Mobilising gender equality: A discourse analysis of bids to host the FIFA Women’s World Cup 2023™

Bridgette M Desjardins
Department of Law & Legal Studies, Carleton University, Canada

Abstract
After an exciting bidding process featuring competing submissions from Brazil, Colombia and Japan, Australia and New Zealand were chosen to co-host the FIFA Women’s World Cup 2023™. Using feminist discourse analysis to examine the narrative strategies employed by the bidding nations, this article demonstrates that bidding nations discursively mobilised themes of gender equality to position their bids favourably. They did so by asserting themselves as leaders in women’s sport and gender equality, and by emphasising strategies for growing women’s football. Bidding nations situate themselves as benevolent rescuers of struggling women’s sport without acknowledging their accountability for policies and practices that disenfranchised women’s football in the first place. This article argues that the mobilisation of gender equality discourses by bidding nations problematically uses neoliberal feminist logics, stripping pro-women messages such as equal opportunity and empowerment of political context and repackaging them in commercially viable ways. Ultimately, although bidding nations use discourses of gender equality to position themselves favourably, existing levels of gender inequality reveal the limits of their positioning.

Keywords
commodity feminism, feminist critical discourse analysis, gender equality discourses, neoliberal feminism, sport mega-event bidding, women’s football, women’s soccer

Introduction
In June 2020, Australia and New Zealand were chosen by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) members to co-host the FIFA Women’s World Cup (FWWC) 2023™. The host selection competition was informed by two significant forces. First, this bidding competition was only the second ever, and the first specifically for a women’s event, to occur during FIFA’s new era of accountability and transparency. Following years of corruption allegations (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson and Sugden,
2003) an official investigation of FIFA was launched in 2015, headed by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. The investigation was centred around bribes, money laundering and fraud, partly in relation to the host selection process for the FIFA Men’s World Cup 2022™, which was controversially awarded to Qatar. Although the details of the investigation and findings are irrelevant for the purposes of this article, the investigation resulted in changes to the bidding process to prevent corruption in future hosting decisions. The changes included publicising information such as the bid books submitted by prospective host countries, the bid evaluation reports completed by FIFA and the ballots cast by member football associations when voting to select hosts for a forthcoming World Cup.

Second, the bid occurred at a time at which FIFA is increasing its focus on women’s football. As part of its post-corruption scandal restructuring process, FIFA (2016) released a roadmap for the future of football, which has a significant focus on women. Supplementing the 2016 roadmap, FIFA released its Women’s Football Strategy (2018), outlining its desire to increase participation and further commercialise women’s football. Additionally, the unprecedented success of the FWWC 2019™ in France (FIFA, 2019a) led to an increased interest in developing the women’s game, after which FIFA pledged to invest US$1 billion into women’s football (FIFA, 2020a). Combined, these factors set the stage for an exciting competition over the hosting rights for the FWWC 2023™. FIFA further expanded its commitment to women’s football in September 2020, after the 2023 hosting rights were awarded to Australia/New Zealand. FIFA’s (2020b) Women’s Development Programme includes eight programmes available to member associations from 2020 to 2023. It aims to support the growth and development of national women’s programmes and offset the fiscal repercussions of Covid-19.

This article analyses the content of the bid books submitted to FIFA by nations seeking to host the FWWC 2023™. It asks the following two questions: how is gender framed and/or mobilised by bidding nations in the FWWC 2023™ bidding process; and what does this framing accomplish? Given increased investment in women’s football by FIFA and numerous football associations, this article is a timely exploration of how proposed goals to improve women’s sport are articulated, along with potential repercussions. It is the first to explore gender as it relates to bidding to host sport mega-events (SME), offering an analysis of bids for a women’s only sport event, as well as focusing on the mobilisation of gendered discourses within the bid.

