

## **Gender equality and the business case in horseracing**

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### **Abstract:**

#### *Purpose*

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the findings and outcomes from research undertaken in 2016 on diversity in British horseracing. The last decade has seen increasing focus on improving gender balance in senior roles in most sectors. Motivation for change within horseracing came from women at a senior level, who identified that the industry was behind in this respect. This work offers a case study to consider, with a business case context, whether an initiative, driven from the top, can open up a conversation about inequality and precipitate change that benefits women across a whole sector.

#### *Design/methodology/approach*

This research took an action research approach, using a survey alongside key stakeholder interviews.

#### *Findings*

The findings showed a diverse industry with complex career paths. Growing numbers of women have entered the sector, though this was often not reflected in women's seniority or in perceptions about their capabilities. Issues identified included the importance of mentoring, networking and career advice for women's progression, which are needed to navigate myriad career paths and male-dominated structures. The paper argues that investigating equality issues from a perspective of those in leadership roles can lead to pragmatic initiatives supporting women at all levels.

#### *Originality*

The originality of this paper is that it focuses on work which, for the first time, explored women's career participation in the horseracing industry. It challenges existing critiques of using a business case to promote gender equality.

**Key words:** Gender, Leadership, Equality, Sport, Horseracing, Corporate Feminism

**Article classification:** Research Paper

## **Introduction**

Over the last decade there has been much focus on improving gender balance on governing bodies and in executive roles in the corporate as well as in public and not for profit sectors. Lack of diversity on company boards was brought into focus by the 2010-2015 European Union Gender Equality Strategy, which promoted greater gender equality in decision-making roles including company boards (Beer and Manfredi, 2011). In response to this agenda in 2011, the UK government commissioned Lord Davies to undertake a review of the causes of women's under-representation on company boards and to make recommendations for achieving a better gender balance (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). This work brought into focus women's under-representation in senior leadership roles across different sectors, including sport, and the need to address this issue. Sport England and UK Sport, for example, funded research that looked at the gender balance of the boards of National Governing Bodies and other sport organisations. That work played a key role in helping different sports identify barriers to women's representation in leadership and included recommendations to achieve change (see, Women in Sport, 2015 and 2015a).

Horseracing, however, did not come under scrutiny in this respect until 2016, when Women in Racing (WiR), an independent organisation formed in 2009 to support women's development across the industry, commissioned the authors of this paper to investigate women's under-representation on boards and other leadership roles, along with career barriers and enablers across the industry. Horseracing is one of the most popular spectator sports in the UK, second only to football. It makes a significant contribution to the UK economy, estimated to be around £3.5 billion and supports over 85,000 jobs (PwC, 2018). The industry has modernised, expanded and diversified over recent years. This has led to many opportunities alongside challenges, including significant skills shortages, particularly in training yards (Public Perspectives, 2019). Nevertheless, horseracing was excluded from wider developments on advancing women's leadership as it receives no public funding and is therefore not subject to government targets.

A key element of the Davies review was the setting of a voluntary target of 25 per cent women's representation on FTSE 100 companies, to be achieved by 2015, and members of WiR with a corporate background had followed developments quite closely. This prompted the realisation that, while the Davies Review target had been achieved by FTSE 100 companies, in the horseracing industry – based on anecdotal evidence - women's representation at board and senior levels was well below this target.

This focus on achieving greater gender equality at the top is informed by a 'business case' discourse (Budgeon, 2015), which associates higher women's representation at senior levels with greater profitability or efficiency. Both the Davies Review and the research initiated by WiR can be seen as examples of what has been termed as 'corporate feminism' (Foster 2013, Livingstone 2016). This is described as being primarily concerned with the re-distribution of top jobs to women already in highly skilled and well-paid positions.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the findings from the research undertaken in 2016 for WiR and subsequent developments from this work. This offers a case study to consider whether a top-down initiative, driven by women in senior roles, can set change in motion to benefit women across a whole sector. The next sections review the framing literature, explain the research methods, and present the key findings from the study and the action taken by the sport's governing body – the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) - in response to the findings. It concludes by arguing that, although some valid concerns exist about corporate feminism, investigating equality issues from a perspective of those in leadership roles can successfully drive initiatives to address gender inequality at all levels.

