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Understanding the Impact of Professional Football Club Cultural Climates on the Experiences of Women Working in Football

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ABSTRACT

Since the professionalization of English women's football in 2018, it is now considered a viable career opportunity for women footballers. Nevertheless, little is known about women *working* within the culture of professional football clubs, the impact on their career experiences, and crucially, within the context of women's sport. Utilizing Schein's model of organizational culture as a theoretical framework and focusing on the professional tiers of English women's football, we interviewed General Managers and Head Coaches for what they perceive to be the cultural features of their organizations that either constrain or support the recruitment, retention, and/or progression of female leaders. In doing so, this research advances existing literature by centering the specific dynamics of women's sport organizations rather than extrapolating from men's football and offers a gendered critique of cultural assumptions that continue to marginalize women. We also extend Schein's framework by applying it to a gendered sporting context, highlighting how deeper cultural artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions intersect with structural inequalities. Findings suggest that women continue to be appraised on the basis of gender rather than capability and that club cultures and practices are constraining the appointment of a gender-diverse workforce. We argue for a shift in focus toward systemic cultural change to address persistent gender inequalities in football leadership.

1 | Introduction

Within the last decade, women's football has experienced a global expansion, demonstrating exponential growth in professionalization, public interest, commercialization, and mediatization (Culvin 2021; Pope et al. 2024). Formal professional playing opportunities exist most notably in Western countries such as England, the USA, Germany, and Spain and are increasingly growing across the Middle East and Asia (Culvin 2021). The increase in professionalization and popularity can be exemplified through viewership and fan engagement. For the recent women's 2022 European Championship, the tournament was the most-watched edition of the competition, with a global viewership of 365 million. The viewership for the final between England and Germany was more than double that of the 2017 final (UEFA 2022). The 2023 Women's World Cup saw the tournament expand from 24 to 32 teams for the first time in its history. The growth in commercialization and mediatization provides some insight into a "new age" of global interest in women's football, shifting the balance toward improved attitudes and recognition of the value of women's football (Petty and Pope 2019).

This growth is, in part, due to the increase in the professionalization and thus, visibility of football for women. At the time of writing, there were 10 professional leagues for women across

the world (the US, England, Germany, France, Sweden, Australia, Spain, Italy, Japan, and China). Consequently, as the most significant outcome of the professionalization of the sport, football is now considered a viable career opportunity for women as players (Culvin 2019). Nevertheless, previous research evidences that the transition for women to occupy jobs as professional footballers in highly prestigious football labor markets is characterized by its short-term nature, precarity, and uncertainty (Culvin 2019, 2021). Although it is acknowledged that these insecurities similarly exist within men's professional football throughout the pyramid (Roderick 2006), it is at the intersection of gender that precarity compounds. This is often a reflection of a fragile relationship between women's clubs when integrated into existing men's clubs and therefore, associated the financial dependency on men's football (Welford 2018). However, while the careers of professional women footballers have generally benefitted from the involvement of men and men's clubs in terms of investment, facilities, and commercialization, research continues to demonstrate that the (men's) footballing workplace itself is a difficult and discriminatory one for women (e.g., Clarkson et al. 2019; Fasting et al. 2019; Knoppers et al. 2021; Norman et al. 2018). Women's football remains an under-explored site for the implications of integrated sports on those women who work within such environments (Welford 2018).

As Goldblatt (2015) describes, women's increased participation and visibility in football has reached every sphere of the sport (e.g., as fans and as players) except the boardroom or manager's office. Professional football remains strongly resistant to what it perceives as women's intrusion in roles of power and decision-making (Goldblatt 2015). The lack of women in sports leadership is magnified when male-dominated sports organizations are considered. Male-led organizations are those reflecting the more traditional workplace, one created and maintained by men since the institutionalization of organized sport (Acker 2006). Relative to their male counterparts working in professional sport more broadly, women are more likely to experience isolation due to their underrepresentation, earn less than men even when performing similar roles, experience gender-based stereotypes and prejudices that impact the perception and acceptance of women, limited career progression, fewer opportunities to advance, discrimination and harassment, and invisibility (e.g., in the media), which contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes (Fasting et al. 2019; Knoppers et al. 2021; Coates and Webber 2023; Schlesinger et al. 2021; Didymus et al. 2020). These experiences are reported across sports, including football. In this way, Cunningham (2008) argues that gender inequality is an institutionalized practice across sports and organizations. Not only are women underrepresented but they are also marginalized. This has been a persistent issue that, due to its longstanding and embedded nature, has become legitimized (Cunningham 2008).

However, this large of body of research documenting women's lived and poor experiences of working in sport, including football, are drawn from *men's* or *male-led* sports organizations. As women's football enjoys rapid growth, more is needed to understand this context and specifically, whether this presents a different and more inclusive working environment and a possible cultural shift for female leaders or are the cultures of

men's clubs and male-led organizations enacted within women's contexts such as an integrated women's club? For example, less is known about what systemic and cultural practices impact women's attempts to navigate the football workplace even working in *women's* clubs or how career pathways become gendered at a professional level of working in sport. Misogyny is well documented in instances of women working in male-led sports organizations, but this may not be the case for women-led organizations and therefore, the present study unveils the potential for understanding alternative leadership models, workplace cultures, and organizational practices when women are *not* in the minority and are in positions of leadership. Do these environments present opportunities to redefine and showcase what gender-inclusive workplaces could look like in sport when women are more visible and represented in leadership or does the fragility of the integration of men and women's club and associated financial implications pose different challenges for women working in these spaces? Women-led football clubs are not necessarily merely smaller-scale versions of their male counterparts but operate with distinct values, goals, and constraints (Welford 2018). This has been built through a different path to professionalization than men's football and is a journey that has had a strong emphasis on proving legitimacy and social contributions (Isard et al. 2024). Nevertheless, the small body of work that has examined women's sports organizations has found that women can still be subject to expectations of lower competencies even when job titles and numerical representation are balanced as well as other tensions and challenges for employees of women's sports attempting to navigate such environments that are not supportive of the presence of a women's team (Allison 2016; Isard et al. 2024). The framing and analysis of women's football workplaces, given the sport's global and cultural popularity, is important for our broader understanding of the roles and work experiences of women working in sport and women's sports, which provides the focus of the present study. Researching these spaces provides critical insights into how women working in leadership or operational roles navigate the intersections of gender, sport, and professional identity in an environment shaped by shared experiences of marginalization and resilience. In particular, we seek to contribute to the limited body of scholarship that has explored women-led sport organizations as distinctive cultural environments, addressing calls to better understand how the gendered dynamics of leadership and workplace culture unfold in female-majority or integrated settings. By focusing on women's football clubs post-professionalization, this study extends current literature that has predominantly centered male-dominated or men's sport organizations.

Previous research in this subject area has largely ignored contextual considerations for how such cultural settings, such as whether the organization is male or female-led, shape women's experiences and trajectories. Recent research has begun to acknowledge the importance of the wider systemic and cultural conditions that scaffold the exclusion of women in football (e.g., Norman et al. 2018). For this reason, the present study case-studied women working in England's women's professional football leagues, the Women's Super League (WSL) and Championship, to examine the culture of women's elite football clubs since professionalization in 2018.

Women's football in England has evolved rapidly since the inception of the FA WSL in 2011. Initially formed as a summer league, the FA WSL has seen four iterations before fully professionalizing in 2018 (Culvin 2021). With the professionalization of women's football having a significant impact for female players, it is still not known how this has impacted the opportunities and viability for women to work professionally in women's football. Specifically, the purpose was to understand how such professionalization has influenced the belief and value systems and the subsequent club practices toward either enabling or constraining the appointment of women, and the subsequent impact on the women themselves. In doing so, we utilize and also build on Schein's (2010) model of organizational culture, applying it in a new context—women's professional sport, to explore how cultural artifacts, values, and assumptions shape gendered patterns of leadership. This theoretical framing allows us to examine not just surface-level practices but also the deeper, often unspoken norms that influence inclusion and exclusion within these evolving organizational environments.

