

## 2016/12: Does the new AFL women's competition represent an advance for women's sport?

### What they said...

*'By not paying male and female players equally, employers send a message to young girls and women that they are not as highly valued as men even when they are the top of their field*

Libby Lyons, director of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA)

*'We're on a journey. It's not the same as the men straight off. We are starting by turning amateur women into professional women.*

*But...we are going to be a long way down the path to being very much like the men in five years' time'*

Gillon McLachlan, the AFL's chief executive officer

### The issue at a glance

On March 21, 2016, it was announced that the inaugural AFL women's football league would begin with a two-month season in February and March, 2017.

AFL clubs were invited to apply for a licence in the inaugural eight-team competition, with April 29th as the deadline for submissions.

On June 15, 2016, the eight clubs selected to form the initial competition were announced. They are the Adelaide Crows, the Brisbane Lions, Carlton, Collingwood, the Fremantle Dockers, the GWS Giants, Melbourne and the Western Bulldogs.

The Geelong Cats, North Melbourne, Richmond, St Kilda and the West Coast Eagles have each been granted provisional licences, and the AFL has explained it will work closely with them to ensure they are part of an expanded competition at the earliest possible opportunity.

Many have welcomed the new competition as a significant advance in women's sport, opening up a high profile code to greater participation from women. Others have suggested that it is not the boon it might at first appear as the female players are not being treated equitably.

### Background

(The information below has been abbreviated from a Wikipedia entry titled 'Women's Australian rules football'

The full entry can be accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s\\_Australian\\_rules\\_football](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_Australian_rules_football)

Information has also been taken from a news.com.au sport news report published on June 15, 2016, titled 'AFL launches women's league'. The full report can be accessed at <http://www.news.com.au/sport/afl/afl-launches-womens-league/news-story/ccfeddd075008b48274405258480dc0c>)

Women's Australian Rules football (also known as Aussie rules, footy, or just football) is the sport of Australian Rules football as played by women, generally with some modification to the laws of the game.

Organised women's football matches began in the early 20th century, but for a number of years occurred only in the form of one-off exhibition games. State-based leagues began to be formed in the 1980s, with the Victorian Women's Football League (VWFL) forming in Melbourne in 1981 and the West Australian Women's Football League (WAWFL) forming in Perth in 1988. The AFL Women's National Championships were inaugurated in 1992. Women's football began to be professionalised in the 2010s, with teams being formed by existing Australian Football League (AFL) clubs. A national women's league, branded AFL Women's, was announced in 2016, to begin play the following year.

### History

Australian Football had been played by men for almost half a century before the first women's football matches were played. Public attitudes and sexism generally prevented women from participating in organised football. However both world wars were a great liberator for women; as the men fought in the war, women were often called to perform many tasks typically done by men, including spectator sports.

Records exist of a football side in Perth, Western Australia made up of department store staff playing as Foy & Gibson's as early as 1917. Matches played in Western Australia were also recorded in 1918.

Following World War I, an exhibition match in Melbourne was held to show that women could play what had previously been seen to be a man's sport. The first women's match attracted a large crowd and interest. The umpire wore a dress. Archives also show a charity women's match occurred on Bassendean Oval in Perth, Western Australia, 27 August 1944. It is unknown whether the game had been played continuously in the state.

Beyond this and occasional matches over the years, women's football was rarely organised, until the formation of the Victorian Women's Football League in 1981 with four teams competing at open level.

It was in 2000 that the sport began to grow rapidly, with the number of registered teams increasing by a phenomenal 450%.

There are now about 120 women's teams across the globe. Australian Football is becoming more and more popular with women and girls, particularly young women. In 2006, 22 years was the average age of players in the VWFL.

The first ever full international was held between the USA Freedom and Team Canada in Vancouver on Saturday 4

August 2007 in front of a crowd of almost 2,500.

### Rule modifications

Some competitions, but not all, are played with modified rules. The main rule differences in Women's Football as opposed to Australian Football involve modified tackling rules. Typically aggressive slinging (swinging a player by the jumper or throwing the player to the ground) of oppositions players in a tackle is not allowed. Like the men's game, head high contact is strictly not allowed.

Another main difference is the size of the ball. A smaller ball to the men's version is often used to minimise hand injuries when marking the ball.

Games of International Rules are also played by many women's leagues against Gaelic Athletic Association clubs. Recreational Football, a fully non-contact version of Australian Rules football is also becoming popular amongst women in Australia and the United States. Many women's leagues also fall into the emerging 9-a-side footy or Metro footy format.

### Scope of the game in Australia

During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, women's Australian rules football saw a large expansion in the number of competitors. In 1998, Auskick, a national program began. The program was designed to introduce the game to primary school aged children. By 2006, it had over 140,000 participants each year. Though the program was never specifically aimed at girls, the safe non-contact environment proved popular and in 2007 about 16% (12%) in of all Auskick participants were female.

