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The Hundred: A sociological analysis of gender relations and the (semi-) professionalisation of women's cricket in England

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Abstract

In this article, we adopt a critical sociological perspective to understanding gender relations and cricket, through the lens of The Hundred – a new, short-form tournament, described by the England and Wales Cricket Board as being part of its long-term commitment to making cricket a gender-equal sport. The Hundred is the first sporting tournament in the world which, from the outset, featured fully aligned competitions for both men's and women's teams, including equal prize money, but not equal pay, which the recent Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket condemned. Drawing on concepts of professionalisation as a gendered process we discuss data from interviews with 33 people working in cricket to consider how gender relations continue to impact opportunities for women in cricket. This article further supports the need to conceptualise professionalisation in sport as gendered by considering the ways The Hundred facilitates opportunities for men's and women's cricket differently.

Keywords

cricket, equal pay, gender, The Hundred, professionalisation, Sport, women

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Introduction

According to the UK's Women's Sport Trust (2023), the average viewer watched 8 hours and 44 minutes of women's sport in 2022, compared to 3 hours and 47 minutes in 2021. It was also a record year for domestic women's sport, with 37.6 million watching it in 2022, beating the previous high of 32.9 million in 2021. Notably, the 27.3 million who watched women's sport in 2020 was lower than in 2019, emphasising the significant, negative contribution of the COVID-19 pandemic to the precariousness of women's sport (Leaders and Sky Sports, 2021). This negative impact of the pandemic was further reinforced by Bowes et al. (2021), who argued that the survival – and therefore, growth – of women's sport is dependent on increased visibility in the media. Cricket has seen a similar increase in people watching the women's game. On 8 March 2020, International Women's Day, 86,174 spectators watched Australia win their fifth Women's World Cup title at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Australia. Despite this media and fan interest, women's cricket was identified in the recent Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket report (ICEC, 2023: p. 12) as an 'add-on' to the men's game in England. The ICEC concluded that 'women continue to be treated as subordinate to men within all levels of cricket' (p. 12). Additionally, the ICEC report lays bare the significantly poorer working conditions for domestic female cricketers than for male ones, finding, for example, that men have privileged access to facilities in England (ICEC, 2023).

The Hundred was launched by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) in July 2021 as a new format of cricket targeted explicitly at attracting more diverse audiences to the sport (Fletcher et al., 2024; Nicholson et al., 2023). The ECB has promoted the competition, which takes place annually during the school summer holidays in the UK, as a key aspect of their Women and Girls Strategy. All teams in the competition have both men's and women's squads which (in theory at least) receive equal marketing, and play the same number of matches, at the same grounds. In this article, we aim to locate the tournament within the literature on the process of professionalisation within women's sport, which emphasises the precarity of the professionalisation process for women (Pavlidis, 2020), as well as the differing paths to professional sport for women compared to men (Thomson et al., 2023; Bowes and Culvin, 2021).

It is within this context that we use interview data from 33 people working in English cricket to highlight how the professionalisation of women's cricket has followed, and continues to follow, a different trajectory from men's sport. In doing so, we provide a gendered lens to understand how The Hundred impacts the professionalisation of men's and women's cricket differently. Given the gendered history of cricket, we begin by providing a long-term perspective on gender and cricket, and the current position of women's cricket and women cricketers.

The Women's Cricket Association and the England and Wales Cricket Board: A gendered process of professionalisation

It is important to recognise that women have been playing cricket for as long as men (Nicholson, 2019). The first recorded women's match in England took place in 1745 (Velija, 2015). However, from the early 1800s, reports of the game declined (Heyhoe-Flint and Rheinberg, 1976). This decline coincided with the strengthening of

the association between nation and cricket, and aspects of masculinity. Increasingly, 'cricket was both fundamentally English and male and therefore unsuited to both the non-English populations of Great Britain and to women' (Malcolm and Velija, 2017: 22). Due to this, women's cricket developed in separate spheres to the men's game across the 19th and 20th centuries. From the 1850s, women's cricket was mainly played in girls' schools and women's universities and colleges (Nicholson, 2019). This remained the case until World War One (WWI), which saw broader changes to women's involvement in public life (Nicholson, 2019). The formation of women's sports governing bodies at this time reflected these broader changes in power relations between the sexes post-WWI, in which women had greater access to public spaces and institutions (Hargreaves, 1994). In 1926 this expanded to cricket, and the Women's Cricket Association (WCA) was formed by a group of women who had been gathering annually at Colwall to play a friendly cricket tournament (Heyhoe-Flint and Rheinberg, 1976). These women were acutely aware of the dominance and popularity of the men's game, and there was a concerted desire to meet behavioural codes and expectations of women at this time (Velija, 2015). The WCA were strictly amateur and this, alongside their separatist strategy, enabled the WCA to organise their own game, away from public scrutiny (Velija, 2018). In the WCA women held all leadership and key roles, mostly on a volunteer basis. Indeed, men could not become members of the WCA until the 1990s (Nicholson, 2019). The WCA was also responsible for managing the national team, and played a significant role in the formation of the International Women's Cricket Council in 1958, which oversaw international tournaments, including the first Women's World Cup in 1973 (Velija, 2015).