2 | Theoretical Framework

To access and understand the belief and value systems that exist within women's football clubs—that is, to interrogate constituents of their culture—we adopted Schein's theory of organizational culture. It is the most accepted framework in business management for uncovering the levels of workplace culture but has yet to be utilized extensively in sport management to address gender equity as related to women in sports leadership (Norman et al. 2018). Schein's (2004) theory is a three-tiered integrative model of organizational culture consisting of artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. First, at the highest level of Schein's model are artifacts—the cultural and often tangible phenomena of an organization that one sees, hears, and feels when encountering a workplace culture (Schein 2016). Artifacts can also include structural elements (e.g., organizational charts) and organizational processes by which behaviors are made routine (Schein 2016). These symbols are easier to identify but often present only a part, or even a misleading view, of an organization (Schein 2016).

At the second level of Schein's model are espoused values. Espoused values are an organization's articulated social principles, norms, standards, and goals that the group claims to be striving toward, such as strategies, mission statements, visions, or philosophies (Junggren et al. 2018; Schein 2016). However, although these values may be what an organization reports to be working toward, the core of organizational culture is made up of its basic assumptions—a "mental map," which guides individual perceptions, feelings, and actions within a culture (Schein 2016, 29). It is at this third level, beneath what is seen, heard, felt, or espoused, that organizational culture can be captured and accessed.

We adopted Schein's conceptualization of organizational culture for an examination of women's football club cultures and the impact of women working in such environment for several important reasons. Schein's theory of organizational culture provides a robust and fitting framework because of its emphasis on the interplay between deeply embedded cultural assumptions, visible artifacts, and shared values. Women's football clubs often represent unique organizational environments where gender equity and inclusivity are more central to their mission and operations compared to traditional, male-dominated sports institutions. Schein's model enables a layered exploration of these environments, examining how shared values and unspoken assumptions about gender, leadership, and sport influence the lived experiences of those women working in such clubs. By unpacking the cultural artifacts, espoused beliefs, and underlying assumptions within women-led football clubs, this theory can reveal how culture shapes workplace dynamics, professional identity, and organizational practices in a space consciously designed to challenge the traditional norms of men's football. Schein's model is unique for how it distinguishes between different layers of culture (artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions) (Homburg and Pflesser 2000). Previous theories have not made such distinctions. Yet, it is crucial to examine such differences and interrelationships to understand how features of an organization may or may not align with each other (Homburg and Pflesser 2000), a point crucial within the context of football and the integration of men and women's teams as part of the same club.

The application of Schein's framework is particularly justified in this context because of its ability to illuminate how culture evolves and is reinforced or contested over time. Women's football clubs often operate within a broader societal landscape that still grapples with gender inequities in sports, meaning that these organizations may simultaneously reflect progressive ideals while also contending with external pressures and inherited cultural norms. By using Schein's multi-level approach, we can examine not only the surface manifestations of culture (e.g., rituals, symbols, and organizational structures) but also the deeper assumptions that underpin them, such as the role of collaboration, and the redefinition of success in sport. This focus aligns closely with the objectives of examining women's lived experiences, providing a comprehensive lens to understand how organizational culture in these settings uniquely empowers or constrains women's contributions, career progression, and sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, due to the underdevelopment of Schein's theory within sporting literature, there is concern about how easily one can identify the basic assumptions of a workplace. Some scholars argue that organizational culture is more dynamic than Schein portrays, and because of this, it is not always so clearly comprehensible or integrative (Raz and Fadlon 2006). However, the strength of the model has been shown in its accuracy regarding the salience of underlying beliefs and values in organizational performance outcomes (Hogan and Coote 2014). In one previous study that used Schein's theory to scrutinize organizational culture and its impact on women's experiences as sport leaders (in this case, as head coaches), the focus was on the relationship between two of the three tiers of Schein's model—how the espoused values of a sport governing body aligned with their basic assumptions, and how this interrelationship impacted the lived experiences of women within that organization (Norman et al. 2018).

In the present study, our attention is primarily focused on the third level of Schein's model, analyzing women's football club cultures to understand what has changed since the professionalization of women's football in 2018. This was the value of using Schein's model, that we could access the deeper assumptions that drive behaviors within organizations. Specifically, we accessed women's club culture through an analysis of belief systems and assumptions within such organizations toward men's and women's capabilities as coaches and, in some cases, as General Managers. We then sought to understand how these assumptions manifested in such club practices. Finally, we examined how this culture helped or hindered women's careers in and experiences of working professionally in women's football. In doing so, we contribute to the literature by empirically grounding debates on organizational culture within the underresearched context of professional women's sport, where gendered assumptions are often embedded in newly formalized structures. Additionally, this study extends Schein's framework by illustrating how his tripartite model, particularly the level of basic underlying assumptions, can be employed to expose and critique the gendered power relations within sports organizations. Rather than treating culture as static or neutral, we highlight how Schein's model can be mobilized to interrogate how cultures actively maintain or challenge gender inequality.

In summary, the purpose of the study was to understand how women's football club cultures (conceptualized as belief systems and assumptions) and practices supported or hindered women's careers since the professionalization of English women's football in 2018. For this study, we understood gender not as a case of fixed categories of people or personal characteristics. Instead, we adopted the position that gender is a "pattern of social relations in which the positions of women and men are defined, the cultural meanings of being a man and a woman are negotiated, and their trajectories through life are mapped out" (Connell 2006, 839).

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Design

Organizational culture, defined for the purpose of this research as "the collective sum of beliefs, values, meanings, and assumptions that are shared by a social group and that help to shape the ways in which they respond to each other and to their external environment" (Ogbonna and Harris 2002, 34), cannot be "measured" (Schein 2016). Therefore, the present study is grounded in a pluralist perspective, recognizing the existence within organizations of diverse subcultures (Willcoxson and Millett 2000). A qualitative research design was adopted to capture deeper levels of organizational (football club) culture through a revelation of basic assumptions. In this way, conversations with club employees were essential. The level at which culture manifests itself is understood at a much deeper level within Schein's framework than alternative cultural models. In other theories and models, the focus on culture tends to center on the visible or tangible manifestations of culture. Instead, we shared Schein's criticism of such conceptions for failing to answer "why" these manifestations exist and for the

superficial analysis of culture. What is often missing in other theories or models is an assessment of beliefs and values within an organization. Capturing these will provide evidence of the basic underlying assumptions of a culture. To elicit these deeper insights, Schein (2016) recommends conversing with key representatives of an organization or workplace, both those on the "inside" (e.g., football club employees) and those on the periphery of decision-making (e.g., [women] coaches).

3.2 | Sampling and Participants

For the present study, we aspired to add to the burgeoning literature that has focused on female leaders and their experiences by including an organizational and cultural lens to the issue, within a specific context (elite English women's club football). We wanted to add to the sole focus on women's experiences told through their own stories (as valid as they are) to understand gender within a greater contextual lens. To do this, it was important to include the voices of the coaches or General Managers as organizational (club) representatives. We sought the participation of a sample of Head Coaches (HCs) from the top two tiers of English women's football: the Women's Super League (WSL) and the Women's Championship (WC). Head Coaches represent the "front line" of football clubs given both their input into organizational decision-making as well as their primary role of developing the players and first team. In addition, we also included the viewpoints of a sample of General Managers (GMs) from the two leagues whose role it is to oversee the management of the women's first team at their respective clubs, including its personnel, operations, and professional day-to-day management. We included men and women deliberately to ensure a conversation about gender equity and not to perpetuate the idea that gender = women.