## **Literature review**

This section provides an overview of the key research and authors critiquing corporate feminism, and existing work on gender issues within the horseracing industry.

### *Corporate feminism and the 'business case'*

A key criticism of the business case paradigm from this literature was its focus on better gender representation within top jobs, which is unlikely to produce any type of 'trickle down' effect to impact structural gender inequalities (Ferreira, 2015). Feminist literature has often been critical of initiatives to address gender representation on company boards. These initiatives were labelled as 'corporate feminism', concerned with the equal distribution of lucrative positions among highly paid women in senior professional roles, doing little to help tackle deep-seated gender inequality in the labour market (Foster, 2013). This focus was, arguably, concerned with the "*equal distribution of millionaires*" (Livingston, 2016) rather than a way of achieving genuine gender equality in a labour market where women were over-represented in low-skilled, low-paid and/or part-time work (ONS, 2013). In particular, criticism focused on its part in a wider neoliberal project that favoured private enterprise and policies, giving advantage to those already in power and subordinating equality to utilitarian aims of increasing company competitiveness and profitability (Budgeon, 2015). In this 'business case' paradigm, women's equal involvement and representation was justified because it fosters competitive advantage, increased performance and productivity.

This approach has clearly achieved traction in the business community, as evidenced by increased numbers of women on corporate boards following Lord Davies' Report. However, it presented some issues, not least that the body of work linking gender diversity to improved company performance has been disputed. Whilst correlations were identified, there were no evidenced causal links between increased gender equality at senior level and greater success (see Post and Byron, 2015; Eagly, 2016). If there was no proof that women's greater involvement increased profitability, the business case for increasing the number of women in senior management roles was considerably undermined.

Critiques of market-based frameworks showed that these accounted for neither sustained structural inequalities, nor complex power structures that have arisen over time (Roberts, 2015). Using business measures to address these inequalities could result in "*the fusion of gender equality to participation in the capitalist market economy*" (p. 213), helping to further

legitimise profitability as a success measure when setting the equality agenda. Gender equality became equated with numbers, indexes and other 'market-based' knowledge at the risk of marginalising the broader social change that is less easy to quantify. Though framing gender analyses in terms of economic efficiency may have supported evidence-based policy-making, it could also have the impact of re-direction, so that gender equality as a goal became subordinate to productivity or employment (Kantola and Squires, 2012). This could also leave those wishing to increase diversity unable to challenge a neoliberal framework as they must operate within its frame - not least because they were often expected to make the 'business case' in order to succeed – and, thus, were instrumental in its reproduction (Budgeon, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014).

Within this environment, women must operate in highly individualistic ways to achieve success, acting as neoliberal subjects who accept full responsibility for their own success. Some commentators aligned with a brand of feminism portrayed in Sandberg's book 'Lean in' (2013), which arguably placed the responsibility with individual women for securing their own position at the top as entrepreneurial actors. Whilst such women may have recognised that inequalities existed, in order to succeed they were compelled to seek self-actualisation and transformation through constant self-monitoring, rather than addressing the wider issues of gender inequality that have traditionally included goals of fair treatment and equal access to institutions (Rottenberg, 2014). This could divide rather than unify them, with the focus on women dealing with their own, internal barriers rather than external or institutional ones. In other words, corporate feminism was yet another version of 'fixing the women' rather than fixing the workplace or wider society, failing to address structural inequalities and patriarchal ideologies within organizations.

Moreover, a focus on aspiration created a divide thought to marginalise women with insufficient ambition or different life-goals (Rottenberg, 2017). Though advocates of greater numbers of women in high-level positions supported the idea that these women provide a voice to improve conditions for all women, there was no guarantee that a re-distribution of top

jobs between women and men would lead to improved interventions for women at the lower end of the labour market. Nor was there any guarantee, as Ferreira (2015) argues, that such an approach would improve women's representation even within businesses, let alone lower segments of the labour market, questioning the statement that "*if we smash the glass ceiling at the board level, we will also reduce discrimination at lower levels*" (p. 3).