The distinctive history of women's cricket from men's cricket is an important context when considering the belated professionalisation of the sport. The women who formed the WCA were mainly upper class, educated, unmarried and initially with enough economic capital to fund their own game (Velija, 2015). However, throughout the WCA's history, there is evidence of significant concern about financial sustainability (Nicholson, 2022). In contrast with the vast resources available to the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), the WCA did not hire its first full-time paid employee until 1971, while all players were amateurs (Nicholson, 2019). Even after another World Cup was won by England, at Lord's in 1993, the women's game still suffered from financial concerns, and the WCA were reliant on a £60,000 grant from the men's Test and County Cricket Board to host a tour by New Zealand in 1996.

While the definition of professionalisation in sport focuses on formalised policies, structured and paid contracted athletes, regulations and commercial practices, the term has often been used in the sociology of sport without a gendered lens (Marshall et al., 2022). In this article, we stress that professionalisation is a gendered process. This is particularly important when considering that the landscape for women's professional sports has fundamentally shifted in recent years, with the establishment of professional leagues like the Australian Football League (AFLW) and the Women's Premier League (cricket) in India (Thomson et al., 2023). Prior research has highlighted that women's experiences of playing professional sports are tenuous and precarious (Pavlidis, 2020), and that pathways to professional sport for women are different, as there are social and cultural reasons which have limited opportunities for women in sport to become professional (Thomson et al., 2023). Bowes and Culvin (2021) contend that the professionalisation of women's sport has had a different trajectory to men's sport due to long-term gender segregation and

exclusion. This was certainly the case in English cricket, whereby the men's game was fully professional from 1962, while no women played cricket professionally until 2014. Bowes and Culvin also argue that the recent professionalisation of women's sports is underpinned by progressive gender ideologies, and involves women's sport organisations demonstrating an increasing formalisation of their administration and structure. This is achieved through policy and practice, resulting in the formal contracting of women as athletes for financial remuneration (Bowes and Culvin, 2021). Within cricket, only after the WCA voted to merge with the ECB at an Extraordinary General Meeting on 29 March 1998 was a professional future for women's cricket conceivable (Nicholson, 2019).

However, Bowes and Culvin (2021) also recognise the processual (and not necessarily linear) element of professionalisation. Women's sport, therefore, still exists on a continuum of professionalisation (Marshall et al., 2022). As Marshall et al. (2022) and McLeod and Nite (2024) note, while a sport might exhibit features of professionalisation, athletes might not be professional. For example, Marshall et al. (2022) explore how the Women's National Basketball League (WNBL) exhibits elements of being professional (with formalised structures and contracted players), yet the lack of pay equity means the players are not professional, operating in what the authors call a quasi-professional environment. Against a backdrop of many so-called 'professional' sportswomen having to take on additional paid work to support their involvement in sport, Bowes and Culvin describe a professional sportswoman as 'a woman whose financial income from her involvement in sport enables her to commit full time without the need to pursue a second occupation' (2021: 9). They also identify three key markers of professionalisation in women's sport: (a) the financial remuneration of athletes; (b) appropriate protections and working conditions; and (c) a formalised administration and structure. This definition broadens out from other concepts of professionalisation to provide a more gendered lens. In this article, we consider the ways in which The Hundred can be seen to have advanced these three markers of professionalisation within women's cricket.

It is important to recognise the relationship between the professionalisation and commercialisation of sport, and media coverage, and the live production of sport events. Despite the growth in media coverage of women's sport discussed in the 'Introduction' section, unequal coverage continues to embed inequity within and across sport (Biscomb and Matheson, 2019; Bowes et al., 2021). An example of how production can influence the experience of fans can be seen in Parry et al.'s (2021) research on the Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) and Big Bash League (BBL) in Australia. Their study of fandom in the two competitions found that the fan experience was negatively impacted by less investment in the WBBL. It meant closed food and drink outlets, fewer replays, and fewer media and entertainment opportunities. Drawing on Musto et al.'s (2017) concept of gender bland sexism, they explore how this difference in the production of the games on match days influence perceptions of value and quality, arguing that it led to male fans valuing the women's competition less. The research highlights how media coverage and production of events can impact the perceived value of the event to fans and spectators (Fletcher et al., 2024). The Hundred provides a potential pathway to increased commercial interest in, and therefore professional opportunities for, women's cricket because it has been billed by the ECB as the showcase event for the English cricket summer. However, any study of the competition must also assess

the extent to which the women's competition was treated on a par with the men's, in terms of media coverage, investment and the match day experience. This is another question we explore below.

Women's cricket: The Hundred and the path to professionalisation

For women cricketers, being (quasi) professional was not an option until 2014, when the first professional central contracts for representing England were introduced. Semi-professional contracts had previously been available in the form of 10 coaching contracts introduced in 2008 by the Chance to Shine charity. While the amount of the central contracts was not divulged, by 2018, the top tier women's contract was worth in the region of £50,000 (Nicholson, 2019). By comparison, men's central contracts range between £650,000 and £1 million, depending on the format(s) played (The Cricketer, 2023). The monopolisation of money and contracts in the men's game represents large power differentials, and in the period since the merger of the WCA with the ECB, the sharing of resources between men's and women's cricket has remained contested, impacting on opportunities for the women's game to be professional.