In Australia, a total of 18,609 girls and women played Australian rules football in 2005 and in 2006 48,054 women played the sport in Australia, and it is one of the fastest growing sports among women in Australia.

There are women's Australian Rules football teams in all states and territories of Australia.

An eight-team national competition backed by the AFL is scheduled to commence in 2017. Bids for a licence to participate were submitted by 13 existing AFL teams.

The competition was announced in 2008 and was slated to commence in 2013 with four to eight teams, but this was changed after it was found that the new teams from the Gold Coast and Greater Western Sydney would not have time to submit their bids in full. The starting number of teams has also been increased due to the growth of women's football since 2008.

A licence had been granted to Fremantle under the umbrella of the Women's Football League in February 2010, but due to a review and the subsequent admission of the Gold Coast and Greater Western Sydney to the AFL, this licence was recalled; it was reissued in 2015, and Fremantle will play in the inaugural season of the competition in 2017.

### How the 2017 AFL women's league will work

Eight-week competition, to run through February-March next year with a top four for the finals

Adelaide, Brisbane, Carlton, Collingwood, Fremantle, GWS, Melbourne and the Western Bulldogs will field teams

25 players per team

Each club is likely to play six games, with two weeks of finals

A team might have 16 players on the field, but it is more likely to be 18

The first step will be for each team to submit candidates for two marquee player positions, such as Melbourne captain

Daisy Pearce and Brisbane star Tayla Harris

The marquee players will earn about \$25,000 each

State-based drafts will be held in October, with a lottery to decide the order of picks

### **Internet information**

On September 5, 2016, Sportette published a comment by Sally Thompson titled 'Why Women's AFL Isn't Just Good Business - It's Big Business'

Thompson outlines the numerous features of the new competition that are likely to make it a commercial success.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://www.sportette.com.au/womens-afl-isnt-just-good-business-big-business/>

On September 4, 2016, Eureka Street published a comment by Erin Riley titled 'AFL women's league may threaten not boost diversity'

The comment explains the various features of the new competition which may exclude many women from competing.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=49831#.V90WYjUnL7V>

On September 4, 2016, Mashable Australia published a comment by Danielle Warby titled 'Australian's women football players must be paid better'

The comment criticises the pay rates proposed for the new women AFL players.

The full text can be accessed at [http://mashable.com/2016/09/04/australian-football-women-underpaid/#mwN8J7z\\_Ikqi](http://mashable.com/2016/09/04/australian-football-women-underpaid/#mwN8J7z_Ikqi)

On September 4, 2016, The West Australian published a report titled 'Women's AFL more popular than men on TV'

The report detailed the large number of viewers attracted to the final women's exhibition game of 2016.

The full report can be accessed at <https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/sport/afl/a/32528639/womens-afl-more-popular->

than-men-on-tv/#page1

On September 1, 2016, The New Daily published an analysis by Anthony Colangelo titled 'AFL's gender pay gap "unfair" and "unreasonable"

The article looks at arguments for and against the pay scale being offered women playing in the new AFL competition. The full text of the article can be found at <http://thenewdaily.com.au/sport/afl/2016/09/01/afl-womens-salary/>

On September 1, 2016, The New Daily published a report by Anthony Colangelo titled 'AFL's gender pay gap "unfair" and "unreasonable"'. Though the report presents a range of views on the pay rate being offered the new women players in the AFL, its focus is on the views of those who consider the rate insufficient.

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://thenewdaily.com.au/sport/afl/2016/09/01/afl-womens-salary/>

On September 1, 2016, Smart Company published a report from Emma Koehn titled 'Sports marketing a new ball game as brands flock to AFL Women's League'

The report considers the enthusiasm with which sponsors appear to be greeting the development of the new AFL women's competition.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.smartcompany.com.au/marketing/74798-sports-marketing-new-ball-game-brands-flock-afl-womens-league/>

On August 31, 2016, The Sydney Morning Herald published a comment by Erin Riley titled 'There is no defence for failing to pay players in the AFL women's league a living wage'

The piece criticises the rate of pay being offered players in the new AFL women's competition.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/news-and-views/opinion/there-is-no-defence-for-failing-to-pay-players-in-the-afl-womens-league-a-living-wage-20160831-gr5mow.html>

On August 29, 2016, The Guardian published a comment by Craig Little titled 'Women's game well placed to produce the AFL's next great entertainer'

The comment details the features of the new women's competition that are likely to make it a success with supporters.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/29/womens-game-well-placed-to-produce-the-afls-next-great-entertainer>

On June 28, 2016, The Conversation published a comment by Suzanne Dyson, Associate Professor, Principal Research Fellow, The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, titled 'To eliminate misogyny, the AFL needs social change, not just crisis management'

The comment argues that the AFL's response to sexism is too reactive and does not reflect a broadly-based cultural commitment of change.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/to-eliminate-misogyny-the-afl-needs-social-change-not-just-crisis-management-61575>

On June 21, 2016, The Melbourne University magazine, Pursuit, published a comment by Professor Cathy Humphreys and David Gallant titled 'Welcome to the club? Women in football'

The comment criticised the misogynistic attitudes expressed by some prominent men within the AFL.