In summary, key arguments supported moving from a business-oriented, neoliberal perspective that subordinates equality to business interests to one where gender diversity is rooted in wider principles of social justice and reducing discrimination. The research study and subsequent recommendations presented in this paper have attracted a critique that aligns with these two, differing perspectives. Williams and Hall's (2018) critique suggested it was framed within a business case, offering "*a heavily corporatised and rather incorporated female voice*" and unlikely to "*subvert ... the existing gender order in British Racing*" or "*offer a springboard for change*" (p. 15). In the following sections, the research findings are explained and the resulting recommendations and activities within horseracing examined through these perspectives.

### *Women in horseracing*

A range of work has explored women's under-representation in sports management and senior leadership (see, for example, Sibson, 2010; Burton, 2015; Adriaanse, 2016), with others arguing that sport can reflect and reinforce existing social inequality (Ryan and Martin, 2013). Further research related to caring responsibilities, work-life balance or career constraining factors such as gender segregation, a 'glass ceiling', and 'homologous reproduction' which sees the dominant group (men) reproduce itself within sports careers (see Dixon and Bruening, 2005; Whisenant and Mullane, 2007; Galloway, 2012; Joseph and Anderson, 2016). Men and men's sports were generally presented as the norm, arguably making it easier to undermine women's leadership capabilities (Fink, 2015).

Existing scholarship relating to women in horseracing is limited, and focused mainly on the experiences of women jockeys, addressing under-representation and potential reasons for this. Roberts and Maclean, (2012), for example, explored how women's participation challenged long-held, traditional ideals of femininity. Others addressed notions that women had the 'wrong' shaped bodies for horseracing (Butler and Charles, 2012), or how they are negatively stereotyped as weaker or less capable than men (Velija and Flynn, 2010), resulting in them needing to become 'one of the lads' in order to succeed (Butler, 2013). Further work has examined how jockeys' careers were shaped by access to physical and cultural capital in ways that can disadvantage women (Butler, 2014). There was also research to show women being offered limited opportunities compared to men (Velija and Hughes, 2017). Overall, these factors identified the "*ingrained patterns of sexism, chauvinism and paternalism*" that acted as barriers to women's progression in the sport (Williams and Hall, *ibid*, p. 1).

In the absence of substantive research relating to gender in leadership and careers within the industry, the 2016 study established a baseline of indicative measures. This was used to start building an understanding of gender representation and women's careers for horseracing as a sector. Full findings and recommendations from the study were published in a report prepared for WiR. What follows explains the methodological approach, presents key findings and outlines the developments that followed on from the launch of the report in May 2017.

## **Methods**

As discussed previously, the initial driver for this research was women's leadership and their representation on the boards of horseracing-related organisations. As little research existed on women working in the horseracing industry, it was felt necessary to broaden the investigation, exploring women's work and careers across the industry to shine a light on some underlying factors. This presented a significant challenge, as horseracing is an industry that encompasses many different roles and specialisms. Such diversity of jobs presented methodological challenges, for example, in terms of comparability of career patterns within horseracing itself, or with other sectors. However, at the same time it offered an opportunity

to investigate women's participation in these different roles and explore their work experience. This research was, therefore, framed as an exploratory study, and undertaken with an action research approach (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). This approach was most appropriate to achieve the aims of WiR, who were keen to obtain some evidence in support of their anecdotal knowledge and make a case for change. Thus, the data collection itself was a form of initial intervention to raise awareness within the industry of gender inequality. Although the research was originally intended to focus on gender, data were also collected that supported some exploration of other diversity issues. The detail is outside the scope of this paper, though it is worth recognising that the availability of data to explore intersectional issues will allow greater understanding of the wider interventions required.

Within the action research framework, a mixed-method, approach was adopted. Quantitative and the qualitative methods were used for complementary and expansion purposes (Buchanan and Bryman, 2009) to "*seek elaboration, enhancement, illustration, clarification of the results from one method with the results from another*" (Green *et al.* 1989, p. 259, cited in Buchanan and Bryman, 2009, p. 520). These methods were applied in sequence, with the survey administered first to provide an overview of work in the industry, and identify the barriers and enablers affecting work experience. Emerging findings from the survey informed the interviews. The survey was administered on-line using SurveyMonkey, and comprised 24 questions aimed at capturing respondent's type and length of work experience in the industry, the roles they occupied, career moves, factors perceived as either enabling their career progression or hindering it, their contractual status and the length of time spent in their current role.