'Transforming women's and girls' cricket' is one of six priorities in the ECB's *Inspiring Generations* strategy for 2020–2024. Within this strategy, the ECB committed to investing £20 million into women's cricket across 2020 and 2021, with an ambition of investing £50 million over the 5 years, and a further commitment to funding 40 full-time professional, domestic contracts attached to the eight new regional women's teams (ECB, 2019). These contracts were in addition to the existing 18 England Women's central contracts. These opportunities and contracts, however, turned out to be more precarious than the men's. For example, COVID-19 delayed their distribution. Instead, from 1 June 2020, to compensate players expecting a contract, the ECB introduced retainers (work-for-hire contracts), awarded to 24 domestic players, at a value of £1000 a month (Nicholson, 2020). The 40 new full-time, domestic professional contracts only came into effect 4 months later, on October 1st, and were worth £18,000 a year (Nicholson, 2020). By contrast, although the England men's team did take a 15% pay cut across the 2020–2021 financial year, there was no delay in awarding men's international or county contracts (Cricinfo, 2020).

Subsequently, ahead of the 2023 season, the ECB (2022) announced a £3.5 million increase in funding for the eight women's professional regions to run until the end of 2024. From 1 November 2022, the number of professional players funded by ECB went up to seven per region, rising to 10 on 1 February 2023. In 2023 there were 80 ECB-funded professional women's domestic cricketers, double the 40 initially contracted in 2020. These are in addition to the 18 centrally contracted players. The salary pot per regional team from 1st February rose to £250,000, meaning the average salary for a women's regional cricketer was £25,000. Nevertheless, the ICEC report (2023) highlighted the continuing gender pay gap between men's and women's cricket in England. They found that the average salary for England women is 20.6% of the average salary for England men playing white-ball (i.e. Twenty20 and 50 overs) cricket, with a further disparity in captains' allowances, with the England women's white-ball captain receiving 31% less than her male counterpart. Clearly, there is

some route still to travel before the precarity of women's professionalism can be seen to be fully in retreat.

Much optimism has been directed towards the commercial success of The Hundred in relation to the further professionalisation of women's cricket. The Hundred was launched by the ECB in July 2021. It is a novel, short, countdown format of cricket, which comprises each batting team facing 100 balls. The event consists of eight city-based (though this is not necessarily evident in their names) franchise teams: Birmingham Phoenix, London Spirit, Manchester Originals, Northern Superchargers, Oval Invincibles, Southern Brave, Trent Rockets, and Welsh Fire. Each franchise fields both men's and women's teams. The franchises are overseen by the ECB, which stipulates a centrally allocated pot of money for players and coaches. For the Men's Hundred, since the outset, the squads for each franchise have been selected via a draft system. Notably, while the men's draft has been televised in each of the three iterations to date, a televised women's draft was only launched for the 2023 tournament.

For the men, 2023 squads consisted of 15 players: one England centrally contracted player and 14 players split across six salary bands (£125,000, £100,000, £75,000, £60,000, £50,000, £40,000 and £30,000). Franchises are permitted a maximum of four overseas players. The budget for each men's franchise is £1 million (The Hundred, 2023a). For the women, franchises can choose up to three centrally contracted England players and 12 others across seven salary bands (in 2023 these were £31,250, £25,000, £18,750, £15,000, £12,500, £10,000 and £7500), including up to three overseas players (The Hundred, 2023b). The overall budget per team in 2023 was £250,000, though this will increase to £350,000 in 2024 (Cricinfo, 2024). One of the tournament's most significant, early achievements was the joint television deal with both Sky and the BBC (Fletcher et al., 2024). In both 2021 and 2022, all matches were televised on Sky, 18 of which (10 men's and eight women's) were also shown live, free-to-air on the BBC. This represented the first time multiple matches of live cricket, in a tournament, were available on UK television, for free, since 2005.

The ECB has described the tournament as part of its long-term commitment to making cricket a gender-balanced sport, and The Hundred is the first sporting tournament in the world which, from the outset, featured fully aligned competitions for both men's and women's teams (Nicholson et al., 2023). Branded as 'match-days', most fixtures are double-headers, featuring both women's and men's matches, with live musical performances during intervals. Significantly, the inaugural 2021 tournament opened with a women's match between the Oval Invincibles and Manchester Originals, where over 7000 spectators attended (Burley, 2021). Moreover, while in 2021 it was customary for the men's contests to 'headline' match-days, by being played during the more lucrative 6–9 p.m. slot, in 2022 the running order was sometimes flipped to promote the spectacle of the women's tournament (Fletcher et al., 2024). Prize money (£300,000) was also the same for both the men's and women's tournaments. However, the salary discrepancies were heavily criticised: in the first year, the highest-paid female players received only £1250 more than the lowest-paid male players (Roller, 2021). Salaries for the 2022 tournaments were increased by 25%. Advocates of the women's game especially welcomed this, though clearly, a significant gender pay gap persisted. Due to financial pressures brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, and

the ensuing cost of living crisis in the UK, salaries were frozen for the 2023 iteration (Morshead, 2022). In January 2024, the ECB announced further investment in the Women's Hundred, which will increase pay across all seven salary bands. The top salary band will increase from £31,250 to £50,000. Pay for the men's tournament was frozen, yet remains significantly higher (Sky Sports, 2024).