**Literature review**

The established body of literature that is focused on SME primarily analyses the repercussions of hosting them, for example, housing displacement and gentrification (Kennelly, 2016; Porter et al., 2009; Shin, 2009; Suzuki et al., 2018), financial risks of hosting (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Mitchell and Stewart, 2015; Zimbalist, 2015) and the necessity for increased security and surveillance (Bennett and Haggerty, 2012; Boyle and Haggerty, 2009; Giulianotti and Klauser, 2009). Despite the social and economic repercussions, hosting SME remains attractive for several reasons. McGillivray and Turner (2017) analysed bids for cultural and sporting events including bids for the Olympics, the FIFA Men’s World Cup and the European Capital of Culture. They
identify three primary motivations inspiring submissions to host bids for large events: (a) economic reframing, whereby bidders hope for financial rewards by hosting, but also see hosting as a means of reframing the vitality of their economy in the global imaginary; (b) nation-building, as a means of constructing a brand identity that is globally recognisable and internally galvanising for citizens; and (c) place-making, whereby the global position of the host nation is bolstered. McGillivray and Turner’s exploration of place-making resonates with a number of scholars who argue that host nations use SME to adjust their image (Buarque, 2015; Henderson, 2014; Ogunnubi, 2019), often as a manifestation of a state’s soft power strategies (Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Grix et al., 2015; Grix and Houlihan, 2014).

McGillivray and Turner (2017) explore the rhetoric employed within bids, and find that bidding nations employ two types of narratives: reward narratives, which focus on convincing adjudicators that the bidding nation is best equipped to host the event on technical grounds and should, therefore, be selected to host; and scholarship narratives, in which the bidding process is reframed to include emotional elements, attempting to move primary considerations away from technical competencies towards intangible factors, such as how much a bidding nation will benefit from hosting. McGillivray and Turner point out that Vancouver’s successful Olympic bid used reward narratives (Black, 2007), because the city presented itself as a safe choice host, citing ‘cosmopolitan’ factors including diversity and multiculturalism as extra incentives, whereas Morocco’s and South Africa’s bids to host the 2006 and 2010 FIFA Men’s World Cup used scholarship narratives, deploying both neocolonial and postcolonial narratives (Cornelissen, 2004).

Although McGillivray and Turner (2017) provide excellent theoretical insight into narrative strategies employed by bidding nations, and other scholars offer thorough and provoking case studies of bidding strategies (Cornelissen, 2004; Hiller, 2000), the role of gender has yet to be thoroughly explored in relation to bidding to be an event host. Neither bids to host women’s sporting events, nor the ways in which gender is discursively mobilised in bidding narratives, have been analysed – a silence this article seeks to address. The comparatively smaller scale of women-specific sporting events has likely contributed to the lack of gender analysis. For example, Müller (2014) offers a quantifiable taxonomy of sport events that considers number of tickets sold, value of broadcast rights, total cost and capital investment for classification purposes. Accordingly, the London 2012 Olympics was a giga event, the relatively smaller South Africa 2010 FIFA Men’s World Cup was a mega-event and the even smaller 2013 New Orleans Super Bowl was a major event. The 2023 FWWC will likely be a major event, whereas previous FWWC would be classified as major or smaller. Additionally, the lack of attention to gender in bidding for mixed gender and men only competitions probably stems from the fact that gender is rarely explicitly mentioned in these bids and, therefore, has inspired little investigation.

With regard to football, conversely, women and gender have been studied extensively. Much of the literature focuses on histories of resilience and repression (Brus and Trangbæk, 2003; Cox and Pringle, 2012; Cox and Thompson, 2003; McGowan and Downes, 2018; Williams, 2003, 2006), the increasing professionalisation of the women’s game and the consequences (Allison, 2016, 2018; Dunn and Welford, 2017; Williams, 2013; Woodhouse et al., 2019) and on sexism and misogyny within football structures.
(Caudwell, 2017; Knijnik, 2012; Scraton et al., 1999; Woodward, 2017). Because this article studies how gender discourses are used in the bid books, the primary focus of analysis is on the ways in which gender is mobilised as part of the bidding nations’ rhetorical sales pitches. To this end, this article engages with the broader context of gendered inequality in football as discussed in the literature only insofar as it is relevant to contextualise the claims made by bidding nations, all of whom take pains to position themselves as instrumental in advancing women’s football.

**Methodology**

The bidding process opened with expressions of interest from potential bidders that had to be submitted to FIFA by March 2019. Nine expressions of interest – a record number – were received (FIFA, 2019b). In July, FIFA’s 2019 Executive Committee unanimously decided to increase the number of teams participating in the 2023 tournament from 24 to 32 and, accordingly, extended the bid submission deadline from 4 October to mid-December 2019. In the end, Brazil, Colombia and Japan each submitted individual bids, whereas Australia and New Zealand submitted a joint bid. Days before FIFA released their evaluation of the bids, Brazil withdrew its submission. President Bolsonaro cited an inability to offer financial guarantees because of economic insecurity resulting from Covid-19 and the resulting austerity measures (Associated Press, 2020). Consequently, FIFA’s (2020c) bid evaluation report appraised the three remaining submissions. Japan withdrew its bid before the final vote, partly because the delayed Toyko 2020 Olympics would require Japan to host two major women’s football events in quick succession, and partly because Japan was unlikely to win after experiencing difficulties in soliciting sufficient support (Kyodo News+, 2020). Thus, Colombia and Australia/New Zealand were the only remaining competitors. Despite the field narrowing from four to two by the final selection date, this article analyses all four submissions, because its aim is not to explore which bidding strategies are successful but, instead, to examine how gender is discursively mobilised by various agents in a bidding event.