The survey was distributed between July and October 2016 by WiR using their networks of contacts via email, an industry newsletter, social media and subsequent snowballing, providing a sampling frame of approximately 4,000 individuals. It was promoted to reach out to both women and men in the industry.

Excel and SurveyMonkey analysis functions were used for descriptive statistics. The sample of respondents to the survey was categorised into four key groups: gender (females and males), age, primary job categories as listed in the survey (ie, breeder/bloodstock, racing administration (including regulators/governing bodies), racecourse management, bookmakers, owners, trainers, jockeys, stable-staff, equine medical and welfare, charitable sector, media and marketing, education and training, finance, human medical and welfare and miscellaneous) and length of service in the industry. Textual responses to open survey questions were collated and content-analysed using Excel to identify common themes.

One-to-one, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 16 key stakeholders (seven women and nine men) between September and November. These included breeders, trainers, jockeys, stable staff, equine and human welfare, governing bodies, media and education to represent the complex nature of the sector.

Findings from the stakeholder interviews were analysed by using QSR Nvivo (v10), which was especially helpful for data management, topic coding and making sense of a rich dataset. The qualitative data analysis used a thematic approach, which drew on some of the issues identified through the preceding literature review, of factors that can impact women's careers in the sport sector. These included lack of training and development, gender stereotyping, few role models, the impact of caring responsibilities and occupational segregation. The survey results, as well as themes that emerged inductively from a systematic re-reading of the data collected were drawn upon following discussions and interpretation within the research team.

Overall, a sample comprising 393 responses was received producing a response rate of 9.8%. Women represented 79.4 per cent of all respondents, with 18.8 per cent being men and the remainder not wishing to state their gender. The largest occupational groups contributing to the survey were those with experience in racing administration (21 per cent) followed by stable-staff (14 per cent), both of which are occupational roles where women are highly represented. Many taking part had long-term experience, with 55.9 per cent of respondents (both female and male) having over 10 years' experience in the industry. Around 15 per cent

of the total who responded to the survey were self-employed or freelance, with 75 per cent of this group being women.

## **Research Findings**

### *The general working environment*

Through the one-to-one interviews with key stakeholders and the survey results, a picture emerged of the general working environment within the horseracing industry. A key feature of the industry, and one that can impact career structures, is its multiplicity of roles and opportunities. Many respondents combined various roles simultaneously, or had worked in several different areas of the industry. Some individuals, for example, had worked in stables, then subsequently racing-related administration. There is often an expectation, especially in relation to yard work, of willingness to undertake voluntary or unpaid work to 'learn the trade'. Others had moved careers to other sectors but continued to be involved in horseracing in other ways, such as helping at their local yard or stewarding at a racecourse because of their passion for the sport. Given this variety of roles and potential for involvement, some respondents felt that the industry could benefit from greater connectivity to offer better opportunities and staff development, which is well summarised by the following quote:

*"I think racing does need more opportunities, more movement of people...more career levels...may be more of the existing organisations within racing should join up and work some kind of 'work exchange' and then may be encourage more 'joining' up of various bodies for membership and benefits, for everybody connected to racing" (Female survey respondent)*

There was some consensus that areas within the industry such as media, breeders/bloodstock, equine medical and stable staff remain traditional and very male-dominated. It was, though, felt that some progress has been made as more women than ever are coming into the industry, for example through racecourse management. It was also highlighted that increasing numbers of women are joining the industry at pre-apprenticeship level through the racing colleges, which supply staff to the yards as well as other parts of the industry. The ratio of women to

men joining the industry through this route was moving towards 70/30 at the time of the study. Given the increase in women coming through the pipeline, retaining their skills is of even greater importance

Women from across different areas of the industry reported being on the receiving end of patronising behaviour and not being taken seriously, stating how these experiences undermined their confidence. Such attitudes were apparent in widely-held perceptions about women's representation, but then shown to be false. Several participants, for example, described horse-breeding as a highly feminised aspect of the industry, citing this as an example of where women were highly successful. On examination, however, just 18.3 per cent of registered breeders were women. Both women and men respondents felt that the industry was, to a certain extent, a "*boys club*", citing examples of men-only events which, although not widespread, nonetheless can exclude women from valuable networking opportunities these can also have a negative, "*drip down*" impact in terms of the spaces where women are made welcome.