The first year of The Hundred was successful both in terms of reaching a new audience for cricket and building a new fanbase for women's cricket. Over half (55%) of tickets were bought by people who had never purchased one before (ECB, 2022). In contrast, with cricket's existing skew towards a male, older audience, The Hundred appears to have attracted more diverse, younger crowds, in that 19% of ticket-holders were children; 21% of ticket-buyers were women; and 36% of ticket-buyers were families. This was also the case with TV audiences. Of the 16.1 million people who watched the first year of The Hundred on television, 57% had not watched any other live cricket in 2021. The crowds for the women's matches were particularly successful. In total, 267,000 people attended – a global record for a women's cricket competition; outperforming the 2020 Women's T20 World Cup in Australia. Average attendance at women's matches was 7500, while the final at Lord's attracted a crowd of 17,116 – the highest crowd ever recorded, anywhere in the world, for a domestic women's cricket match. The men's and women's finals drew respective TV audiences of 2.4 million and 1.4 million, while the tournament's opening match was the most watched women's cricket match (across both international and domestic) in the UK on record. While TV viewers declined by around 20% to 14.2 million the following year, The Hundred continued to take cricket to new audiences, with more women (28%), children (22%), and families (41%) attending than in 2021 (ECB, 2022).

The second instalment also set a new global record for total attendance at a women's cricket competition, record crowds at every venue, and the domestic attendance record broken twice (Nicholson et al., 2023). Of the Sky and BBC TV audience, 42% had not watched any other ECB cricket events in 2022 before The Hundred, resulting in 5.9 million new viewers. Women (31%) and children (14%) made up a significant share of this TV audience. In this sense, the production of The Hundred was professional and women's cricketers experienced playing in a professional league. However, this does not necessarily mean that their experiences were equal to those of their male counterparts. In what follows, we utilise qualitative interview data to explore the professionalisation of the women's game as gendered within the context of The Hundred, assessing how the impact of The Hundred, for women's cricket, differs from its impact on the men's game.

Methods

This article emerges from a larger data set, generated in response to a broader aim, which was to explore the potential role and influence of The Hundred on cricket in England. To address this wider aim, it was important to engage with as many different stakeholders and audiences of cricket as possible. To that end, 33 people were interviewed, consisting variously of:

- A former England international player (male);
- Three current players who participated in The Hundred (x2 female, x1 male);

- Two former Presidents of the MCC;
- Two former senior officials for the ECB;
- Two senior leaders of County Clubs;
- Two Regional Performance Directors of women's cricket;
- Two Cricket Development Officers;
- Current member of The Hundred's marketing team;
- Three current cricket broadcasters/journalists/cricket writers;
- Head of Commercial Partnerships at a major cricket venue;
- Stadium Managers for three County Clubs;
- Former ICC Media and Communications Officer;
- Two former England Team Managers (men's);
- Former England Team Liaison Officer (men's);
- Two Event Managers at major cricket venues;
- Two Hospitality Managers at major cricket venues; and
- Three female fans.

Each interviewee was interviewed once. Given the focus of our article, the gender mix of participants is important. Of the 33, 25 were men and eight were women. While all participants were involved in women's cricket in some way – for example stadium, event and hospitality managers split their time between men's and women's cricket – 11 were employed full-time within the women's game. This ratio is consistent across the game with, as we discuss later in the article, men continuing to occupy powerful roles in the women's game, though not necessarily vice versa.

All interviewees were recruited and interviewed by Fletcher. Fletcher identifies as a White, heterosexual, non-disabled, cis-man. As a well-established cricket researcher, player and enthusiast, Fletcher could be considered an 'insider' – privy to the nuances of the sport and The Hundred (Fletcher, 2014). As a wider advocate for equity in the sport, he is trusted within the cricket community, which helped the recruitment process. Interviewees were recruited through a combination of, initially purposive, followed by snowball sampling. He has accumulated a significant network within the sport, some of whom agreed to be interviewed. Where relevant, social media – principally Twitter and LinkedIn – was also utilised to connect with specific individuals who would fill emerging knowledge gaps. A further snowball sampling technique was applied for three reasons. Firstly, to empower participants to shape the research via the inclusion of those voices interviewees believed should be heard; secondly, to ensure the sample did not simply reflect existing professional networks; and thirdly, given the lack of available data documenting The Hundred, snowball sampling was key in ensuring that a meaningful and representative sample of voices was gathered.

Ethical approval for this project was granted via Leeds Beckett University in July 2019, and data were collected between 2019 and 2022. This longitudinal approach ensured that our data captured the views of participants who were anticipating the first season of The Hundred, were able to reflect on the first season, and were planning for the 2022 event. Interviews addressing pre-The Hundred were concerned with broader questions about the ever-shortening of cricket formats, and whether there was space within cricket's portfolio for The Hundred. Interviews conducted after the first season of The

Hundred reflected on initial responses to the competition, principally whether its innovations had been successful, as well as anticipating what the competition's social and participatory impacts could be. Interviews that took place in the lead up to the second iteration of the competition in 2022 were slightly different again, taking on a more gendered focus; specifically looking to the potential impact of the Women's Hundred on women's cricket. During the research period, we have also crossed the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews ($n = 21$) conducted before the pandemic were undertaken face-to-face. The remaining interviews ($n = 12$) were conducted over Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or WhatsApp. Interviews lasted between 20 and 76 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis to identify key themes.