The full text can be accessed at <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/welcome-to-the-club-women-in-football>

On June 20, 2016, The Guardian published a comment by Catharine Lumby titled, 'Eddie McGuire is the poster boy for an era we should have waved goodbye to'

Lumby is a professor of media at Macquarie University, a former journalist and a pro bono gender adviser to the NRL.

Her comment is critical of the out-moded, misogynistic attitudes of some prominent men within the AFL.

The full text can be read at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/20/eddie-mcguire-is-the-poster-boy-for-an-era-we-should-have-waved-goodbye-to>

On June 20, 2016, The Guardian published a comment by Stephanie Holt titled 'Some tips for Eddie McGuire and other blokes about women in AFL football'. Holt criticises the dismissive attitudes many men adopt toward women in AFL football.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/jun/20/some-tips-for-eddie-mcguire-and-other-blokes-about-women-in-afl-football>

On June 20, 2016, The Guardian published a comment by Russell Jackson titled 'Eddie McGuire's 'banter' exposes the rank hypocrisy of AFL football'

Jackson argues that the AFL's response to the recent incident involving Eddie McGuire reveals its hypocritical attitudes to women.

The full text can be found at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/jun/20/eddie-mcguires-banter-exposes-the-rank-hypocrisy-of-afl-football>

On June 15, 2016, The New Daily published a comment by Angela Pippas titled 'Why a women's AFL comp is a win for equality'

Pippas argues that the new competition will supply women and girls aspiring to play AFL football with valuable role models.

The full text of the comment can be accessed at <http://thenewdaily.com.au/sport/afl/2016/06/15/afl-women-league/>

On June 15, 2016, The Sydney Morning Herald published a comment by Samantha Lane titled 'New AFL-backed league a game-changer for women'

The article explains some of the advantages the new competition offers women.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/sport/womens-league-a-gamechanger-for-afl-20160614-gpilu4.html>

On June 10, 2016, The North West Star published a report by Samantha Lane titled 'Melbourne questions plans for eight teams in AFL women's league'

The report details the reservations of the Melbourne club about the AFL's intention to run an initial women's competition with eight rather than six teams.

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.northweststar.com.au/story/3961830/melbourne-questions-plans-for-eight-teams-in-afl-womens-league/?cs=12>

On May 2, 2016, 3AW News talk published a comment by Shane McInnes titled 'AFL women's league scheduled at the wrong time'

The comment is critical of the decision to play the first women's AFL games in February and March.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.3aw.com.au/news/opinion-afl-womens-league-scheduled-at-the-wrong-time-20160502-gok30k.html>

On August 19, 2015, the ABC's current affairs program, The Drum, published a comment by Amanda Shalala titled 'Here's how we can set up a women's AFL league'

The comment makes a range of suggestions as to the most effective ways to establish the women's competition.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-19/shalala-afl-women's-league/6707646>

On May 8, 2016, The Conversation published a comment by Tony Ward, a Fellow in Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne titled 'Female fans are AFL's secret weapon in drawing crowds'

The comment considers the importance of female supporters in maintaining the AFL's profitability.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/female-fans-are-afls-secret-weapon-in-drawing-crowds-41173>

### **Arguments suggesting the new AFL women's competition is not an advance for women's sport**

1. Most women are currently not interested in the AFL and the code is simply trying to extend its fan base, not assist sportswomen

Those who argue that the development of a women's AFL competition is not a significant advance for Australian sportswomen note that most Australian women are not interested in the competition.

The latest findings from Roy Morgan reveal that the proportion of Australian women aged 14 and over who support an AFL team slipped slightly from 35.6% to 33.8% between 2012 and 2015, as did the proportion who watch matches on TV (down fractionally from 34.0% to 33.4%).

It has further been noted that while the proportion of Australian women aged over 14 who play footy has always been very low, participation has decreased marginally since 2012 from 1.3% to 1.0%. This demonstrates that fewer women play Australian Rules than niche sports such as field hockey, archery, gymnastics, martial arts or ice/figure skating. It has further been suggested that the AFL's recent moves to make the code more attractive to women as both spectators and players are not motivated by concern for women, but are merely part of an attempt to keep the code commercially viable.