Results also revealed strong perceptions that certain roles are gendered, for example, that women have greater empathy with animals. One female survey respondent stated bluntly that:

*"Sexism is still a big issue and people consider elements of the job, roles in industry as [a] male or female role. Women can nurse foals, men can do stallions"*.

An issue identified especially (though not exclusively) for staff working in the yards was that of sexist banter and sexual harassment, reported by a small number of survey respondents who witnessed or experienced this behaviour.

#### *Barriers and enablers to career progression*

Work-life balance may be challenging in an industry where some roles require a 24/7 commitment, especially for those working directly with animals. As one female interviewee stated: "*racing isn't a career choice, it's a lifestyle*". Yet having access to some form of flexibility

is important, as demonstrated by the 40 per cent of women whose survey responses indicated that they benefit from flexible working arrangements.

Survey results identified a number of factors that women perceived as barriers or as enablers to their career development and progression. Barriers included lack of good career advice, identified by 49 per cent of women respondents overall as having constrained their career development and progression. Stable staff and jockeys, though, reported better levels of career support with 54 per cent indicating that good advice has facilitated their career. Other factors identified by women respondents as career-constraining were the lack of opportunities for training and development, and their caring responsibilities either for young children or adult dependents.

Gendered barriers were particularly identifiable within stable staff roles. A high proportion of women respondents (68 per cent) working in this environment indicated that they did not have childcare responsibilities, with those who did reported that this had constrained their career. This resonated across the industry, as of those who felt they had received less favourable treatment, 65.2 per cent felt that pregnancy had affected their promotion prospects, and 55.6 per cent that maternity leave had done so.

Some also highlighted the difficulty of moving from working in stables to other roles in the sector and a lack of recognition of the skills gained doing stable work. This further supports arguments for the industry to identify better career pathways and movement between roles.

As one respondent stated:

*“Without progression opportunities and good training, leadership and encouragement people will continue to leave the sport” (Female survey respondent).*

This point echoes the suggestion that the industry promotes greater mobility between different roles and ‘work exchange’.

In terms of career enablers, mentoring was cited by both female and male respondents as a positive experience, especially when mentored by a professional with a good understanding

of the industry. Role models were also seen as important, with 55 per cent of female respondents indicating the significant importance of women role models on their career progression. However, a number of participants highlighted the lack of available women mentors and role models, with half identifying a lack of mentoring and 27 per cent who *never* had the opportunity of being mentored. Twelve per cent of female respondents had not received any mentoring and felt that this might have constrained their career 'a lot'. The importance of women who are already well established in the industry sponsoring other women was highlighted and, in some cases in evidence, with one female interviewee explaining:

*"I have met individuals in senior positions who go out of their way to be supportive of organisations like Women in Racing and those within it".*

Networking was further identified as an enabling factor, with almost half of survey respondents stating that this had been a significant factor in their career development.

#### *Women jockeys and other freelance work*

In support of existing scholarship, the role of jockey stood out as having a very low rate of women's participation, despite the potentially high numbers in the pipeline through the racing colleges. Though becoming a jockey is highly challenging for both women and men, interviewees suggested that some trainers and owners are less likely to give apprentice rides to women, citing examples of those who would argue that women do not have sufficient weight and strength to ride as well as men. Other barriers to women that were cited included the need for extensive travelling, which can be difficult to reconcile with family life, and the freelance nature of the profession with the associated lack of secure earnings. The freelance nature of the job was described as less appealing to women who recognise both that they have fewer earning years if they want children, and less time to save for a maternity break. Women in other freelance roles, in particular media work, also raised these factors as potentially detrimental to their career development. This was compounded by their inability to afford the

training and development (compared to those in contractual employment) that might progress their careers within this diverse and multi-faceted sector.