Velija and Nicholson were recruited during the analysis phase once it had become clear that there were some prominent issues pertaining to gender equality that had not necessarily been anticipated during the early phase of interviewing. Both identify as White, heterosexual, non-disabled, cis-women, and are experts in historical and sociological debates surrounding women's cricket. As a result, collectively, the team was expertly positioned to unpack the nuances within the interview data. Analysis followed an iterative thematic approach which used gender and professionalisation as a guiding analytical framework. A six-phase model of thematic analysis, as described by Braun et al. (2016), was used to analyse the data. All interviews were read through several times by all authors. Initially, we were concerned with identifying all interesting and potentially relevant themes. Next, initial codes were generated through systematically coding the entire dataset and subsequently organising codes into themes. These were reviewed by all authors to ensure they were a good reflection of the larger dataset. Our goal was to ensure that no single interview dominated the narrative; rather we sought to ensure that themes were representative across the sample. Once all data were coded, the themes were revisited for coherency, refined and operational definitions developed to describe each theme. The analysis identified three over-arching themes related to The Hundred and the professionalisation and equalisation of gender relations in the game, namely: (a) the importance of being visible; (b) investment and resourcing; and (c) questions over the future separation of the Women's competition.

Findings

The importance of being visible

We know from evidence that there is a media flurry during major events, such as Cricket World Cups or, indeed The Hundred, but the day-to-day coverage of women's cricket remains far less than the men's (Leflay and Biscomb, 2021). This was discussed amongst our respondents, who expressed a widely held view that enhanced media coverage of women's cricket would facilitate greater levels of external investment through sponsorship and commercial opportunities, thus helping to professionalise the game. To re-emphasise, every women's match of The Hundred is televised on Sky, with eight free-to-air on the BBC. According to this female player in The Hundred, the visibility of the women's tournament is positive:

I think the fact that it is on free-to-air TV will hopefully bring new viewers to the game. (2022)

Similarly, this Cricket Development Officer reflected how:

It (visibility) will bring in more money to the game, it will bring in more TV viewership. When you see the game, we (women) opened The Hundred live at the Oval, on BBC One, you think “phenomenal”, a Friday evening on BBC One (sic).¹ You couldn’t even dream of that five or six years ago. (2022)

The same interviewee went on to reflect on the positive contribution The Hundred was making to the profile of women cricketers, not just to other women and girls, but to boys and men too:

It (The Hundred) was so instrumental in raising the profile of the women’s game and then also raising their profile. That other girls and women around the country can watch, and boys can watch the women’s game is so, so important for the women’s game. The Hundred has to be looked after by broadcasters. (2022)

While men’s domestic cricket has been televised for years (if not always on free-to-air), The Hundred is the first domestic women’s cricket to feature regularly on UK television, making this element of the tournament particularly significant for women’s cricket. Currently, the joint deal negotiated by the ECB means the women’s games cannot be ignored by broadcasters. On the other hand, even in the light of their comments about the positive experience of The Hundred, this Development Officer emphasises that the tournament remains at the mercy of future broadcasting plans – ‘The Hundred has to be looked after by broadcasters’ (2022). This highlights the precarious nature of the gains made for women’s cricket in the first two years of The Hundred.

In addition to being exposed to heightened media attention through televising The Hundred in its entirety, another significant outcome of the event is that the women are competing in front of much larger crowds than in any other domestic tournament. This female player in The Hundred reflected on the speed of development experienced by those within the women’s game:

It was so different; an unbelievably different experience to what I’ve experienced before ... To have that sort of exposure and to be on the level with the crowds and media, it was crazy different and something I didn’t imagine I would experience for another couple of years. (2022)

For this male, former England player, the pressure and scrutiny attached to competing in front of large crowds are essential to the professionalisation of the women’s game:

When it comes to playing in front of large crowds, it adds different pressures which you can only learn about once you have done it. I feel that will also help the women’s national team identify some very good players and know they can handle the big pressure of international cricket. (2020)

Another female player in The Hundred believed that early exposure to crowds was essential to aspiring international players:

The games being on TV, the crowds, the scrutiny that comes with it. The competition is huge, and it will be massive for players wanting to play international cricket ... We had a few of the international girls saying that they had not played in front of crowds like this in a long time, so it was a really good feeling for them as well. (2022)

The joint scheduling, whereby both women's and men's matches are played on the same day, was regularly described as being positive for the exposure of women's cricket to larger audiences, who may not have seen women's cricket before. This gave the players and fans an experience of a more professional and mediatised sport setting, and arguably generated more acceptance of the women's game. This female player in *The Hundred* reflected on changing patterns of spectator influence in watching women's cricket:

A lot of people do watch both matches. But, also, a lot of people came early to watch the women, *or just to watch the women*. I think, early on, people came for the men and happened to catch a bit of the women too. By the end though, more and more people were coming early because they wanted to watch us. After all, it's enjoyable to watch the women. The structure of *The Hundred* definitely benefitted us. (2022, *original emphasis*)

This accords with what Nicholson et al. (2023) found in their survey of fans who attended the first year of *The Hundred*, whereby 49% of male and 40% of female respondents said that the tournament had changed their view of women's cricket; with many stating they now preferred the women's competition to the men's (pp. 26–27). Placing the women's teams on a more level playing field with the men, by having them play at the same grounds, on the same day, under the same team brands, has helped promote the visibility of the women's game.

Within this context, the growing mediatisation and commercialisation of the women's game was considered a powerful opportunity to further facilitate professionalisation by increasing the number of contracts available. As this Performance Director of women's cricket said:

I think the more women are in the media, the more money people will want to put towards it to professionalise it. So, we'll have a boost and gain more contracts, more quickly for the women. That exposure, and people thinking they can become more professional, will help players get better. The standard of play will be better, and people will want to come and watch. That will increase the number of professional contracts on offer. (2020)

As we discuss in the next section, to further promote professionalisation, there has also been an increase in staffing salaries and capacity. Notwithstanding these gains, as we highlighted earlier, a series of significant financial, human and infrastructural inequalities exist across the national game, and serve to slow the pace of development and professionalisation of the women's game. In the case of this research, while acknowledging these wider inequalities, participants were keen to highlight the positive contributions *The Hundred* had made to the professionalisation of women's cricket.