The Football Association (FA), as the research funder, facilitated access to clubs by identifying 16 of the 23 eligible clubs as appropriate for approach (seven clubs were excluded due to recent staffing changes). The research team directly contacted these 16 clubs, inviting participation from their GMs and HCs. Of these, nine clubs agreed to participate—representing over half (56%) of the clubs offered by the FA and a substantial response rate within the context of elite sport research, where access is tightly controlled, gatekeeping is common, and organizational sensitivities often limit engagement. This strong participation underscores the robustness of the sample given the challenges of research access in elite-level football, where confidentiality, time constraints, and operational complexity often pose significant barriers.

Importantly, the sample was not intended to reflect the culture of the entire WSL or WC leagues, but rather the women's arm of the specific clubs involved, situated within their own organizational and operating contexts. The study successfully secured participation from all General Managers at the nine clubs and five Head Coaches, ensuring the inclusion of individuals with strategic and operational insight central to the research focus. These voices are not only rarely accessed in sport research but are uniquely positioned to offer first-hand accounts of club culture, recruitment practices, and leadership dynamics.

Although modest in size, the sample provided thematic saturation, with later interviews confirming rather than extending the conceptual categories developed in earlier phases. In qualitative research, especially within elite sport settings, depth of understanding and contextually rich data take precedence over breadth, and the recurrence of themes across this sample supports the sufficiency of the data collected. Moreover, the study contributed valuable exploratory insights into a significantly under-researched area and lays the groundwork for future, broader investigations. To address concerns around selection bias, it is important to clarify that participation was determined at the club level, not based on individual characteristics or preexisting interest in the research topic. The sample included both WSL and WC clubs and a variety of organizational models (e.g., independent and integrated), supporting diversity in the perspectives captured. Although non-participating clubs may differ in some ways, there is no evidence of systematic exclusion that would undermine the credibility of the findings. On the contrary, the voices presented here offer a rare window into organizational practices that are typically opaque within professional (women's) football.

Recruitment was facilitated through the research funder who provided contact details of 16 GMs from the two leagues in question (the WSL and WC). The research team then directly contacted the GMs to share an outline of the study and invite their participation and the participation of their GMs and HCs. Head Coaches and General Managers were asked to contact the research team directly if they wished to be included, to protect confidentiality and anonymity. In total, of the 16 clubs approached, nine clubs agreed to participate in the study (two WSL clubs and seven WC clubs). Of these clubs, all nine GMs and five HCs agreed to participate and so received information about the nature of the research and a formal invitation to take part.

The sample size in this study—nine clubs from the two tiers of competition, representing a mix of WSL and WC clubs, was determined by the practical constraints and challenges inherent in research at an elite sports level. It is important to highlight that the participation of elite-level clubs often involves significant challenges, where time constraints, confidentiality concerns, and logistical barriers often restrict researcher access. The findings remain significant because they are drawn from informed participants directly involved in decision-making processes. By securing data from a diverse set of clubs across both tiers, this study provided critical exploratory findings that lay the groundwork for future research with larger or more representative samples. Moreover, the study included perspectives from all General Managers (GMs) and a subset of Head Coaches (HCs) from the participating clubs. This targeted recruitment ensured representation of individuals with strategic and operational insights, enhancing the quality and relevance of the data collected.

For the GMs, five identified as White and non-disabled men, three identified as non-disabled, White women, and one GM identified as a British South Asian woman. Of the nine GMs, two had been in the post longer than 2 years. The other seven GMs had been appointed in the past 18 months (at the time of the research). In all cases, the incumbents had a previous relationship with the club either in a voluntary capacity, a permanent role in the men's club, or a personal relationship with a member of the executive. For the HCs, five coaches were interviewed (one from Tier 1 and four from Tier 2). One HC identified as a White non-disabled man, one identified as a British South Asian and non-disabled man, one coach identified as a Hispanic and non-disabled man, and two coaches identified as White and non-disabled women. All five coaches managed the senior women's first team within their respective clubs. Although two coaches held their UEFA A License, the other three were in the process of gaining their license. In this case, each coach had an assistant coach who held a UEFA A License qualification to ensure the team met the FA licensing conditions.

The clubs reflected a broad geographical spread of England, covering the South, London, the Midlands, North West, and the North East. Although two of the clubs were independent, the other seven were separate entities but operated under the umbrella of the established men's football clubs with varying degrees of integration. To provide participants the freedom for openness during data collection, whilst protecting anonymity and confidentiality (given that they may be identifiable due to their profile), pseudonyms were used throughout. Primary data were then collected with the GMs and coaches utilizing one-to-one semi-structured interviews. This method represented the most suitable for the present study within the context of elite football clubs, striking a balance between feasibility and the depth of data required to address the research aims. Focusing on organizational practices and decision-making processes are often confidential and sensitive issues within elite sports settings. Interviews allowed for in-depth, contextually rich, and nuanced data collection in a manner that ensured participant anonymity and confidentiality. Logistical challenges too of researching in such contexts also meant individual interviews were the most practical and effective method for engaging key personnel while respecting their time constraints.

3.3 | Data Collection

Following institutional ethical approval by the University Ethics Committee Board, in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 45 and 120 min, were conducted with the participants by two members of the research team who were experienced qualitative researchers. Interviews were held at times convenient to the schedules of the GMs and HCs and were carried out on-site at the respective clubs. Participants were interviewed to discuss the culture of their football club, principally related to the context of women working in women's elite football in England. The interviews covered a range of aspects including governance and autonomy, cultural beliefs and assumptions, and development and recruitment practices. The design of the interview guide was informed by a review of previous literature exploring the experiences of women leaders in sport as well as our theoretical framework (Schein's model of organizational culture), which explicitly asked questions of club (organizational) culture. The focus of the interview included questions on the following: (1) the participants' professional background and how they became to be appointed in their current role, (2) the participants' understanding of the cultural

differences between working in men's and women's professional football in England, (3) the influence of culture from the men's club on the operation of their (the women's) club, (4) the visual symbols and narratives that are dominant within their club, (5) how these aspects of culture influence personnel recruitment, (6) how women are recruited and developed within their club, (7) how greater gender diversity and inclusion within professional football can be achieved, (8) how the shift toward professionalizing women's football has impacted the recruitment and support for women, and (9) how they perceive and support men and women working within their club. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by members of the research team.

3.4 | Data Analysis

On completion of the interviews, all data were transcribed and assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Following transcription, we utilized reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) to make sense of the interview data. Analysis was guided by both deductive (using our theoretical framework) and inductive reasoning. Deductive analysis included coding the data utilizing Schein's model to answer our research questions, focusing on the cultural values, belief systems, and formal and informal work practices (e.g., coach recruitment) of clubs for how they may impact women. Using a combined deductive and inductive approach allowed us to underpin our findings with theory while allowing space for new meanings and ideas to emerge (Ryba et al. 2012). The analysis followed five stages, utilizing abductive reasoning (Kovács and Spens 2005). First, our reflexive and abductive approach involved familiarizing ourselves with the data, developing inductive codes which were grouped together to represent the participants' accounts, and then generating broader findings/themes which connected the experiences of the participants with our theoretical framework and existing literature. We developed emergent properties within the data that were coded and grouped with other potential codes. This then created a set of initial themes that were constantly compared to other themes to refine further (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Following this, we revisited and revised the initial themes using our theoretical framework and previous research literature to reach a consensus, as a research team, on a final set of themes (Braun and Clarke 2019). To ensure trustworthiness within the data and our analysis, we dialogically reflected on our analytical process with a "critical research friend" who was an experienced qualitative researcher but outside of the immediate research team. This involved repeating the data analysis independently to reach consensus on the final themes generated by the primary research team members. The purpose of engaging with a critical friend in this way was to utilize collaborative thinking to test and critique ideas (Loo and Sairattanain 2021). This process did not create any changes to the analytical process or to the final themes generated.