In response to the suggestion that the new AFL women's competition had the capacity to lure women from support for established women's sporting competitions including netball, basketball, hockey, soccer, cricket and softball, AD Reidy, writing for The Roar, asked concernedly, 'Is the establishment of the new league primarily a business development opportunity aimed at increasing AFL club memberships, or is it based on building the game at a community level?'

In an opinion piece published in The Conversation on May 8, 2015, titled 'Female fans are AFL's secret weapon in drawing crowds', Tony Ward, a fellow in Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne, wrote, 'To be successful, footy codes have to both maintain existing fans and attract new fans. Women fans are a key part of the picture.'

Women are an important part of the fan base, with clear room for growth. Mothers are also needed to support their sons' decision to play AFL. In a very real sense the continued success of the AFL depends on attracting and retaining the support of women; however, critics have argued, the betterment of women supporters and players is not the AFL's primary objective.

2. The women will be playing within a substantially misogynistic culture

It is argued that the introduction of a professional women's competition within the AFL does not signal a fundamental

change in the code's essentially misogynistic culture.

As one instance of this anti-woman ethos, two club presidents, Eddie McGuire at Collingwood and James Brayshaw at North Melbourne, encouraged each other in verbal abuse directed at The Age's chief football writer Caroline Wilson, 'joking' about drowning her.

In a comment published in Melbourne University's magazine Pursuit on June 21, 2016, the University's Professor Cathy Humphreys and David Gallant commented, 'The juxtaposition of McGuire's and Brayshaw's comments alongside the announcement of ... the fast-tracking of the women's franchise into the AFL begs the question: what sort of 'club' are women being encouraged to join?'

Humphreys and Gallant criticised the 'blokey' attitudes within the AFL which are hostile to women and the wider social implications of these attitudes. They stated, 'Violence against women occurs within this wider social context of attitudes, which legitimise abusive and humiliating comments as 'just a joke'. It invites bystanders to join in on a group culture that continues to normalise disrespect towards women as part of "being a bloke".'

Some commentators have noted that there is a conflict between the male bonding and group loyalty encouraged on field and the ethical, individually responsible behaviour that off field conduct protocols require of male players in their interaction of women.

It is also argued that there is a conflict between the influence of and media focus on AFL spokesmen such as Eddie McGuire and Sam Newman and the code's supposed rejection of their sexist attitudes.

On June 28, 2016, The Conversation published a comment by Suzanne Dyson, Associate Professor, Principal Research Fellow, The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, titled 'To eliminate misogyny, the AFL needs social change, not just crisis management'. Dyson stated, 'The likes of McGuire and Newman are...poster boys for an era that should have ended years ago. Yet they continue to have a powerful influence on others who are uncertain or who share their values about the place of women in society. They represent the tip of an ugly, misogynist iceberg.'

Until the AFL is prepared to take a consistent, ethical position on sexism and misogyny in the game, incidents like this [McGuire's verbal abuse of Wilson] will continue to be a problem and contribute to harming the AFL's brand.'

In an opinion piece published in The Guardian on June 20, 2016, Stephanie Holt commented, '[W]omen are left wondering, how do we love this game, when the public rhetoric of its most prominent personalities is at best demeaning and at worst dangerous? No amount of white ribbons or pink ladies or women's teams will change that.'

In another opinion piece published in The Guardian on June 20, 2016, Russell Jackson, referring to the AFL's failure to reprimand McGuire for his comments about Wilson, stated, 'This is the real embarrassment for football - not that it's incapable of involving women, because it now does so in performative and often crowd-pleasing ways, but that its cult of personality and craven worship of bullies makes rank hypocrisy like this its default philosophical setting.'

### 3. The women players are being paid much less than male players

Critics of the new AFL women's competition claim that the rate of pay being offered the female players is discriminatory and does not remunerate their skills or potential fan-appeal at a level comparable to male players.

In an opinion piece written by Erin Riley and published in The Sydney Morning Herald on August 31, 2016, Riley claimed, 'When the AFL announced it would be launching its women's league in 2017, I, and countless other fans of women's footy, rejoiced...But the joy was short-lived: today we found out the majority of players would be paid just \$5,000 for their 8-week season. Unlike the men's players, they will not be provided with private health insurance.'

The discrepancy between male and female pay rates has been stressed. Erin Riley has noted, 'A whole women's team, with a 25-player list, will be paid around \$190,000. The average men's player earns \$302,104 per season. Every single male player is paid a set fee of \$3,605 per senior match paid, on top of their base salary.'

Riley has further explained, 'the women's season will be shorter: eight weeks of competition compared with the men's 22. But even on a per-match-payment basis, the women are getting paid substantially less than male players. For eight senior games, a male player will be paid \$28,840 on top of his base salary. That bonus pay is more than even the highest-paid female player will get for her entire season.'

The Australian government's Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) director Libby Lyons has criticised the low pay rates being offered women AFL players as inequitable.

