concluded the 2019-20 season with Covid-19 testing in place, while the women's Premier 15s 2019-20 season was declared null and void. To add to the uncertainty, the Premier 15s competition lost its title sponsor in the summer of 2020 (Orchard, 2020a), and the continual struggle of women's rugby to obtain adequate revenue would have no doubt exacerbated concerns for female players on the status of their game. In response to the challenges of the pandemic, the RFU announced a 25% cut in funding to women's Premier 15s teams (totalling £187,500), yet the £25 million distributed per year to men's Premiership rugby remained in place (BBC Sport, 2020). Both competitions restarted in October 2020, although with no funding for testing, the women's Premier 15s league restarted with reduced playing time and rule adaptions (Orchard, 2020b). This highlights the unequal and gendered landscape in the sport, in England and the United Kingdom especially. It is from this position that we can start to comprehend the role of women as athletes, and more recently, activists of change, in the sport. A central piece to this specific discussion, though, is understanding the role of online media in athletes' lives, coupled with an awareness of the media coverage of the sport.

Media coverage, online media and feminist athlete activists

Broadcast visibility was identified by World Rugby (2017) as central in the women's development strategy, for maximising the commercial value of the sport and increasing financial sustainability that can enable or contribute to growth. However, a lack of media coverage of the sport has been a consistent problem, despite increasing numbers of women and girls participating across the world. For example, in Wright and Clarke's (1999) media analysis of women's rugby, they draw on *six* articles collected between 1996 and 1997 on the sport in the UK and Australia. Hardy (2015) notes that the dominant image of rugby in traditional media is men's rugby, which enhances the belief that rugby is a hyper-masculine sport. More recently, writing about the Six Nations championships, Owton (2016) bemoaned that none of the women's matches were broadcast on television, despite the men's event dominating free to view broadcast channels. In 2017, the women's Rugby World Cup was hosted in Ireland, with England finishing runners up to New Zealand. In examining media coverage in England at this time, Leflay and Biscomb (2021) were able to draw upon 22 articles across four British newspapers, a notable increase on Wright and Clarke's (1999) work in the 90s but arguably a limited number nonetheless. Whilst Wright and Clarke (1999) reported that the print media coverage of women in rugby served to trivialise the sport, emphasised femininity and was distinctly heterosexist, there was a notable difference in Leflay and Biscomb's (2021) findings. They found print media articles celebrated the success of the team, were positive about the performances, but also concluded that the coverage was ambivalent, in that it both

celebrated the success of the run to the 2017 final whilst documenting issues behind the scenes regarding the cancellation of player contracts.

Given the limits to coverage in traditional media spaces, it has been noted that the online, digital media environment has increasing importance for women's sport. Sports media academics have often highlighted the potential for digital media to redress the lack of coverage for women's sport and contribute to challenging prevailing hegemonic media representations of female athletes (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Bruce & Hardin, 2014; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b; Kitching et al., 2021a; 2021b). Social networking sites such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, alongside sports blogs, now play a central role in the coverage of women's sport, and for female athletes. These social media platforms have created the modern 'accessible athlete' – particularly pertinent for women athletes (Pocock and Skey, 2022) – through a bypassing of traditional media outlets that have been dominated by men's sport and male athletes. As such, some academics note that female athletes can use online media to contest the discourses that devalue sportswomen (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Bruce & Hardin, 2014; Sanderson & Gramlich, 2016), with sportswomen recognising the role it can play in both inspiring young girls and engaging with potential sponsors (Pocock and Skey, 2022). However, the use of social media by female athletes is not without its problems.