Investment and resourcing

When referring to ‘professional’ sport and the ‘professionalisation’ of women’s cricket, there is a risk of conflating these with contracts, salaries and economics alone (Bowes and Culvin, 2021). While some elite female cricketers are professional, in the strictest sense of the term, the vast majority remain semi-professional and, therefore, precarious. Increasing the number of professional contracts available to female cricketers, as well as the value of these contracts is clearly essential (Thomson et al., 2023; Marshall et al., 2022). However, to fully professionalise women’s cricket, it is necessary to look beyond the purely monetary aspects. This Operations Executive (men’s and women’s), for instance, referred to the positive influence he had seen in the women’s game as a result of combined financial, human and infrastructural investment:

These are good athletes, good cricketers, but equally, it shows that the last year and a half now, we have given people a professional set-up. Before that, they were not training much over winter, barely during the season and thrown onto a field where you’re thinking, “come on, I hope this is good”. Whereas now, they have great coaches in and around them. These coaches are focusing on them. So, they have a full winter of getting better; being professional players. (2021)

Indeed, it was widely believed that the status of female players – that is, within the Club environment and, specifically, with men – is improving:

They (men and women) are treated the same. If you’re at a five-star hotel in London or at [venue name] here, the men and women are treated the same – just a cricketer. The prize money is the same, which is very, very good. (Regional Performance Director of Women’s cricket, 2020)

Again, we see here that The Hundred has advanced progress towards gender equity in cricket via the important step of providing equal prize money and facilities for male and female players (Pavlidis, 2020; Thomson et al., 2023). Working conditions are one of the three key markers of professionalisation identified by Bowes and Culvin (2021) and the suggestion by these interviewees is that The Hundred has facilitated an advance in this aspect of the process.

However, although prize money for The Hundred is equal between the men and women, the salaries of women fall far below those of the men, a state of affairs that has been well-publicised and critiqued (Fletcher et al., 2024). For participants in this study, the pay gap between male and female players was a significant elephant in the room; widely acknowledged, but never truly unpacked. This Regional Performance Director of Women’s Cricket, for instance, was confident that salaries in The Hundred would continue to rise alongside the quality of competition and number of sponsors. He would not, however, be drawn on whether salaries would rise to the levels received by men any time soon:

With regard to (equal) pay, it’s a tough one. The positive thing is, it’s going in the right direction. Last year (2021) it was a big old gap, this time round (2022) it’s double, which is fantastic. The Head of the competition for women said it is not where we want it to be yet, but they will obviously never use a numerical figure yet. But it needs to keep increasing and we will see it keep increasing when the product is so good. The sponsors will keep pushing that and we will keep getting closer (to equal

pay). We must remember as well, I understand, without definitive evidence, that the top band of women's cricket is the biggest in the world.² It is now the world's market leader, and it's year two ... It (The Hundred) will be better next year; the games will be closer, and the money will keep improving. I cannot put a figure on it, but I am confident it will keep going up and up. (2022)

This article is about the professionalisation of women's cricket and, as advocates for equality and social justice, we find it difficult to commend approaches to salaries in The Hundred when they continue to marginalise women. Women feeling grateful for opportunities to be paid in sport, even if unequal to men in the same sport is a strategy Pavlidis (2020) highlights amongst AFL players. Players described the importance of not being seen to be negative about conditions of pay, and explained that players consider themselves lucky for the opportunity to play, even if not paid. This discourse of gratitude ignores inequitable pay and conditions (Bowes and Culvin, 2021).

The Hundred is only a 4-week competition. There is no requirement for female players outside of the tournament to possess full-time paid contracts with their regions and thus they are not, strictly speaking, professionals. Within this context, if we exclude England and overseas players, The Hundred is providing much higher salaries than many players are currently receiving. This player spoke about how the salary she receives from The Hundred had moved her closer to being a professional player:

Not all of the women are on professional contracts. A third of the team aren't being paid to play their regional stuff. So, all they get is money from The Hundred. So, to have that allows women to feel more comfortable to take four weeks off work or whatever it is. It allows women to see where their future in cricket could go. Like, for me, I'm not contracted as part of the (regional team) so, for me, the money I get paid in The Hundred means I can afford to live on a part-time job and that allows me to play cricket a lot more. It's the same for a lot of the other girls as well. Like me, they're thinking, "I may get contracted in the next few years, so how can I sustain playing cricket?" (2022)

Despite concerns about ongoing pay inequities, The Hundred can therefore, be seen to have advanced the first of Bowes and Culvin's (2021) markers of professionalisation, namely financial remuneration. The ICEC is calling for equal pay to be introduced in The Hundred by 2025, as well as overall equal pay at the domestic level by 2029, and at the international level by 2030. There will be substantial pressure on the ECB to accept these recommendations and, if not, to explain why continued inequities in the professionalisation of the women's and men's games remain in place. The Hundred is therefore, likely to serve as a continued vehicle for advancing this aspect of professionalisation. However, there is a caveat. Given the relative lack of money in the women's regional game, many players continue to work part-, sometimes full-time, in 'regular', non-sport jobs. This significantly reduces the amount of time they can invest in training and playing. Moreover, as these players are employed in jobs unrelated to cricket, they are not automatically afforded the right to take time off to pursue their playing careers. This contributes to work precarity for women cricketers, both within and outside of cricket (Rubery *et al.*, 2018).