3.5 | Ethical Research Practice

One of the primary objectives of the research was to analyze the impact of women's football professionalization and club culture on gender diversity and inclusion within professional football clubs. In recognition that all groups of women (but some more than others, e.g., women from ethnically diverse backgrounds and/or women who identify as disabled) are underrepresented and often marginalized, we focused the interview questions that asked about culture and working practices on how these would support greater equity for women. We also based our findings on the stories of our participants, and this meant that trustworthiness and respect of the participants were fundamental. We ensured this by including space within the interviews to invite reflective member checking and reflexive questions with our participants (i.e., how did you feel during the interview? Were you able to share all your experiences?). We also shared copies of each of the interview transcripts with the respective participants to invite their reflections and edits if they so wished. Upon examination of the interview transcripts, only minor additions and grammatical edits were made by the interviewees. Data analysis only followed once this stage had been completed with participants.

4 | Findings

4.1 | Women Are Appointed on the Basis of Gender Rather Than Capability

Women are more often than not appointed on the basis of gender rather than capability. At the time of research, there had been significant growth and development within English women's football in the previous 2 years. The sport had been professionalized, and the FIFA Women's World Cup had recently taken place, raising the profile of and support for women's football in England. Barclays Bank had also announced the largest commercial investment in any English women's sport. Yet, within the women's clubs included in the research, significant fears remained; however, regarding the long-term financial sustainability of the clubs, and the difference in financial strength between the men's and women's teams was a concern. There was a fear this would then have a potential impact on enabling or constraining paid employment opportunities within the clubs. Nevertheless, through the investment into and development of women's football, principally by The Football Association and their provision of programs to support the progression of women, one notable change observed by all the participants was that the visibility of women in coaching roles in the sport had improved. There were more women represented in the early and middle stages of the career pathway, and there was a sense of merit toward appointing women. Yet, when we delved deeper into this "artifact" of culture (greater visibility and representation of women) and espoused values (the greater inclination to appoint women), there appeared to remain deep-rooted doubts about the abilities of women to lead. There was evidence that the assessment of women continued to be a gendered process rather than one based on perceptions of their capability:

> Because I was there, [the female sporting director] put [a woman in charge to have a woman in charge], but which is totally wrong, but you find those behaviours. (Harry, UEFA A qualified head coach, tier two club)

The basic assumptions toward the capability of women, compared to their male counterparts, appeared to be rooted in the perceptions of some General Managers (GMs) and other coaches that women had only secured coaching roles because they were being "fast-tracked" through affirmative action programs. The focus of this type of approach to improving gender equity is on creating equal opportunities and the removal of structural barriers to women's recruitment and advancement (Ely and Meyerson 2000). But like findings in other sectors (e.g., Rapoport and Bailyn 1997; Ely and Meyerson 2000) and rare sport coaching research into ideological framing of equity approaches (Norman 2016), this approach can cause a backlash against women and a sense of resentment from those outside of these programs. This was a finding in our study: women who had qualified through affirmative action programs were perceived to have received unequally favorable treatment. For example, one Head Coach commented that programs were often seen as "_helping rather than rewarding female coaches._" In this way, women were being seen as "special cases," and appraisals of their value were based on gender rather than talent. This then appeared to perpetuate the assumption that women needed additional support, were less able, and led to questions as to the credibility of programs and initiatives to support women's recruitment and progression (such as mentee programs, bursaries, or women-only courses), as well as questions as to the credibility of the women enrolled onto them. Without the equivalent robust career development pathway that men had (e.g., more opportunities to work in the men's academy systems), it led to questions from some GMs as to the capability of women compared to men:

> None of [women coaches] are anywhere near as good as our counterpart in men's [football]. Women obviously have different strengths and weaknesses than men ... So the techniques are different ... [Women's football] is very different from a technical perspective so the [coaching] is at a more junior level possibly than it would be in the men's [game].
>
> (Stephen, General Manager, tier one club)

But despite women's underrepresentation as elite coaches, there were more favorable views of women's capabilities to coach in _women's football_. In this way, there has been a shift since 2018: the greater visibility of and investment into women coaches through professionalization of the sport had raised their profile and the subsequent desire to appoint them in women's football clubs, demonstrating how professionalization can favorably alter perceptions of female coaches, as one General Manager noted in their explanation of their recruitment strategy:

> There are fewer female coaches around. We subsequently had difficulty in finding a head coach because we think the combination of a female head coach and a male assistant works quite well and we already had a male assistant. So, we were determined that we wanted a female head coach, but it has been hellish hard work finding one.
>
> (David, General Manager, tier two club)

Nevertheless, these espoused values of wanting to appoint women and have a female head coach belied an underlying motive that it was beneficial to the club from a safeguarding or public relations perspective rather than necessarily because women are capable. This finding aligns with earlier research that one of the primary challenges facing women coaches continues to be accepted and respected as competent leaders per se with credible knowledge and experience (Tjønndal 2019). The present study is further evidence that women are still experiencing treatment based on gendered biases, beliefs, and assumptions (Walker and Bopp 2010; Allison 2016). There is a relational discourse that still persists in coaching that women are considered more suited to nurturing styles of working with athletes/players (e.g., safeguarding) and that a need for an increase in women coaches due to safeguarding concerns pertains merely to this aspect of coaching (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2008). Women are often not hired because of their capability and that while perceptions are increasingly favorable toward the hiring of women, without challenging the reasons _why_ this is may be reinforcing the idea that women's coaching roles are part of a gendered discourse (such as safeguarding) rather than competence. This became evident in discussions with Harry regarding the decision-making process behind appointing a female assistant coach:

> It's beneficial [for the club] to have female coaches and [women in leadership] roles. The relationship the girls build with a female member of staff has a lot of benefits for the whole club, [from] a selfish point of view.
>
> (Harry, UEFA A qualified head coach, tier two club)

Similarly, for Rosie, a GM of a tier two club, a main driver for appointing a female head coach was from a welfare and safeguarding perspective:

> The appointment had to be a female [to] go inside the changing room, it cannot be a male.
>
> (Rosie, General Manager, tier two club)

Although at first glance this may be positive for women, it again raises questions about whether women are being chosen based on their gender rather than their capability. For one of the female GMs from a tier two club, she argued women's ability must be questioned due to their lack of representation in men's football. In this way, Olivia is making the claim that men's football is the "marker" by which we must measure "success" and is laying the responsibility of the invisibility of women at the feet of women themselves without considering the history, culture, and structures that lie behind why women are not recruited. It is also evidence that the binary separation of football, "women's" football and "men's football," may be undermining true inclusion and diversity within professional football workforces because it can lead to unequal evaluations with justification between the two (Martínková 2020). Although football is separated in this way, the different men and women who work in these contexts, and the value of the sport, will not be considered equal:

> There isn't a comparison, men are much more successful. So, it is difficult to turn around and say this is a prime example of a female that has gone in and been just as capable. That's the difference between generalising "football" because if you just [say], "Football," you go no, because that's three [women]out of thousands. But in women's football (they are capable).
>
> (Olivia, General Manager, tier two club)