Ms Lyons stated, 'No matter the workplace, women should be paid the same as men for doing the same job.'

Playing professional football is no different. By not paying male and female players equally, employers send a message to young girls and women that they are not as highly valued as men even when they are the top of their field.'

Critics have also argued that it is inequitable that women AFL players are not receiving health insurance as part of their remuneration package.

University of Technology Sydney women's sport and gender equality expert Dr Johanna Adriaanse has stated, 'If men receive health insurance as part of their contract the women should get the same, there is no doubt about that.'

Riley and other critics have claimed that without a higher wage rate the women's competition cannot be expected to thrive. She notes, 'Forget being full-time athletes year-round: this isn't even enough money to live on during the season. After years of being told to be patient, enough is enough. In 2017, there is no excuse for not paying players a full-time, living wage.'

In a comment published in Eureka Street on September 4, 2016, Erin Riley expanded on the damaging effects of the low pay rates being offered women playing in the AFL competition. Riley noted that the low pay rate would exclude many women from being able to play. She explained, 'In order to train three times a week, many players will be required to relocate closer to their clubs. This puts their day jobs in jeopardy, meaning only those who can afford to change jobs or

take time off can afford to play. This has the potential to seriously skew the playing group towards those who are from higher socio-economic status.

It will also disproportionately exclude women in regional areas (which also disproportionately affects Indigenous women) and women who don't live in the states with a team.

Additionally, weekend and evening child care, when players are most likely to need it, costs substantially more than weekday child care. There is a strong likelihood that for women with caring responsibilities, the bulk of that meagre salary would be eaten up by child care costs. This has the effect of excluding women with caring responsibilities from participation in the league.

So the foundation for a genuinely inclusive league is not strong. Fair pay is an essential part of that: to ensure that women of disadvantaged backgrounds aren't excluded from participating in the league.'

#### 4. Most coaches and administrators are male

Critics have noted that the power structure within the new female competition seems to favour men.

In a comment published in Eureka Street on September 4, 2016, Erin Riley noted the disproportionate number of men in power positions within the women's competition.

Riley writes, 'Of the seven coaches named so far to the women's league, only two - Fremantle's Michelle Cowan and Adelaide's Bec Goddard - are female.' Eleven days later when the last coach was announced, the number of female coaches remained at two.

The Adelaide Crows have appointed Bec Goddard; the Brisbane Lions have appointed Craig Starcevich; Carlton has appointed Damien Keeping; Collingwood have appointed Wayne Siekman; the Fremantle Dockers have appointed Michelle Cowan; the GWS Giants have appointed Tim Schmidt; Melbourne has appointed Michael Stinear and the Western Bulldogs have appointed Paul Groves. Thus, only 25 percent of the coaches in the women's competition are women.

Erin Riley argues, 'This dominance of male coaches again replicated the model in which women are accountable largely to men: both as coaches and in senior management roles.'

Riley explained the probable consequences of this, noting, 'If a leadership role in the women's league is seen as a stepping stone into coaching or administration in the men's competition and remains a pathway primarily for men, it will be a problem. The league needs to provide pathways for women to develop those skills in at least equal numbers to men. A women's league that is dominated by men off the field substantially undermines the project of developing opportunities for women in football.'

Riley argues that the power balance in the new competition is concerning, 'So while there are great opportunities for the AFL National Women's League to forge new ground and create a more inclusive competition, so far the signs haven't been positive. The groundwork seems to be in place for a competition where...and the off-field roles are occupied more by men than by women. Rather than challenging the paradigm of gender and sport in Australia, and recognising intersectionality and inclusiveness as vital parts of that, the league is perpetuating old power structures. Sure, it might get better later on. But there's no reason it can't be better from the start.'

#### 5. The women's AFL games are being scheduled as though they were a second-rate competition

Some critics of the new AFL women's competition have argued that it is being introduced in a way that undermines it and suggests it is second-rate. The new women's competition will not be being showcased parallel with the men's competition. Instead it will begin with a two-month season in February and March, 2017.

In an opinion piece published on the 3AW internet site on May 2, 2016, Shane McInnes stated, 'The AFL's plan to hold the women's season during February and March doesn't achieve the desired objective of getting traditional AFL followers involved and behind this new concept.'

McInnes went on to explain, 'First, it's still summer ... Footy, is, was and always will be a winter game (and games that are played in February and early March, are rarely taken seriously).

Secondly, it's still cricket season...Why would you want to go head-to-head with what is already a juggernaut? As they say, you've got to pick your battles.

Thirdly, in February, families to head to the coast on weekends, not to suburban venues for a game of footy. Just the way it is.'

McInnes argues that there is a fourth and final reason why the manner in which the new competition is being introduced will undermine it. McInnes claims, 'You have to give fans a regular taste of women's football. Week in, week out. Let fans see what it has to offer. Let them see how entertaining it is.