Pocock and Skey (2022) highlight that with increased visibility in online spaces comes pressure to self-present in overly feminised and sexualised ways. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) identify this as the 'athletic labour of femininity'. Some (although importantly not all – see, for example, Chase, 2006) research into women's rugby cultures has noted female players portraying a 'heterosexy-fit identity' in navigating their involvement in a heavily masculine sports environment (Ezzell, 2009). For female athletes that have to carefully manage their self-presentations in this way, such as emphasising femininity over athleticism, LaVoi and Calhoun (2014) present concerns that while some female athletes may achieve personal benefits – through gaining visibility, promoting their brand, and securing sponsorships – this approach inevitably does little to advance women's sport. Furthermore, many sportswomen have experienced abuse and/or misogyny online, with Mogaji et al. (2020) highlight the risks associated with using social media, cautioning that sportswomen must be aware of online 'trolls'. The problematic elements of social media are thought to have detrimental effects on sports performance, as well as mental health and well-being, as women navigate and manage their engagements on social media (Pocock and Skey, 2022).

Despite the complex management required by sportswomen in using online spaces, one thing this type of media has enabled is a rise in female athlete activism as women have a space to challenge inequalities and injustices (Schmidt et al., 2019; Kitching et al., 2021a, 2021b). There are

increasing examples of women athletes using social media to either speak out against broader social justice issues or enable the proliferation of activist campaigns and ideologies. This has occurred around racism (for example, players in the WNBA supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, McClearen & Fischer, 2021; Williams, 2021) and politics (for example, Megan Rapinoe, Schmidt et al., 2019; Frederick et al., 2020), as well as challenging specific sport-based gender inequality and sexism (for example, Megan MacLaren, Kitching et al., 2021a; 2021b). This is despite recent evidence that informs us that many female athletes are under pressure to feel grateful for the opportunity to compete as professionals, thereby inhibiting them from speaking critically about their involvement (Pavlidis, 2020; Bowes at al., 2021). Antunovic and Hardin (2012) contend that social media harbours feminist potential, and there are continuing examples of sportswomen engaging with social media in this way.

Ahmad and Thorpe (2020) refer to the power of the hashtag (#) on social media sites (specifically Twitter and Instagram). They describe how hashtags are used to group communication, with social media users signifying that they are willing to amplify a cause, connect with others and become part of a bigger group when adopting a hashtag on their posts, identifying how hashtags can be used from the 'everyday personal politic to contributing to and supporting broader social movements' (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020; p. 676). Before going on to discuss the ways in which rugby union players have engaged with social media, we first present a brief discussion of the theoretical underpinning to this work.

Neoliberal Feminism and Female Athlete Activism

Drawing primarily from Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018a) writing on the topic, this chapter adopts a neoliberal feminist framework to make sense of this phenomenon. The neoliberal feminist project has highlighted how identifying as a feminist is now seen as a form of cultural capital, and identifies a contemporary rise in feminism (Rottenberg, 2018). However, this is understood as a movement that recognises gender inequality – focusing on women's empowerment and choice – whilst denying the gendered socioeconomic and cultural structures that shape the social world. In relation to sport, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a, p. 17) discuss Banet-Weiser's (2015) notion of "economies of visibility" as 'a mechanism through which to understand the logics that encourage sportswomen to act as entrepreneurial subjects responsible for the construction and promotion of their online identities as marketable media products'. In understanding this in neoliberal feminist terms, it is clear that the subject – the sportswoman – is aware of the inequalities between men and women, is perhaps unaware of the wider social, cultural and economic forces that produce this inequality, yet accepts full responsibility for change, on an individual level (Rottenberg, 2014;

Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018). Indeed, social media has provided female athletes with a platform to cultivate visibility, overcoming the tools and logics of the market to promote themselves.

The neoliberal feminist project has enabled women to use their individual voices in challenging gender inequality, yet as Rottenberg (2018) notes, simply drawing attention to these issues will not be suffice for cultural and/or institutional change. As such, this approach to *doing* feminism is not the only way to understand how feminist ideologies operates in this space. However, the use of personal social media accounts to challenge inequality that affects athletes on a personal can be seen as evidence of a neoliberal feminist approach. As such, the next section of this chapter will present two case studies on the ways in which women rugby players in the UK have engaged with social media to challenge inherent gender inequality in their sport.