From the interviews with the coaches and GMs, it appears that while there is a growing acceptance of women's representation working in elite English women's football, it remains questionable as to whether the broader assumptions and beliefs of women's capabilities are equally shifting. Generally, like other sectors, men continue to be perceived as more capable leaders (Schein 2016). Although many clubs espouse the value of having women represented in their coaching set-ups, and there are women seen (artifacts) in such roles within clubs, the longevity of and motive behind these appointments do not always appear to be on the basis on assumptions made of women's abilities. Since the time of the research to the time of writing this article, this claim could be evidenced by the statistic that of the 10 Women's Super League clubs, only three now have a woman as a head coach (permanent rather than on an interim basis). This is less than half at the time of research (seven women as head coaches). The decline in the number of female head coaches in the highest echelons of English women's football speaks partly to the lack of change in the underlying *beliefs* in women's capabilities as leaders. Through such limited endorsements of women's contributions beyond issues of safeguarding and player welfare and thus viewing women through such a stereotypical lens, such perceptions have been shown to have negative consequences for the longevity of women leaders (Dwivedi et al. 2021). A lack of longevity in recruitment of women coaches could be attributed to the motives of clubs appointing women often based on what is the merit of being publicly "seen" to have a female leader (given the prominence of women's football in England) and limited appraisals of their contribution, rather than deep-rooted beliefs in the *value* in women.

4.2 | Club Cultures and Practices That Constrain the Appointment of Women

The purpose of the research was not only to understand football club appraisals of appointing women but also to understand what club practices and cultures existed that either supported or constrained the appointment of a more gender-diverse workforce. In the following sub-sections, we outline the pertinent club cultures and practices that evidence, cause, and/or are shaped by the basic assumptions of women's capabilities, as evidenced in the previous section.

4.2.1 | Club Approaches to Recruitment: Women Deemed the "Riskier" Candidates

It is important to understand the recruitment of women leaders to women's teams within the wider operating contexts of the football clubs. Across the sample of clubs, the organizational structure, size, and reporting lines varied significantly. The financial position of clubs played an important role in enabling more employment opportunities (such as coaching roles) to be created; the two issues could not be separated. The precarious nature and instability of the financial position of all the women's clubs were a result of the lack of financial robustness within women's football. Previous research has also found this instability within women's clubs and as a consequence, an underdevelopment of infrastructure and organizational growth (Clarkson et al. 2023). At the time of the research, all the HCs and GMs interviewed agreed that their clubs were still losing money and, therefore, were not sustainable as a commercial business model. Further, for all but one of the clubs, there was a sense of dependency on the men's arm of the football club and the performance of the men's team within their respective league, a finding of previous research that found it was both a risk as well as a reward of being financially connected to the men's arm of a football club (Clarkson et al. 2022). Through this, there was a sense of instability and lack of independence, and an under-development within the women's clubs in terms of business planning and marketing capability. All these factors created a sense of instability, a reactive rather than proactive approach to planning, and financial insecurity within clubs. The impact on recruitment was then to adopt risk-averse less transparent approaches to mitigate the risk of uncertainty that clubs felt came with female leaders who represented an "unknown":

> [This] is a business … There's pounds and pence starting to come into it, and you've got to be sure … [Clubs] can't afford risking relegation now or anything like that because there's just too much at stake … [Recruiting coaches is] very risky. [What if] I persuade [a female coach] to come in on what we can afford to pay her, and then all of a sudden something goes wrong. It's a big risk.
>
> (Diane, GM, tier two club)

Previous research has argued that (gendered) perceptions of good leadership are associated with organizational stability and that the health of an organization can influence ideas about women's fitness to lead (Ryan and Haslam 2007; Ryan et al. 2011). In the case of the present study, with the financial implications of relegation, many clubs felt a "safer" approach to recruitment was the appointment of men through known networks and contacts:

> It's got to be who you know and not necessarily what you know because … that's generally business and life isn't it? You tend to lean towards what you know don't you? Sometimes it gets predictable as well, you can see a job, you can say you know who's going to get that.
>
> (Tomas, GM, tier two club)

> In my early coaching it was definitely who I knew that was helping me to make the right moves. [There hasn't been] much turnover in [my roles] but in other places

definitely, [you hear] someone telling them about a job that's coming up and stuff like that. You see the same faces working and around similar clubs.

[Meryl, Head Coach, tier two club]

The complexity was further exacerbated by the exponential growth of women's football in England in terms of commercial interest and participation. The clubs did not have the infrastructure to manage such fast growth. For head coaches working in women's football, the role now demands more than just a technical and tactical expertise. Consequently, the clubs we interviewed were occupied and concerned by the changing nature of the head coach role and the challenges faced in balancing the commercial aspects of the role with the operational demands to deliver the "on-pitch" coaching:

[I'm] thinking about what type of person to bring into the club, thinking about club reputation and dealing with agents, dealing with finance. So, it's definitely growing from being a coach. I think you have to be also a bit more aware and understand the operations of football and make decisions that are not just solely based on the score or the players, you have got to make decisions based on football as a whole. So, I think that is definitely where the role has changed.

(Carl, GM, tier two club)

This change then fed the club's desire to resort often to men who were perceived as having the experience as well as qualifications, and with the underrepresentation across sport more generally of women which created a sense of "invisibility" and "unknownness," it led to a mistrust of women's capabilities:

Women's football is actually very political and it's a small community. I would know the men who couldn't care less [about women's football] and would only be here because they've got no other work and wouldn't really care passionately about it. And I know there's some females who … okay, they've got their licence, but would I trust them with the running a football club? Genuinely I wouldn't because I've never seen any evidence of [women] being successful.

(Tomas, GM, tier two club)

From Tomas' account, it appears that women leaders in football do not enjoy a trust advantage as they have reported in other sectors (Post et al. 2019). His story also demonstrates that the invisibility of women is harming perceptions of their skills, competencies, and experience.

4.2.2 | Clubs Value Experience and Delivery Rather Than Qualifications, to the Detriment of Women

At the time of the research, there was a significant drive within The Football Association to increase the pool of qualified

women working in the most elite levels of English women's football; that is, to grow the number of women qualified at UEFA A License level on the football coaching pathway. The significance of this qualification is that it is the prerequisite for employment as a head coach in the top two tiers of women's football. Therefore, interventions such as bursaries and positive action programs designed to assist women were put into place by The FA. Consequently, during the time of the research, this led to a doubling in the number of women qualifying to A License level so that they were suitably qualified for clubs to meet regulations.

Nevertheless, from the perspectives of the clubs and coaches, it was evident that this did not impact their assumptions of women or lead to a subsequent increase in their recruitment. This was because it was clear that clubs valued experience and delivery, along with their understanding that the role of head coach is now changing to demand a greater commercial awareness (as previously discussed). The clubs believed that women still did not possess the requisite exposure to and experience (principally coaching and commercial) in elite men or women's football:

I think there is a lack of females who have the level of experience [for this level]. I don't think it is essential for them [to have an A Licence]. I think it is more the experience [that is needed].

(Meera, GM, tier two club)

In this way, simply having a mass of qualified women is not sufficient on its own to change the representation of and the ideas ascribed to women coaches, especially in light of some of the criticism of coach education and development for its lack of decontextualized delivery and need to be grounded in more practice-based learning opportunities (Hall et al. 2019; Nelson et al. 2013). For one GM of a tier two club, they believed the basic requisite for an A License was not enough. Toward women, as discussed earlier, appraisals of their competency were still a gendered process rather than based on capability. Even when qualified, such as the growth of the commerciality of women's football that women's capabilities were doubted even further.

Of the 24 clubs across the 2 divisions, there's only 3 people that have the Pro Licence that would have [that]business understanding module … whereas I think however many [women] [with an A Licence] there are … none of them have got that understanding of (the commercial demands of the role).