The bid books submitted to FIFA by each of the prospective host nations are the primary texts analysed in this article. The bid book submissions ranged in length from Japan’s relatively short 102-page submission to Australia/New Zealand’s 188-page document. The format of the bid books follows a formula prescribed by FIFA, so the subjects addressed are consistent. The books are split into five key subjects: (a) event vision and key metrics; (b) event infrastructure; (c) event services; (d) commercial; and (e) human rights and sustainability. The content in the first and last sections is the most relevant to this study because gender features prominently, although data from each of the five sections were collected and analysed. Additionally, FIFA’s (2020c) FIFA Women’s World Cup 2023™ Bid Evaluation Report is analysed to contextualise how bidding nations’ discursive choices were interpreted by FIFA.

Feminist theory, particularly concepts of neoliberal feminism, facilitated this analysis. Operating globally at present, neoliberalism is a political economic practice and theory that prioritises free markets and trade and increased private property rights alongside state deregulation and disinvestment elsewhere (Harvey, 2007). More than a political or economic framework, neoliberalism has become a rationality whereby the
subject becomes a form of human capital, and political elements of governance are
subsumed by economic priorities (Brown, 2015). The influence of neoliberal rationali-
ties on political mobilisation manifests itself via appeals to individual freedom and
choice, as influenced by market principles, at the expense of structural and communal
arguments. Neoliberal feminism, therefore, refers to the manner in which neoliberal
ideologies appear in some forms of feminist thinking; this does not mean that feminism
as a whole has been co-opted, but rather that some tenets of feminism are selectively
utilised in accordance with neoliberal rationalities. Prügl (2015: 617) identifies three
distinct tenets or manifestations of neoliberalism, and describes how some contempo-
rary subsets of feminism have been neoliberalised, focusing on ‘(a) the co-optation of
feminism into neoliberal economic projects, (b) the integration of feminism into neolib-
eral ideology, and (c) the interweaving of feminist ideas into rationalities and technolo-
gies of neoliberal governmentality’.

Similarly, Rottenberg (2014: 421–422) argues that neoliberalism as it relates to femi-
nism produces ‘a particular kind of feminist subject. Using key liberal terms, such as
equality, opportunity, and free choice, while displacing and replacing their content, this
recuperated feminism forges a feminist subject who is not only individualised but entre-
preneurial.’ This introduces a paradox whereby gender inequality is simultaneously
acknowledged and disavowed and gendered emancipation is stripped of societal context
and refigured in individualised terms. Neoliberal feminism departs from streams of femi-
nism that focus on structural and political causes of gender inequality such as Marxist
feminism’s focus on women’s exploitation via capitalism and critical race theory’s cri-
tique of hierarchies embedded in legal structures. As neoliberalism reframes human sub-
jectivity according to market principles, neoliberal feminism refigures women’s
collective political struggle, presenting the future of women’s emancipation as the
responsibility of the individual woman, made possible when women subscribe to market
rationalities of personal advancement and competition.

Such feminist theory informed the coding process. This was facilitated via the qualita-
tive data management software NVivo 12, which was used to assist coding and analysis.
Simultaneous qualitative coding methods – Descriptive Coding and In Vivo coding –
were used during first round coding. Descriptive Coding identifies the topic of a set of
data, after which the researcher assigns a relevant code based on categorisation (Saldaña,
2013; Tesch, 1990). In Vivo coding, which is inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz,
2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), assigns a code based on the language found in the data.
As such, In Vivo codes are generated by the participants, which helps the researcher retain
participants’ meanings during coding (Charmaz, 2014). Like Descriptive Coding, In Vivo
codes can also be used to identify the main topic of a data set rather than summarise or
analyse content, which allows the two types of coding to work together seamlessly as
Descriptive Coding methods. Given that this article asks how gender equality discourses
are mobilised, particular attention was paid to discussion of gender during coding.