Online Activism in Women's Rugby: Case Studies

The first case study refers to the hashtag #IAmEnough, a social media response popularised by Wasps and Wales player, and founder of sport marketing company The Perception Agency, Flo Williams following an incident in August 2020. The incident centred on the apparel sponsor of the Ireland national team unveiling the new team playing kit for the 20/21 season. The launch featured both men's and women's kit, but the problem lay in who was chosen to promote the kit: the apparel company used three international players to display the men's kit, and three models to showcase the women's version. Using her Twitter account, Williams tweeted, alongside pictures of the launch:

> SPOT THE DIFFERENCE
> 2 Jersey Launches
> 3 Models
> 3 International Players
> 3 Profiles lifted
> 1 HUGE Opportunity Missed
> By not using the female players to market THEIR OWN KIT an opportunity to build recognition, fan bases & creating role models for future generations is lost. (Williams, 2020a)

> A follow up tweet from Williams stated:
> A nameless face in the jersey does nothing to represent the women who will be wearing it. Brilliant to inspire the future Robbie Henshaw's and Connor Murray's, but when visibility for the women's game is so key, this is a missed opportunity & thoughtless marketing. (Williams, 2020b)

Initially, the apparel company – Canterbury of New Zealand – responded to William's tweet the next day, explaining that the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed production of the women's kit. However, William's opening tweet garnered significant attention, with 870 retweets, 187 quote tweets and 4118 likes at the time of writing. Williams later posted via Instagram:

> Because role models are real models. We are more than enough & we've had enough. #enough (Perception Agency, 2020).

Shortly after William's tweets on the 22nd August, women and girls across all levels of the game filled social media with empowering images of themselves in rugby kits, using the #IAmEnough, and with that, the #IAmEnough campaign was born. The premise of this campaign was that female players were worthy of showcasing their own kit, in line with the marketing strategy for the men's kit. #IAmEnough involved individual women rugby players posting active images of themselves playing rugby, in opposition to the use of 'heterosexy' models and marked a backlash from the playing community around the gendered expectations of women in the sport. The campaign was picked up by the popular media, with many leading newspapers in the UK documenting the issue. Fi Tomas of the Telegraph referred to it as 'the biggest body image movement in the history of women's rugby' (2020, 31 Aug). After 5 days, the apparel company in question released the following statement, 7 days after the kit launch:

> As a brand, we believe in putting our hands up if we get something wrong. To announce that our new Ireland Women's pro jersey was available for pre-order, we super-imposed the jersey's image onto a model to share this exciting development with our dedicated female players and fans. It was always, and remains, our intention to photograph female players in the new jersey and we remain committed to supporting the talented women in our rugby community on and off the field. While the image was primarily designed for our website, which also features male models, it has understandably caused frustration. We accept this was an error and apologise for any upset caused. At Canterbury we believe that rugby is for everyone and we're united by our mutual love of the game. We look forward to sharing our 'A New Horizon' campaign to support the launch of our Ireland Women's Pro jersey in October, with the same commitment and dedication that we have for all our teams. (Canterbury New Zealand, 2020)

Clearly, the individual campaigning instigated by Williams was a central factor in the backlash to the kit launch. Commiskey (2020, 31 Aug) reported in the Irish Times: 'The message is clear now. Male dominated organisations only respond to one method of interaction. The current generation of

female athletes are beginning to understand this'. The solution to challenging gender inequality in the sport here is clearly framed as an individual problem that relies on the social media nous of female players and their supporters. In this case, the individual entrepreneurship of Williams instigated a collective action movement that critiqued the decision of Canterbury – but arguably did little to recognise the broader social constructs that allowed the issue to occur – and subsequently highlights the neoliberal environment in which these athletes are operating.