(Angelo, GM, tier two club)

This could be a case of women in leadership having to work harder to prove themselves compared to their male counterparts (Norman 2010). For another (male) GM, again, the idea that once women had the A License that they would be suitable candidates for head coaching roles, was not the case. Instead, it was the *experience* of working in elite women's football, and experience was not something many women could evidence:

> I think if you were an A Licence coach, and you have got a lot of experience working with females at a higher level. That to me is more important than having an A Licence ... You want the best coach you can have for your team. And the best coach is not the qualification.
>
> (Carl, GM, tier two club)

For another club, they believed that the women who had been supported by The FA to gain their A License had had their employment expectations erroneously raised and this was why many women did not seem, to them, as interested in gaining practical experience in addition to being simply qualified:

> It does come back to the volunteering, putting the hours in, and doing jobs that you may think is below your pay grade or below your standing in the game or whatever. A lot of [women] are fast tracked through and then expected just to walk into a big job and be successful at it where actually you'd say ... "What have you done? Have you actually been successful in anything that you've done in terms of delivery of a team over a certain amount of time, because actually all you've done is you've [taught] coaching for a bit and it's been a bit of a project," and that's the total sum ... It's almost like "I've done this qualification, I've obviously proven myself, I'm obviously great"? Well, actually, no, you've not done anything because it's not just about your coaching, it's about the way you handle players.
>
> (Tomas, GM, tier two club)

These assumptions that women neither possessed the experience or inclination toward gaining experience was quoted as the reticence toward recruiting them into clubs:

> I think now [the FA are] asking females to apply for their A and they've not had their B license for very long or they've not had the hours on the grass. There's more [men] out there. [The FA are] pushing the females through. But then when they come through into the interview process [to be] as high a calibre as what some of the males are [in terms of image and the reputations] ... The females aren't as good.
>
> (Olivia, General Manager, tier two club)

Because of the binary model ("men's football" and "women's football") that defines football (again, supporting the view that this division works against improving equity and inclusion) and of the assumptions made of men and women's ability to lead, men have more opportunities to work in football than women and it is such opportunities that provide career development and advancement (Banwell et al. 2021). Through this, men accrue greater social and human capital which is more greatly valued by clubs than a qualification.

According to one participant, the external perception of The FA's drive to qualify more women was that through positive action programs, such as funded bursaries and women-only courses for coaching qualifications, it was not closing the gender gap in elite coaching because these programs were perceived as less credible by clubs, lacking in the experiential learning and practical experience that clubs desire:

> My opinion is that they are giving out qualifications a lot easier than what they used to ... I'm all for obviously the women's game, growing the women's game more and more [women] coaches. I just worry are we diluting the quality [of women coaches]? Are you really being challenged, are you really learning? I feel now some of them are rushed through just because they want to get more women, more A licence candidates, more B licence candidates.
>
> (Olivia, General Manager, tier two club)

From a coaching perspective, women realized that qualifying as a coach was a very different experience to when they had completed and were seeking employment. For Simone, she had felt supported by the governing body to become qualified as an A License coach. However, she felt that the qualification had not sufficiently equipped her with the practical experience, yet it was onerous, and it was preventing her from progressing from her current role into a tier one club:

> I managed to secure a bursary for [the A Licence]. [The club] gave me the time off in order to do that, but when I say that it's not really because it was just an extra day of my work. I was encouraged to do it, but I definitely do not have anywhere near sufficient contact hours with the players in order to support my requirements moving forward now ... so it's going to be a lengthy process on how I [progress].
>
> (Simone, Head Coach, tier two club)

This is also problematic because it unfairly raises women's expectations of finding paid employment easily and quickly just because they are in possession of the UEFA A License. There are limited opportunities for such roles, particularly for women because of the binary model of football coupled with the gendered (negative) assumptions of their capability to coach in "men's" football means they are not often considered for roles beyond working in women's football. Programs such as bursaries for underrepresented coaches also pose a risk to the reputation and credibility of women, a finding similar to women in leadership research that shows such positive actions often invoke adverse reactions from male leaders and recruiters because they encourage tokenism, lessen women's credibility, and create a mindset of increasing "numbers" of women rather than true inclusion (Hamplová et al. 2022). For Rachel as a GM, it had impacted her perspective of recruiting a female head coach because there was the perception that women were now only expecting higher roles rather than starting at lower levels of club coaching:

> It is a status thing. I think if you start to put people on their A Licence, they then feel like they are too big to go and work and get the hours with the youth teams.
>
> (Rachel, GM, tier two club)

For the coaches themselves, increasing the pool of qualified women without the jobs for them to go into, for this General Manager, was unfair to both the women and the clubs. The women had raised expectations but for clubs, they had no means to employ new or progress existing coaches into other paid employment due to the financial constraints of women's clubs:

> If the funding's not there, if the investment's not there in the women's game .... And the FA say (my Head Coach) has got to be paid that amount of money, and I say can't afford it. Yes, we've got all these A Licence coaches now, where do they do? Where do they work? Well, can they not be the Regional Talent Club technical director? Yes, but that's only 9 hours a week, what do you expect them to do with the other 31?
>
> (Tomas, GM, tier two club)

For one male Head Coach, he strongly disagreed with the governing body's positive action approaches for women coaches such as bursaries or fast-track programs, believing it worked against the principle of equality and, in his eyes, discriminated against men.

> I disagree with this FA campaign of just women or giving priority to women. I think it should be all equally. The right formula is equality. It is not preference to one of the genders. It's equality. Everything (should be based on) equality.
>
> (Barney, HC, tier two club)

This view of equal treatment, a degendering strategy, is reflective of the idea that career outcomes are the consequences of individual choices (Connell 2006). The need for women to have a track record of employment (thus, experience) as well as their UEFA A License was a recurrent theme across all the interviews with GMs and Head Coaches. Although participants recognized the need to build critical masses of qualified women, there were widespread perceptions that, given clubs value experience over qualification, the current system is flawed in allowing women through the system who do not possess sufficient practical experience. This presents a further risk to the credibility and reputation of women. Although it is important to create opportunities, it is also crucial to ensure that rigor is applied to their development pathway.

4.2.3 | A Wider Lack of Visibility of and Value Toward Women's Football Within Club Contexts

In a previous research project, we had carried out similar work to the present study, and this had involved the research team taking cultural walks around football clubs to contribute to our understanding of the culture of the settings. We observed visible cultural artifacts of the clubs. During this earlier research, we noted that, and the GMs and Head Coaches agreed, much work was needed to raise the visibility of the women's arm of the club and women in football more generally. During the present study and our interviews with other GMs and coaches, there was a growing consensus that this visibility had increased since our first research with other clubs. The clubs cited examples of successful joint branding with the men's side of the club, such as female players advertising the new club kit for the following season, billboards outside the ground advertising the next women's match, or women's team shirts next to the men's shirts on mannequins in the club shops. This move to more joint activities was attributed to the growing success of the England women's team (known as the "Lionesses") and the visibility that this had generated.