Let the fans see that the women are as skilful, as athletic and as tough (maybe even tougher) than their male equivalent. And, there is the perfect timeslot to do that and that's pre-game, as a curtain raiser to AFL Premiership season matches.'

### **Arguments suggesting the new AFL women's competition is an advance for women's sport**

1. The new AFL women's competition gives women access to one of Australia's most high-profile and lucrative sporting codes

Women's sporting competitions have long had difficulty attracting the publicity, sponsorship and fan base that are typically enjoyed by high profile male sports.

The expansion of the AFL competition to include women gives women players access to the media coverage and related opportunities normally only available to men.

In an opinion piece published in The Sydney Morning Herald on June 15, 2016, Samantha Lane explained what taking

their place within as popular a sporting code as the AFL might mean for women players.

Lane stated, 'Overnight, your local girl Auskicker has won the opportunity to become a 200-game AFL legend.

She now stands to be applauded - and awarded - for her feats on field in a way that men around Australia have for decades.

She now stands to earn a living from pursuing sport as a full-time career.'

Lane explained further, 'Women, from 2017, will be crowned AFL Brownlow medallists, or a more appropriately named equivalent prize for being their competition's best player.

Women will be named in AFL All-Australian teams. They will be AFL club captains. Their kicks, marks and handballs will be broadcast on television and on radio. They will win sponsorships. In elite sporting surrounds they will be professionally coached and groomed.'

Commenting on what has now been made available to women AFL players, Melbourne captain Daisy Pearce has stated, 'It's the biggest code and the biggest sporting body in the country and certainly here it's a big part of the culture of Melbourne and to now have the opportunity to play this sport means a lot to girls.'

The lucrative potential for players and clubs is obvious from the extent of sponsor interest.

On September 1, 2016, Harris Scarfe unveiled a partnership with the Adelaide Crows women's team, the first sports partnership in the company's 167-year history. Meanwhile, Sydney Airport and financial services provider FlexiGroup have signed on with the Greater Western Sydney women's team, while Harvey Norman will be the Giants' partner sponsor.

Such sponsorship announcements have been seen as marking a shift after many years of crowd funding campaigns from women's AFL clubs to simply get on the team bus and play. The exposure made possible by joining the national AFL competition will offer a wide range of opportunities to the women players and the clubs for which they play.

## 2. The new women's competition will supply women and girls with positive role models

It has been argued that without a prominent women's AFL competition, women and girls are being denied an opportunity to see female players showcase the skills men display and so are not being given the role models that would encourage them to aspire to perform similarly.

When the eight clubs to field teams in the initial competition were announced on June 15, 2016, the AFL Commission Chairman, Mike Fitzpatrick, stated, 'Today we are joined by some of the best players our game has to offer, women who are already becoming household names, role models and heroes for the next generation of players.

The establishment of a national women's league will provide a platform to inspire young girls to reach for the stars...'

Similarly, Western Bulldogs club president Peter Gordon has stated, 'This is an important equity issue in terms of players and women being able to play, but it's also important that young girls growing up in the game get to see role models.'

Prior to the establishment of the new women's league, women interested in AFL have had limited role models.

Sports journalist, Angela Pippas, has stated, 'When I was growing up, I was the ringleader of kick-to-kick in my street. I could recite the A-Z of the South Australian National Football League backwards. But all my football role models were men. Men who played for Norwood.

The thought of an elite women's competition was something that never entered my head - not even fleetingly. Playing competitive Australian Rules football was never an option for me.'

Pippas believes that the new women's AFL competition will address this deficiency. 'Now, girls have a pathway and strong, visible role models to guide and inspire them every step of the way.

They will see elite women footballers on television, hear them on radio, read their stories and perhaps even collect their faces on footy swap cards.

They will see them get drafted, debut, kick their first AFL goal, take mark of the year, win the competition's best and fairest, run out on grand final day and hold the premiership cup aloft.'

Some of the women selected to play in the new competition have already noted that it will give them an opportunity to act as role models for girls interested in the game. Melbourne captain, Daisy Pearce, has stated, 'It's great to have the opportunity to play an elite sport out on an elite arena in a professional environment. But more so, to look around today and see those little girls who will grow up knowing that's something they can achieve is amazing.'

## 3. As the women's competition grows more women will participate as coaches and administrators

Those who support the new women's AFL competition argue that it is only a matter of time before women will feature more prominently as coaches and administrators within the competition.

In June, 2016, AFL chief executive Gillon McLachlan, stated in relation to the new competition, 'It will provide opportunities for talented girls, but more than that: for coaches, for administrators, for everyone who wants to pursue their love of this game - men or women.

But certainly there will be a lot more opportunities for women than they've had in the past.'

Melbourne chief executive, Peter Jackson, has similarly stated, 'We needed more women in our game at all levels... We need them in our clubs, we need them in our footy departments...'