### *Women in senior and leadership roles*

Respondents held differing views about a need to increase women's representation at senior levels. Some felt that progress has been made and there were a few isolated comments in support of the idea that the industry operates as a meritocracy, giving access to abundant opportunities and presenting no problems for women. Some women who had achieved leadership roles within the industry reported that, although they personally had not faced overt sexism, they also felt that they were neither encouraged nor welcomed in senior roles. This was well summarised by one, who said that when her male boss left:

*"[I] did not feel that as his second in command [they] would consider a woman in the role. This was never overt however, I was not encouraged to apply" (Female survey respondent).*

When asked whether during their time in their current role they had applied for promotion or for other significant career moves, survey results indicated that, compared to men, women were both less likely to have applied for promotion and also less likely to intend applying in the future. Reflecting the complexity of the industry, however, variations were found in different areas of work, for example, both women and men who worked in racing administration (including regulators/governing bodies), racecourse management, charitable sector or finance were more likely to have applied for promotion in contrast to bookmaking and equine and medical welfare. One senior stakeholder interviewee confirmed that, in the customer-facing and racecourse-related roles there are very good opportunities for all. Where the industry was seen to be offering wider and more senior opportunities for women in a variety of roles, it was also observed that these are often in areas traditionally populated by women, such as HR. Despite this, however, it was commented that:

*"I think there is a bottleneck if you like ... as you get to more senior positions in horseracing. And I think there is a paucity of female executives once you get to the operating, chief*

*operating officer, chief executive, finance director level*".

(Interviewee, male)

This may be particularly problematic as a lack of women at senior level means fewer role models, which can have an impact particularly given the number of women who identified this as key for success.

Anecdotal knowledge on lower numbers of women in board positions was clarified by a snapshot of industry organisations at the time of the study. A BHA list was used to identify both executive and non-executive board directors and trustees (BHA Industry Links, 2017). It showed greater numbers of women on the boards of charitable organisations, compared to other boards, with an average of 34 per cent and 16 per cent respectively. Overall, levels of representation on horseracing-related boards mirror those in the wider economy in that charitable organisations tend to have higher representation of women both in executive and non-executive director roles with 27.6 per cent of CEOs of the 100 largest charities being women (Jewell and Bazeley, 2018).

In summary, the findings showed myriad career paths, and a complex industry that is changing and would benefit from structures to better support connectivity, mobility between roles, training and development opportunities and better career advice. Though greater numbers of women are pursuing careers in the sector, some areas remain male-dominated, with firmly entrenched ideas about gendered roles. These can then lead to the exclusion or occupational segregation of women. Many identified the difficulty of achieving work-life balance within an industry that is often seen as a lifestyle choice, with pregnancy, maternity leave and caring responsibilities acting to constrain careers and/or promotion prospects. Many of these constraints have been identified in other sport scholarship. These include careers that are shortened to accommodate caring responsibilities that may not be compatible with obtaining the rich work experience needed to succeed, or to working in a role that is predominantly freelance. However, the complexity of horseracing careers adds an additional layer for women in horseracing. In order to navigate the industry, mentoring and networking were identified as

important enablers, both of which can be less available to women. Finally, there remain some misconceptions that high proportions of women succeed, supported by a belief that the industry always operates as a meritocracy. The picture remains complex with differences in where women best achieve. It is, though, apparent that gender-related segregation remains, for example, in more traditionally 'feminine' areas such as the charitable sector and hands-on animal care, or 'masculine' ones such as jockeying.

### *Recommended 'next steps' and further developments*

A set of recommendations was developed, informed by the above research findings, discussed with WiR and designed to address the key issues and some of the underlying causes. These reflected the richness of the findings and were used to highlight four key areas for change. Initiatives suggested to address '*career development and support*' across the industry included suggestions for raising the profile of existing successful women to reinforce necessary role models, finding ways to advise and support women on potential career paths and developing industry standard guidelines on essential mechanisms such as mentoring. '*Senior level development and recruitment*' provided suggestions such as shadowing and mentoring for nurturing women at less senior levels, to both empower individuals and address the shortage of women in senior leadership positions to develop role models for the future. Recommendations relating to '*work-life balance and pastoral care*', for example, included proposed 'next steps' aimed at changing the culture by challenging "*any negative attitudes around diversity and enable all managers to understand what is required by them*" and to tackle bullying and harassment (Clayton-Hathway & Manfredi, 2017, p. 47). Finally, '*taking forward the diversity agenda*', aimed to promote better understanding of the issues the industry faces and emphasise a need for leadership in developing fairer treatment and access to the industry's institutions. The diverse and fragmented nature of the industry was taken into account, in particular its many small businesses with few resources at their disposal. A key recommendation was the establishment of "*an independent steering body to act as champions*

*in supporting the industry in its efforts*" (ibid, p. 45) to address diversity issues with suggestions for this initiative to be led by the BHA.