Beyond these cultural artifacts, however, and some "green shoots" of a change in women's visibility as players, the clubs still described broader organizational change as "slow" when it came to gender equality. The significance of this is in contributing to an understanding as to why women are still doubted for their capabilities, considered the "riskier" appointment compared to men, and why club recruitment practices still favor men, as explored throughout this paper. This is because there is a wider pattern of basic assumptions that are the drivers of club values and actions. Meera described this as a gendered hierarchy within her club, evidenced by the difference in provision of resources:

> There's the still pecking order. The men's teams get priority over access to pitches, access to resources, access to kit. I think that comes down to what the club sees as more valuable to, frankly, the club itself. [The] under 23 men's team, U18's team, the academy boys. They are still seen as more of an asset to a club than a women's team.
>
> (Meera, GM, tier two club)

For Daniel, there were board members within his club, a highly successful men's English Premier League team, who continued not to support the women's team beyond branding because of the worth they ascribe to women's ability to play and lead the sport. This was then reflected among club fans too:

> So, there are some people even within the club that they are slowly changing but they are struggling to change because they have these values of inequality, if you want to say, you know, buried inside in them. [And there are] some people that come to the men's game ... they will never come to the women's game. [They say], "oh, the women shouldn't be playing here because they ruin the pitch for the men" or things like that.
>
> (Daniel, GM, tier one club)

Daniel went on to describe how these values led to difficulty in his role as GM because the challenges, being culturally rooted, were deeply embedded and led to a deprioritizing of the women's team. This was because the club valued revenue

generation and did not see the relationship between this with greater equality and long-term growth. The club board did not understand the benefits of having greater parity between the men and women's teams:

> When you're in a huge club environment like this and you've got a first team that are obviously doing incredibly well on the men's side, and you've got a first team that are doing not so well on the women's side, the transition is out of sync, so the scales kind of don't balance. So, our internal kind of politics, for lack of a better word, is down to [the men's] team is really high impact, the [women's] team isn't currently … I think the culture problem for us [is] pushing [us] out further [and] does come down to a lack of understanding.
>
> (Daniel, GM, tier one club)

Daniel felt this then hindered the long-term planning, resourcing and thus, potential of the women's team within the club, evidencing the impact of the day-to-day decisions that the board made (i.e., their basic assumptions) and thus, creating a "vicious" cycle in which the women's team would never be successful:

> So how [they] understand the game of women's football, it's a different game, or they're not interested … I think a lot of the culture impacts because you're fighting against peoples' lack of understanding or lack of vision of women's football … I think that's where we struggle a little bit because we just don't quite get it … I think obviously the struggle is, you know, the growth is limited which is predominantly down to budgets and support.

Other GMs agreed that because women's football and their women's teams were still not financially viable that this impacted their cultural value in the eyes of the general board. So, although the club's cultural artifacts spoke to a greater sense of equality and visibility of the women's team as mentioned earlier (e.g., women modeling the club kit in the club shop, and greater advertising around the club promoting the women's team), what remained the priority was the financial value and revenue of the teams. The significance of this is the impact on the lived experiences of those women working day-to-day in the clubs. For Diane, because her women's team did not make as much money as it costed within the club, she felt a sense of dependency as a General Manager and that the women are made to feel like a drain on club resources:

> We're the "leeches" … It doesn't matter which way you dress it up, the female game isn't held in the same esteem as the men's, so yes, there is a gender situation but that's prevalent across the game full stop, it's not specific to this club. The profile's been raised, [the] tide is turning but it's a very slow beast to turn. The problem is that you're always the last priority because [the board's] focus, if you strip it right back, you're a

business at the end of the day and, with all due respect, women's football [sic] does not make any money in this business … The culture of the club is certainly old school. I just don't understand why you would separate males and females when you're encouraging both.

(Diane, GM, tier two club)

Diane's head coach, Simone, echoed this feeling that she also experiences from the club and from those work in the men's team:

> Until the women's game's is in a position where you're attracting similar or more [money] than the male club, the male players, and you're generating a level of revenue that can pay wages and pay players, [women are] always going to be considered [the] second-class citizen. It's painful for me to say.
>
> (Simone, Head Coach, tier two club)

For both Simone and Diane, a club culture that values profit over equality and a lack of value ascribed generally to the women's team, has created a significant amount of emotional labor and work-related stress for them. This too was a similar finding in the work of Isard et al. (2024) in different women's sports in the United States. The research uncovered what the authors referred to as a "collective anxiety" for women's sport employees who felt their club's pressure to conform only to financial logics, the associated threat to their team's existence, and then the implications for women's sport more broadly given the different and shorter history of the professionalization of women's sport (Isard et al. 2024, 161). This created a sense of precarity and emotional labor for women working in these spaces who feel the constant pressure to feel that they belong (Isard et al. 2024). In the case of the present study, it led both Diane and Simone to question their own self-worth as female leaders in the club and evidences the need to interrogate beyond what can be seen or espoused in an organization to truly understand what the realities are:

> It's kind of we're in the "backseat" [of the club]. Not intentionally, but I just think it's pecking order of how it operates down to the fact that yes, we probably generate some nice publicity for them and we're being successful (Simone, head coach). But it's not tangible and it doesn't pay wages. It's so frustrating, and maybe I've almost adopted that culture of we are "second best," but I don't know if I'm just tired of fighting with them [the board] or [even know] where that fight would get me.
>
> (Diane, GM)

Stories such as Daniel's, Simone's, and Diane's bring to light the patterns and extent of gender division within some English elite football clubs, and they highlight that these cultural patterns are rooted in what is valued by those in decision-making roles within the clubs. This insight is significant because it allows us to understand the incongruencies between what is seen in organizations (in this case, football clubs) and what is valued and

practiced. The increase in visibility of women's teams within the broader club contexts (cultural artifacts), without corresponding changes in what are the values in a club that drive behaviors (the basic assumptions), means that gender equity will not be achieved for women coaches, women football leaders, female players, and football universally. Within this theme, there was also a clear cultural emphasis on gender difference, and, as the present study has evidenced throughout, this idea of "women's football" and "men's football" is undermining true equity and inclusion. Revenue generation is of more value than a commitment to gender equality (de Haan and Sotiriadou 2019) and remains a critical factor in determining the value of women in football. Coupled with a lack of understanding of the strengths of women's football generally, culture change in English football toward gender equity remains slow.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

Three critical messages emerged from the present study in response to the question of how English women's football club cultures influence the career pathways of women working in the sport. The first and most critical finding was that there is a perceived gendered capability gap emerging between elite men and women's coaches. Many of the General Managers (GMs) and coaches interviewed agreed that women are more visible and that their appointments have become more "normalized" within women's football. Nevertheless, it was evident in the present study that women still experience issues in establishing their authority and changing the perception of their abilities. Therefore, affirmative actions have had limited success in challenging the view that women are capable, and in some ways, may have negatively impacted the credibility and perceptions of women because there were views that women had been "fast-tracked" through the system or that they still did not possess the necessary employment experience. In this way, it is evident that there remains an undercurrent of resentment and doubt toward women's capability and authority (Connell 2006) even in women's football clubs where their visibility and representation is higher (Allison 2016).

It has been made known through previous research that there are negative perceptions in more sport more broadly, of women, from the perspectives of administrators, leaders, athletes/players, and fellow coaches (Thomas et al. 2023). This damages the credibility, respect, endorsement of, and trust toward women while leading to a feeling for these women that they must prove themselves and evidence greater expertise to demonstrate their worth (e.g., Norman 2010; Szedlak et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 2021; Hindman and Walker 2020). The present study contributes to this body of research further by focusing on the concept of women's capabilities within the context of women-led sporting organizations and evidencing that it is a crucial factor in the appointment or lack thereof of women working in the footballing workplace. Although other sectors continue to shift and progress (e.g., recent longitudinal research in the corporate sector demonstrates that assessments of women's effectiveness as leaders show that women are evaluated equally or better than men on key leadership capabilities (Zenger and Folkman 2012, 2019), sport, and in this case,

football, still lags behind). This is because a cultural connection and long-standing socialized belief between men, masculinity, and leadership remains a basic and driving assumption (Connell 2006; Coghlan 2021; Schein 2009). Complex relations of power remain present across elite English football clubs and at the heart of gendered meanings of organizational power (Connell 2006; Knoppers et al. 2021). Such basic assumptions are the essence of culture and the subconscious of an organization; they are revealed in the perceptions and thoughts of organizational members and act to guide behavior (such as personnel recruitment) (Hatch 1993). Without addressing this level, it is very difficult to change the culture that underpins the current situation of women's underrepresentation as, and poorer experiences of, working in professional sport (Schein 2016).