So far, we have suggested that enhanced media coverage and exposure of the Women's Hundred can (and should) contribute to the further professionalisation of women's cricket through encouraging investment by lucrative sponsors, which allow teams to offer more

player contracts – both in number and value – and to employ more professional coaches, while providing access to better facilities and resources. Against this backdrop, and continuing this discussion, some participants cautioned about how this more professional culture and environment would inevitably encourage greater expectations for, and scrutiny of, the women’s game. This Regional Performance Director of Women’s Cricket said that a culture change was already apparent between years one and two of the competition. Given the success of the first iteration, it was felt that The Hundred was bringing about a more high-performance culture. This was presented in contrast to a developmental culture that has traditionally existed in the women’s regional game:

It is a performance competition and will become more cutthroat. Ultimately, every team wants to win it. It’s not about development, it’s about winning. And being paid good figures now, it’s a different culture and feeling to the regional set-up.

Interviewer: It’s not about development?

No, it’s about people being paid handsome sums, players and coaching staff. And if you do not perform, why would we sign you next year? The regional model, they’re local players, and even after a ropey year, we’ll coach you and develop you to be a better player, and in a couple of years you may be a superstar, or fulfil your potential. It is about helping players, whereas The Hundred is about performance. (2022)

This shift towards a high-performance and more professional culture facilitated further conversations about the longevity of the Women’s Hundred. As we have discussed already, male and female teams compete on the same day and at the same venue. It is widely suggested that this format has made a positive contribution to spectator numbers at women’s matches, but equally, there is strong evidence to suggest that a good number of spectators only attend women’s matches (Nicholson et al., 2023). Therefore, we were keen to explore with participants whether the Women’s Hundred could exist separately.

Separate competitions?

With improved investment and professionalism comes higher expectations on the quality of performances, and the overall product of The Hundred. All our participants believed that the current, multi-match format had been successful in the short term. As these fans said:

I think running the women’s version concurrently is a great idea and hopefully, this increases cricket’s popularity with women. (Female fan, 2021)

I like the double header aspect, giving the women’s game an equal platform. (Female fan, 2021)

However, there was a widely held view that the long-term ambition should be for the male and female competitions to be separate. While he was at pains to say so, this Operations Executive did not believe the women’s competition was currently developed enough to justify being hosted separately:

I think there is always an argument around going alone, but the product needs to be good enough to bring in crowds. You can't hold it back obviously, but you need to be able to have showpiece matches. (2021)

He went on to say that any move towards separation would be resisted by some because 'you always have your critics who are a bit backward thinking'. There is a suggestion here by the interviewee that there are still people occupying positions of authority within English cricket, including those working within The Hundred, who still hold conservative notions regarding the appropriate place of women's cricket in relation to the men's game. This may well contribute to the sense of precarity felt by female players.

For participants in this study, separate competitions was considered inevitable; it was a case of making the change at the right time – for both women and men. Indeed, currently, there was a feeling that the multi-match format was working well and therefore, further innovation was unnecessary. As this female player reflected:

A lot of people were saying that if we do go separately from the men next year, we won't have built up enough of a profile or people coming to watch, where they'll come and just watch us. Whereas, if it stays this way again, we will have the crowds, and interest. (2021)

Similarly, this Director of Women's Cricket spoke about how, in the short-term, the women's competition would benefit more through leveraging interest in the men's competition than it would through being hosted separately:

Currently, you're always in the shadow of the men so I think there is space for that discussion of whether you are better to go it alone ... But there is no shame in staying together. The men's tournament is a beast, tag along with it. (2021)

In contrast, acknowledging criticism towards the sustainability of the men's competition, for other participants, there was a feeling that The Hundred should only be maintained for the women. This excerpt from a male cricket writer was indicative, whereby they acknowledged the vital contribution The Hundred was making to the women's game, but was more sceptical about its longevity for the men:

I don't like it personally, but I can and do acknowledge that it has been good for women's cricket. It's raised its profile no end. I think The Hundred will be here for the remainder of the TV deal – so until 2024. If I was in charge, I would then get rid of it for men and keep it for women. (2021)

This view is most commonly expressed by (male) sceptics of The Hundred (see e.g. Hashim, 2023; Turberville, 2023). While there is no reason why the women's game should have to mimic the men's game, the argument is also problematic because it suggests a continued power imbalance between the men's and women's games: the implication is that female players should be happy to continue to play an unpopular format of the game, considered 'lesser' by some writers and fans. This view also ignores the gender relations within

cricket which have meant women's cricketers have, throughout history, had fewer opportunities to be professional in all other formats of the game (Velija, 2015; Nicholson, 2019).

Conclusion

The professionalisation of women's cricket in England and Wales is far from complete and if we adopt three of the markers of professionalisation in women's sport described by Bowes and Culvin (2021: 8–10) – (a) financial remuneration of athletes; (b) appropriate protections and working conditions; and (c) a formalised administration and structure – then it is evident that there is still some distance to travel. On the latter point, there was a clear break when the ECB took over in 1998 from the amateur, volunteer-driven approach of the WCA to a more business-like approach. There are now almost 100 female professional cricketers in England and Wales, aligned to the new eight-team regional structure introduced in 2020. However, at the time of writing, there remain a significant number of regional players who do not possess full-time contracts. This no doubt contributes to the disappointing lack of ethnic and social class diversity seen within women's cricket: Sophia Dunkley and Issy Wong are currently the only centrally contracted ethnically diverse players in the women's game, while the ICEC (2023) correctly observe that the women's game is also disproportionately reliant on the private school system to produce elite players. The continued middle-class whiteness of women's cricket is a subject well worthy of future research (Fletcher et al., 2021).