The AFL is making a deliberate effort to appoint as many women coaches and administrators as possible in the new women's competition. It has been claimed that the current relative lack of women in these positions is a consequence of inexperience and that over time women's participation as coaches and administrators will grow.

Collingwood's inaugural coach of the women's team, Wayne Siekman, has stated, 'People keep asking why there aren't more females coaching teams next year, but right at the moment there's a lack of quality female coaches out there.'

Siekman and others have indicated that steps are being taken to address this problem.

Referring to the women coaches with whom he works, Siekmen has stated, 'We want to help upskill them as quickly as we can so that in four or five years' time, most of the coaches at women's level are females.

I can see that happening and if we could get there as quickly as that it would be great for the game.'

Collingwood's operations manager, Meg Hutchins, has stated, 'We want to help develop them [women coaches] and help them reach their potential, and the biggest feather in the cap would be if they were to go on and become head coaches in the women's competition in the future...

The best coaches out there at the moment are all males, other than Michelle Cowan and Peta Searle, and we want to try and change that by creating this pathway program.'

The AFL's Respect and Responsibility Program states, 'It is difficult to ensure that an environment of equality is generated where women are not appropriately represented at all levels of club administration, or are portrayed as sex objects or otherwise marginalised, rather than being recognised for their skills and contributions. Football clubs are an important part of Australian society and thus need to be safe, supportive and an inclusive environment for women.' This statement of principle refers to all AFL competitions, including, but not restricted to, the new women's competition, and is expected to result in growing numbers of women assuming roles as coaches and administrators in the new AFL women's competition and in the men's competition.

#### 4. The women's game will achieve a more prominent position over time

Supporters of the way in which the new women's AFL competition is being established argue that critics need to recognise the fledgling state of the current competition and that it will consolidate over time. As Amanda Shalala noted in an opinion piece published by the ABC's current affairs program, *The Drum*, on August 19, 2015, 'The AFL will...have to compete with well established women's competitions in football, netball, cricket and basketball, amongst others, so patience is key.

It will take time to rival the established codes, to attract top talent and to build an outstanding product.'

Supporters of the current arrangements for the inaugural competition point out that the number of clubs fielding teams will grow, the remuneration offered the women players will increase and the scheduling of the games will be altered with the games being played during the traditional football session and so able to take greater advantage of the conventional fan base.

As the new competition develops the League intends that the season will be extended and that the women players will be paid more, with the ultimate intention of them being able to be fully professional in the way the men are.

The AFL development manager, Simon Lethlean, has stated that he hopes that stars such as Melbourne captain Daisy Pearce will be fulltime within four years. Lethlean observed, 'I don't think we can say in two-four years' time that it will be fully-professional for women, but we'd certainly love it to be.

Make it sustainable, make it long-term and be here in 100 years with 18 teams and broadcast and sponsorship support.'

The AFL's chief executive officer, Gillon McLachlan, has made a similar point, stating, 'We're on a journey. It's not the same as the men straight off. We are starting by turning amateur women into professional women.

But I tell you what we are going to be a long way down the path to being very much like the men in five years' time.'

The AFL intends that over time the women's competition will field the same number of teams as the men's, each probably affiliated with one of the existing clubs. The fact that there are initially only eight women's teams in the competition has been explained as a resources and a readiness issue.

The Geelong Cats, North Melbourne, Richmond, St Kilda and the West Coast Eagles also applied to have a women's team in the 2017 and were unsuccessful. However, each of these five clubs has been granted a provisional licence, and will be provided with an outline of how the AFL will work closely with them to develop their talent base and ensure they are part of an expanded competition as soon as possible. It is anticipated that some will join the competition as early as 2018.

Specific information is to be provided to each club on how they can develop partnerships with state-league clubs, contribute to the talent pathway by supporting Youth Girls Academies, and enhance their capacity to support a women's team.

It has also been suggested that over time the scheduling of the women's games is likely to change. Once all clubs have an associated women's team it will be possible to use the women's games as curtain raisers to the men's matches. As Amanda Shalala has noted, this would have the additional benefit of allowing 'a cost effective approach for broadcasters, who can take advantage of their existing setup for the preceding AFL match.' It will also ensure that women's games draw the largest crowds possible with the associated benefits that come from attracting sponsorship.

#### 5. Players, spectators and sponsors are already embracing the women's competition

Supporters of the new women's AFL competition note that even before it has officially begun the participation rates among women players and the strength of audience support for exhibition matches indicate that the women's league will be a success.