Case study two relates to an incident that occurred in 2021. The aforementioned COVID-19 enforced postponement of the women's Six Nations competition, whilst the men's tournament went ahead as planned, was widely reported within the sports media. These stories prompted disparaging comments (such as 'no one cares') from supporters of the men's game about the (lack of) significance of their female counterparts. In response to this, the #icare campaign was created by Premier 15s player Stef Evans, to challenge the notion - emphasised by both the institutional decisions and the responses from fans of men's rugby - that 'nobody cared' about the women's game. She posted to Instagram:

> "If you care about the Women's Six Nations, about issues affecting the game, about women's rugby in general – Say it. Post a photo of yourself playing, or your favourite women's player or women's team. Talk about what that photo means to you, what it represents. And use the hashtag #ICare." (World Rugby, 2021)

The campaign went global, with elite players, recreational players, men, women and fans of the sport using the hashtag to support women's rugby. As Fi Tomas (2021) of the Telegraph noted, 'Within hours, the movement took off globally and social media was – for the second time in recent months – flooded with empowering photos of female rugby players and fans from the women's game, telling the world why they cared about their sport'. Fellow Bristol Bears player Elinor Snowsnill shared the following tweet, which emphasised the premise of the campaign:

> I don't particularly care about mens (sic) football. So when I see a post about mens (sic) football, what do I do? I continue scrolling & don't give it a second thought. I get on with my life. I certainly don't waste precious time commenting on mens (sic) football posts about the fact that I don't care.
>
> Do these men trolling articles about womens (sic) rugby genuinely think we are going to believe them when they say they don't care? Are they really that stupid? The simple act of commenting to declare the statement proves the opposite to be true.

#icare about my sport, as do millions others.

Rugby has truly enriched my life in a way I could never have imagined. It has given me friends for life form all over the world, it has taken me to all corners of the globe, it has given me a full time job, it has given me a purpose and it has taught me life's most important values.

To those men.. can you say the same about your hobby of online trolling? (BBC Sport, 2021, 17 Jan)

The postponed Six Nations tournament was later rearranged as a standalone tournament for the first time in its history. Again, we can see evidence of the significance of individual agency and self-representation on social media. The individual voices of the athletes highlight the significance of athletes having an avenue for their personal, unfiltered voice.

Conclusion: Feminist Athlete Activism in Rugby

This chapter has critically discussed the rise of online activism in rugby union, specifically in the UK, as women players attempt to challenge their subordinate status in the sport. Initially, we can understand this approach as part of a neoliberal shift in feminist attitudes of women, which highlights the role of individual voice in challenging gender inequality that has a direct influence on those speaking out, whilst failing to challenge broader systematic issues. However, as Dubrowski (2021) highlights, feminism has become highly visible and a subject of interest, and its contemporary manifestations go further than neoliberal understandings. As such, it would be remiss to not think of this issue as part of a broader network of feminist action, and as Keller (2015) notes, the online practices of feminists can be seen as part of a thriving contemporary feminist movement, which has the scope to be both culturally and politically significant. The two online hashtag campaigns, started by women players from within the game, can be understood in this way. Initially starting out as individual action, these campaigns snowballed into collective action, reaching the national press in the UK, prompting discussions and, significantly, change.

Whilst academics may be critical of the increasing demand placed on female athletes to carve an online space for themselves to generate media coverage (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018a), here the women's rugby community demonstrates the possibility it can create to have voices heard and instigate social justice action, especially in case study one, where the apparel company committed to positive change in regard to its promotion of men's and women's kit. However, the extent to which this has prompted actual, cultural change – either in the company itself, in wider rugby marketing and

media practices, or in the game more broadly – remains to be seen. Similarly, it places a great deal of expectation, and additional non-sporting labour, on to female athletes to continue to advocate for change, perhaps extending Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018b) notion of the athletic labour of femininity to include a feminist agenda as part of that – initially as a form of neoliberal self-empowerment but perhaps also as part of a bigger agenda of collective action.

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