A second key message from the present study is the significance of the role of organizational values in supporting or hindering the overall growth of women's football and in the appointment of women within women's football clubs. Although club boards continue to consider gender equality as separate from financial growth, profit over people continues to be the driving force, and women's sport continues to be criticized as being financially unviable (Isard et al. 2024), there will be a ceiling to the growth, visibility, and resourcing of women's elite football clubs in England. This is the value in adopting Schein's model of organizational culture for the present study: that while the clubs espoused values that appeared to support greater gender equality across the men's and women's teams within the clubs, what was truly driving behaviors and decision-making was revenue generation and perceptions of performance excellence (the men's teams were often valued higher because they were seen to be succeeding in their respective league). This was coupled and compounded by a sense of dependency on the men's team and success from the women's team within the club; the women's team's finances were linked to how the men's team performed. There were clear gender inequities within the club practices related to pay, visibility, the treatment of women players, coaches, and leaders, and the resourcing of the teams. Although these inequities exist, a rhetoric of support for women's football and women in football is an espoused value but not one enacted in practice (Isard et al. 2024; Hoeber 2007). This was a similar finding to the work of Hoeber (2007) in her study of organizational values in Canadian athletic university departments. Similar to the present study, the values of performance excellence and revenue generation took precedence (and were not seen to be related to) gender equity in athletic departments. Consequently, the prioritization of these values led to greater inequities for athletes within the system. In the present study, the disparity in resources led to an instability, insecurity, and under-development of the women's arm of the football club and decreased the opportunities for women as leaders because they were often overlooked for appointments. As Schein argues, the success of organizational change depends on the support of senior leaders (Schein 2016), so any initiatives within football designed to drive gender equity across clubs and for women working in football require the capacity and endorsement of club boards to drive institutional transformations (Cortis et al. 2022). Addressing gender equity for women's teams and in the recruitment of women must be done within the wider operating contexts of football clubs.

Linked to this is the third message to arise from the present study. It was evident through the research that the priority for GMs and clubs in leadership recruitment is experience over qualification. The consequence, and as found in similar, previous research of prioritizing experience over formal qualifications in leadership recruitment can perpetuate gender disparities within the football industry. For instance, Knoppers et al. (2021) argue that men's dominance in sports leadership is often attributed to the perception that women lack specific and substantial experience, particularly from men's elite sports. Women's experience is also not as valued as men's (Mikkonen 2023). Therefore, an entrenched association of leadership with masculinity that results in hiring practices that favor men with traditional career trajectories (Bryan et al. 2021) and emphasize prior experience, may disadvantage women who have been systematically excluded from opportunities to accumulate such equivalent experience. By focusing predominantly on prior experience, clubs may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities and narrow the talent pool, overlooking highly capable (female) leaders with diverse qualifications that could bring fresh perspectives to leadership roles. This emphasis on experience can also contribute to a culture where traditional hiring practices are maintained, rather than fostering innovative and inclusive approaches to leadership recruitment. This also has implications for any positive action initiatives designed by governing bodies to increase the pool of (qualified) women; such programs must ensure they connect with what is valued by "employers," in this case, football clubs. They must clarify and manage expectations of such programs, and they must include a greater emphasis on experiential learning. We also recommend a revision of current development pathways for women leaders working in (women's) sport to identify the gaps between the revised requirements and what is currently in place. Specifically, we recommend a role review of what it means to be a head coach or General Manager in elite women's football in England. Our findings correlate with the previous work of Knoppers et al. (2021), who argued that national football associations and other football organizations are overly occupied with positional power when it comes to women (in this case, women being in certain roles or possessing particular qualifications). Consequently, this may be contributing to reputational risks, mistrust, or lack of belief in the capabilities of women because clubs do not perceive women as possessing sufficient experience to justify their appointment. The absence of a defined and robust career development pathway for women working in football is inhibiting both women's progression and the assumptions made of their ability to lead. Instead, a male model of progression and traditional concepts of careers, career development, and success is still the prized route (progressing through men's and boys' academies). Sports organizations must pay more attention to understanding women's career development and creating a clearer pathway to advancement that considers what employers (in this case, football clubs) value, rather than relying on the linear, hierarchical, and traditional (male) models that currently exist (Hertneky 2012).

In summary, the present study sought to understand the role of women's football club culture in enabling or hindering the appointment of women into senior roles in elite women's football in England. This study contributes to and extends the current literature in several important ways. First, although previous research has established the challenges women face in male-dominated sports organizations, our findings provide new insights into how similar dynamics persist—and are sometimes subtly reinforced—even within women's or integrated football clubs. By focusing specifically on professional women's football post-2018, this study addresses a gap in the literature by examining how gendered norms and assumptions continue to influence recruitment and leadership perceptions in a context often presumed to be more progressive. Second, we offer an important extension of Schein's model of organizational culture by applying it within a gendered sporting context. Our findings illustrate how Schein's three levels, artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions, are deeply intertwined with organizational power structures and gender ideologies. In particular, we show how basic underlying assumptions about leadership, capability, and legitimacy remain resistant to change and continue to shape the cultural logic of clubs, despite shifts in surface-level representation or formal equity policies. This application of Schein's framework in a gender-focused study of sport culture demonstrates its value as a diagnostic and critical tool, not just for understanding culture but for interrogating how it sustains gender inequality even in evolving institutional environments.

Future research should be directed at examining the organizational contexts and cultures that shape women's experiences of leading sport. There is a lack of sustained research on this topic, and yet, if we wish to change the status quo of women's invisibility and often poor experiences of sports leadership and coaching, we must place the emphasis on systemic change by uncovering what are the policies and practices within organizational contexts that pose the most significant structural barriers to women in sports leadership. Despite the increasing visibility of women in sport, the systemic issues that perpetuate their invisibility in leadership positions remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps in research is crucial for identifying the nuanced ways in which club cultures, organizational practices, and industry norms marginalize women and reinforce gender inequality. This requires not only critical examination of recruitment, progression, and retention practices but also an overhaul of the underlying organizational cultures that value traditional, often exclusionary, notions of leadership. Without a sustained commitment to research and systemic reform, efforts to promote equity risk being superficial and short-lived, leaving the fundamental structures of exclusion intact. Placing a stronger emphasis on this research agenda is, therefore, not only necessary for advancing gender equality in sport but also for enriching the broader field of sports leadership with diverse perspectives and innovative approaches. Such systemic changes must then be grounded in the sport and the context: they must consider what is currently valued and enacted by the critical agents in that setting. The present study evidenced the significance of the context in shaping women's experiences and the role of key stakeholders in shaping this culture, in this case, integrated football club boards and General Managers (GMs). A further suggestion for future research is that more work is needed to unpack differences beyond solely gender. Diversity among women within elite English football is low. We require a deeper understanding of how gender intersects with other relations of power; at present, women in such sports leadership positions tend to belong to homogenous,

privileged social groups (Evans and Pfister 2021). Nevertheless, sport is a system of inequalities and patterns. If we place further scrutiny on cultures and systems that scaffold difference and include the voices of those who are most marginalized by and thus, least heard in these systemic issues, we can contribute a more multidimensional understanding of how discrimination is enabled and licensed within sports organizations and leadership.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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