The growth of player participation in women's football has been recent and dramatic. Sally Thompson, writing for *Sportette* on September 5, 2016, outlined the growth in participation in the women's game. Thompson has stated, 'Women played a handful of games between World War 1 and the 1970s, mostly as fundraisers or social attractions, it was not until the formation of the Victorian Women's Football League (VWFL) in 1981 that an organised league existed for women, albeit for just 4 teams. In 2005, the VWFL celebrated its 25th birthday with 26 teams and just shy of a thousand players. In 2010 the AFL announced a review into the women's game with the intention of developing women's participation to a national level, and in 2015 the AFL recorded over 284,000 women playing the game. In just 10 years



women's football has gone from an obscure minority to making up a quarter of all registered players.'

There are also indications of a high level of interest in the women's game from spectators. On Saturday, September 3, 2016, the exhibition match between Melbourne and the Western Bulldogs attracted a peak television audience of 1.05 million viewers. Melbourne viewers averaged 387,000, comfortably ahead of the next best Saturday game of the season, which was St Kilda and Geelong's clash which averaged 347,000 Melbourne viewers.

Women players are already being presented as having a powerful capacity to attract support from fans. Their diverse backgrounds and fresh images are seen as a strong drawcard, attracting additional supporters to the AFL.

Graham Burgen, the head coach of the Victorian Women's Football League, predicts that the women's game and those who play it will be a great success with fans. Burgen has stated, 'I've been out to hundreds of games all across Victoria and interstate, and the skills of the game are first class. Once they get to play on a bigger stage and are exposed to a larger audience, the public is going to love it - and the women who play it.'

Women's teams and individual women players are also attracting the interest of large commercial sponsors.

The Western Bulldogs chief executive officer, David Stevenson, who was formerly a US-based vice-president of sales for Nike, has indicated that the interest in the women's team his club will field is coming from 'large multinational companies'.

The AFL's chief executive officer, Gillon McLachlan, has stated, 'I think...people are going to be surprised about how many companies [are interested] who ordinarily wouldn't want to be involved with our game, or who haven't been historically. But because they support gender equality, and because they support women's sport and women's participation, they're going to become involved.'

### Further implications

Women's sport in Australia appears to be going through a period of relative growth and success.

The Matildas reached the quarter-finals of the Women's World Cup, a feat the men's team has never achieved. In cricket, the Southern Stars dominated the Ashes, in contrast to the male cricketers, while in basketball the Opals qualified for the 2016 Olympics in Rio.

The Australian Sports Commission Chair, John Wylie, has suggested that the success of female athletes on a national stage has the capacity to change long-standing perceptions about women's sports - particularly that people are less interested in watching women play.

Wylie has stated, 'People are watching major sporting events like the Netball Cup final on Sunday. They're seeing high quality sport. We think the community's appreciation of women's sport is increasing.'

Wylie noted by way of example, 'The Netball Cup drew record television ratings but the real story was on social media, with 1.1 million tweets mentioning the game.'

What that shows is that there is a very high level of community engagement through social media in top-level women's sport.'

The AFL's decision to begin the women's competition in 2017 when at one point it had been proposed for 2020 can be seen as an attempt to capitalise on this trend.


The AFL is currently the only major sporting code in Australia that does not have a women's national competition. There would seem to be a clear need to address this deficiency.


It remains unclear what the impact of a women's competition within the AFL will be on women's sport. It would seem likely to increase the profile of women in sport and, if the new competition is well-resourced and presented, it should extend community appreciation of women's athleticism and sporting skills. The existence of a national competition within which women can play should also increase the interest among girls and young women in playing AFL football.

There is some concern that the very profile of the AFL may have a downside, with skilled players in other codes leaving cricket, netball or basketball in order to play football. This could be to the serious detriment of competitions where women currently excel. On September 14, 2016, Netball Australia announced a huge pay increase for players in the new national league. Netball Australia's deputy chief executive, Marne Fechner, stated, 'We want to ensure that netball remains the code of choice ... there was a story that potentially netballers are leaving the sport for AFL and our job is to ensure that over half a million girls want to be Diamond or a championship player.'

While on the one hand it is a cause for celebration that skilled Australian sportswomen at the national level are receiving greater financial recognition; on the other, developments such as this could stretch the resources of existing codes beyond their capacity. This would be to the detriment of Australian sportswomen.

### Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

AGE, September 10, 2016, page 33, comment by Prue Gilbert, 'Level the playing field, AFL'. 

H/SUN, September 6, 2016, page 21, comment by Susie O'Brien, 'Peanuts are an insult to these brilliant women'. 

H/SUN, September 5, 2016, page 5, news item (photos) by Minear and Byrnes, 'Women shine'.

### Women and sports, incl sexism, sexist comments, discrimination and gender, incl as AFL footballers, players in women's league:.

AUST, September 16, 2016, page 5, news item (photos) by R Urban, 'Women's sport pay not in the ballpark'.

AGE, September 14, 2016, page 7, news item (photo) by C Booker, 'A dream fulfilled as twins join sisters on football field'.