This recommendation was enacted by the BHA, which established the Diversity in Racing Steering Group (DiRSG) comprising different stakeholders from the industry. In 2018, the steering group launched its first Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan (2018). It sets a target for 30 per cent women's representation on industry-related boards by 2021, and emphasises the need to monitor participation on the racing workforce as a whole. It also commits to identifying and showcasing more diverse role models, to tackling the gender pay gap and offering an industry-wide mentoring scheme. The plan concludes by stating that:

*"As the first publication from the Diversity in Racing Steering Group we hope this action plan provokes debate and generates further ideas from all sectors of the sport". (p. 8)*

Following its publication, a full-time head of diversity and inclusion was appointed to implement the plan, which suggests real commitment in taking action to achieve change (see BHA, 2018), alongside the establishment of a framework for monitoring and accountability. In line with this, as the governing body for the sport, BHA opened themselves up to potential scrutiny, conducting a review of its governance structure to ensure it is in line with UK Sport's Code for Governance (Diversity in Racing Steering Group, 2019).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Critiques of 'corporate feminism' raise valid concerns about whether re-distributing lucrative and prestigious leadership roles between women and men can tackle more entrenched, widespread inequalities. In other words, is having more women in leadership roles going to produce a 'trickle down' effect to benefit women working at lower levels within organisations and sectors? Or is corporate feminism simply the product of a neoliberal agenda that has succeeded in subordinating the case for gender equality to business interests? As highlighted earlier, Ferreira (ibid) expressed doubts that the top of organisations is a good place to start, calling for more empirical evidence to show that intervention at board level reduces

discrimination lower down. More specifically, in critique of the study explored by this paper, Williams and Hall (ibid, p. 15), question the effectiveness of the recommendations that stemmed from the research and argue that “*using the smooth conciliatory language of ‘partnership’, ‘brands’ and ‘best practice’ the report offers a heavily corporatised and rather incorporated female voice*”. They call for a more radical and transformative agenda to “*challenge or subvert...the existing gender order in British racing*” (p. 15).

It is the contention of this paper that, although both the general critique of corporate feminism and that more specifically addressed towards this study raise some reasonable arguments, neither offer solutions nor point to any practical steps on how such radical transformation could be achieved. In its final section, this paper argues how the study shows that, although the initiative was driven by a group of women whose initial concern could be perceived as a lack of women’s representation in senior leadership roles within horseracing, it has benefitted women working across that industry in different roles and at all levels. The discussion begins with the question raised by Ferreira about starting ‘from the top’, and whether a focus on senior leadership can help address wider issues of gender inequality. It then responds to the more specific criticisms raised by Williams and Hall.

Firstly, the top can be a good place to start, as this is where power lies and where any action is likely to have greater visibility. Moreover, in the specific context of horseracing which, as seen earlier, is a very diverse and fragmented industry in terms of different roles and professions, it is difficult to see where else action to promote positive change across the whole industry could start. This study showed that starting from the top gave greater visibility to the WiR report and, similarly to the Davies Review, attracted a lot of media attention. In turn, this generated a positive response from the BHA. This was demonstrated by the establishment of a cross-industry diversity steering body and the subsequent adoption of an action plan for implementation across the sport.

Secondly, this takes us to the more general criticism that a focus on senior leadership does not help to address wider issues of gender inequality. We argue that the research conducted

for this study showed that any serious discussion about women in leadership roles can lead to looking more broadly into gender equality issues, power relations and deep-seated inequalities in order to understand what prevents equal participation of women in different roles. In short, women's under-representation at the top is a symptom that requires an investigation of the causes that lie across different sectoral layers acting as barriers to a more equal gender distribution of senior jobs. Although driven by some from a corporate environment, this work has nonetheless created a space to start a broader conversation about gender and other equality issues. Within that space, some senior respondents have already been willing to 'call out' areas where, as women moving up the ladder, they had not been welcomed. Based on current arguments about corporate feminism, we could surmise that these women's interest was their self-actualisation and a brand of feminism that aligns with that advocated by Sandberg (ibid), driving an initial focus on the lack of women on boards and leadership roles. Regardless of the motivation, however, the WiR project showed an act of unity and not simply individualism, with the report providing a comprehensive picture of gender issues across the industry.