This article highlights how women in cricket have differing experiences of professionalisation to men, and specifically, the ways a professional league like The Hundred impacts differently on the men's and women's game. Currently, the new women's regions sit in a strange nexus; somewhere between independence and interdependence. While nominally separate entities, they are expected to function on shoestring budgets, and are therefore, reliant on the men's First-Class Counties to assist with their day-to-day operations. By contrast, as our findings highlight, The Hundred has provided a revolutionary break from established gender relations in cricket, advancing professional opportunities for female cricketers, and increasing the visibility of the women's game. The historical context presented at the start of this article established just how radical a break The Hundred is with the preceding two centuries of English cricket history.

What role then, if any, can The Hundred play in the further professionalisation of women's cricket? The obvious answer is in its role as a showcase competition. Bowes and Culvin (2021) highlight the crucial role of the media in giving legitimacy to, and expanding the fanbase of, women's sports, as a route to increased professionalism. Our findings point to the importance of free-to-air coverage of The Hundred on the BBC, and of the broadcasting of every single women's match on Sky, in heightening the profile of the women's game. As a competition, The Hundred has created a mass of new fans for women's cricket who would otherwise never have been exposed to the sport, via the double-header model (Fletcher et al., 2024; Nicholson et al., 2023). The recent huge crowds at the Women's Ashes – the overall series attendance was 110,000 (compared with just 32,000 in the last home Ashes in 2019) – show that these new fans are also cross-pollinating into the international game (Nicholson, 2023c).

Yet the current discourse around The Hundred also contributes to the sense of precarity outlined above. In April 2023 it was widely reported that the tournament could soon be abolished in favour of a Twenty20 competition (Sim, 2023). What this would mean for the women's game was entirely absent from the discussion – a point which underlines the continued normative priority granted to men's cricket by both the media and the ECB. England Captain Heather Knight's own response to the ICEC report was to emphasise the need for sustainable structures in women's cricket 'to give equal opportunity, to give any young girl exactly the same opportunities to be a professional cricketer as a young boy has' (Nicholson, 2023a). The Hundred clearly has a role to play here, but it is by no means a panacea. We cannot, and should not, ignore the fact that the future of the event itself remains relatively uncertain. At present for example, we know very little about the impact of The Hundred on participation and engagement of women and girls. We know even less about the impact of The Hundred beyond the franchise locations. On the other hand, at this critical juncture for English cricket, in the wake of the ICEC's damning report, it makes no sense to abolish the only existing cricket tournament in the world currently predicated on gender equity (Nicholson et al., 2023). The equitable allocation of resources in The Hundred – the women play on the same grounds as the men, on the same day – has been revolutionary in the context of a sport which is historically grounded in institutionalised sexism.

The data presented in this article differ substantially from what Parry et al. (2021) found in the context of the BBL and WBBL in Australia. We argue that The Hundred is contributing to the increased pace of professionalisation across English women's cricket, at least across two of Bowes and Culvin's (2021) key markers. Firstly, while The Hundred has been critiqued for the continued pay disparities between men's and women's players and, more recently, its umpires (Nicholson, 2023b), it has at least forced the media to engage with the concept of equal pay. Arguably, the greater success of the Women's Hundred than the Men's Hundred in terms of its ability to grow audiences and attract the world's best players has also made a good case for equal pay in cricket – not just in moral terms, but in commercial ones.³ Secondly, our data points to improved working conditions for women players, based on the competition's guiding principle described by the ECB of 'one team, two squads, one fanbase' (Nicholson et al., 2023: 8).

The diversity of our interviewees has enabled us to provide a wide-ranging perspective on the ways in which The Hundred has impacted on gender relations within English cricket. However, future studies are needed to understand in more depth the perspectives and experiences of female players in particular. The role and influence of experienced international (domestic and overseas) players on the professionalisation of others is a case in point. The rhetoric of gender equality espoused by the ECB in relation to The Hundred is welcome, but it is after all just one tournament within an entire sporting landscape. The process of professionalisation needs to be understood holistically, and it is for this reason that more player perspectives, from across the entirety of the women's game – both in the UK and elsewhere – are crucial to fully understanding the nature and extent of professionalisation in women's cricket.


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Notes

1. The opening match of The Hundred was actually on a Wednesday (21 July 2021), and was broadcast on BBC Two.
2. Since we completed our research, the Women's Premier League in India has seen its inaugural tournament (2023). Franchises in the tournament invested unprecedented sums into players. For comparison, the highest-paid Indian player, Smriti Mandhana was sold to Royal Challengers Bangalore for £340,000. Her salary in The Hundred, at the time, was the maximum £31,250, only a 10th of her WPL fee. The highest-paid English player, Natalie Sciver-Brunt, was sold to Mumbai Indians for £320,000. Her salary in The Hundred was also £31,250 (Morshead, 2023).
3. At the time of writing, the ECB has equalised match fees for England's men and women's teams, and has committed to further investment in women and girls cricket, at all levels (ECB, 2023).

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