It is true that the recommendations in the report address areas such as improved networking opportunities and career advice, which have been critiqued as part of a 'fixing the women' approach. However, this also opens up women's access to essential physical and cultural capital. Furthermore, the research gave a voice to a more marginalised sections of the industry. It also helped to surface a number of issues, such as wider structural disadvantage and inequalities related to pregnancy and maternity, the impact of few senior women as role models, difficulties of achieving a satisfactory work-life balance, and also sexism, bullying and harassment in some areas of the industry. Moreover, by creating a baseline of measures, there is initial evidence to show where women are under-represented. This can contribute to the debunking of long-standing stereotypes and perceptions that horseracing operates entirely as a meritocracy. These findings have helped to gain a better understanding about how the

sector is segregated, alongside the lived experiences of women working in different parts of this industry and at all levels.

Williams and Hall expressed doubts as to whether the report could be a “*springboard for change*”. They especially pointed to the use of language of ‘*partnership*’, ‘*brands*’ and ‘*best practice*’. It is recognised that they have a point about such language, in relation to its focus on corporate concerns. However, this choice of language is important if those concerned with equalities wish to engage with businesses. In this specific case, with a sector driven by many commercial interests as well as a passion for the sport, any solutions must speak a language to which they relate. As this case study shows, the “*smooth and conciliatory language*” of the WiR report has been instrumental in encouraging a collaborative approach whereby the BHA engages with its recommendations and develops an action plan, setting up a steering group and committing financial resources through the appointment of a diversity specialist to drive change. Moreover, it opened up a discussion on other diversities and the adoption of a more inclusive discourse. This may not be the “*challenging call to arms*”, as argued by Williams and Hall, but it has led to concrete steps to achieve change, albeit incrementally.

It is not intended to dismiss the criticism raised by the literature on corporate feminism nor that specifically raised towards the WiR report, as both make valid points. However, this paper argues that, between the business-oriented approach to equality and the more radical one, there might be a ‘third way’ for promoting equality and achieving change that is rooted in a more pragmatic approach. We live in a society heavily influenced by neo-liberal ideology, and this is not going to change any time soon. What matters is putting gender equality on the agenda and opening up the conversation. As this work shows, ‘the top’ can be a good place to start and it can produce a ‘trickle down’ effect to benefit women more widely across a sector. Such a call to action may need to be wrapped up in the language of business to initiate change, and, by commissioning and championing this research the senior women in horseracing can intervene to benefit and give a voice to women at all levels of the industry.

## **Organisational Implications**

It is important that those in senior and governance roles, such as the BHA recognise existing barriers to women's careers in the horseracing industry. There is a strong business case in existence within the ongoing work of the DiRSG, as these initiatives could help with retaining talent. This, however, will also support principles of social justice and reducing discrimination through introducing structures that encourage change.

## **Limitations**

While acknowledging that the response rate of 9.8% was low, we are mindful that this was the first study of its kind and therefore new to many individuals and the industry in general. This may have caused potential participants to feel inhibited. Nevertheless, the findings obtained across the qualitative and quantitative methods provided rich data and supported the key findings discussed here.

## **Future research**

Future studies could seek to revisit the themes covered in the original survey to ascertain the impact of any equality initiatives in place. Building on some of the structures the industry developed following the existing work, and the fact that such a survey would be more familiar to the industry means a broader sample could be possible. A wider data set would support greater analysis of the experiences of more diverse groups through intersectional analysis, for example, exploring gender and age. An additional area for useful exploration would be career pathways within the sport and how these fit with contemporary career models and, for women, in different stages of the life cycle. This would have practical application in assessing support structures for women in horseracing. Aligned to this would be some investigation of ways to increase valuable social capital for women in the sport. Furthermore, more detailed examination of some of horseracing's organisational structures, their gendered nature and systemic inequalities would be helpful in supporting positive change. Finally, it is hoped that the work herein provides a basis for conducting similar studies across other sports.

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