The coding methods described above facilitated a feminist critical discourse analysis
(CDA) of the bid books. CDA takes an ‘explicit sociopolitical stance’ with regard to the
study of discourse (Van Dijk, 1993: 249), examining the meaning of language in and
through social practices (Gee, 1999). Beginning with the assumption that CDA should
not analyse the discourse itself but rather the dialectical relationships between the
discourse and other objects, elements or moments, Fairclough (2010: 14) asserts that, ‘the priority for critical research including CDA should shift from critique of structures to critique of strategies – of attempts, in the context of the failure of existing structures, to transform them in particular directions’. Although adhering to the general principles of CDA, feminist CDA focuses on gender by concentrating on how discourses (re)produce gendered social orders, thus precluding transformative social possibilities (Lazar, 2017). This study of the narrative strategies related to the mobilisation of gender found within the bid books fits naturally with CDA’s focus on critiquing discursive strategies; specifically, this article explores how neoliberal feminist logics employed within the bids allow structural issues to remain uncontested. Therefore, the dialectical relationship between performative invoking of gender equality discourses and the existing state of gender inequality is the object of analysis. Given that FIFA asserts women’s football is on the cusp of dramatic transformation after the success of the FWWC 2019™ (FIFA, 2019c), a critical analysis of how women and women’s football are discursively positioned is fruitful. As such, commonalities between bid books are stressed.

Findings and analysis

Analysis of the four bid books submitted to FIFA by the five prospective host nations found that on behalf of bidding nations, football associations position themselves as leaders in women’s football to present themselves as the country most equipped to grow the women’s game. The overarching focus of the bid books is the development of women’s football, guided by FIFA’s Women’s Football Strategy (2018). Coding revealed three interconnected categories with regard to gender references: the current state of gender equality; the current state of women’s sport in the nation; and plans for the future of women’s football. Conceptually, the purpose of the bid books is to convince FIFA that the bidding nation(s) should be chosen to host the event. Discussion of commercial details, event infrastructure and event services comprise the majority of the bid books. These technical details feature little discussion of women’s football. However, gender equality discourses feature heavily in the section of the bid books entitled ‘Hosting vision and strategy’, particularly in the subsection dedicated to ‘Women’s football development and legacy’.

In addition to touting superior infrastructure and services, each country mobilises discourses of gender equality to present itself as the nation best equipped to grow the game and, therefore, as the country most suited to host the 2023 tournament. As such, gender equality is used to sell the nation to FIFA in the same way that superior stadiums are presented as selling points. This article argues that such mobilisation of gender equality discourses employs problematic neoliberal feminist logics. Although acknowledging that women’s football needs development, and each nation asserting it is the best to take this on, bidding nations present themselves as benevolent rescuers of struggling women’s sport without acknowledging their accountability for policies and practices that disenfranchised women’s sport in the first place. Ultimately, bidding nations’ use of gender equality discourses to present themselves as champions of women’s equality in football, despite varying levels of existing gender inequality, reveals that feminist messaging is commodified as a sales strategy in SME bidding.
**FIFA’s role in guiding gendered discourse**

FIFA prescribes the structure of the bid books and the topics that must be covered within. In *Guide to the Bidding Process* (FIFA, 2019d), FIFA outlines its plans in relation to the growth of women’s football, and highlights its *Women’s Football Strategy* (2018). In the bid evaluation report (FIFA, 2020c: 54) FIFA states that conformity to its ‘vision’ with regard to growing women’s football is a key consideration when evaluating bids. Despite this, details explaining how bids will be evaluated give no quantifiable weight to gender initiatives: 70% of the evaluation rests on infrastructure (stadiums, accommodation, event sites, etc.), and 30% on commercial viability (forecasted revenue streams and organising costs) (FIFA, 2020c). Regardless, adherence to FIFA’s *Women’s Football Strategy* is necessary, although it is a soft metric excluded from the quantitative evaluation scheme.

FIFA released a comprehensive bid evaluation report in June 2020, judging each of the three remaining bids according to the predetermined criteria mentioned above. Alongside the quantifiable portion of the evaluation, FIFA also evaluated bidding nations’ strategies with regard to women’s football development and legacy, their capacity to grow the women’s game and wider impacts on gender equality. For example, when evaluating Colombia’s bid, FIFA (2020c: 122) states

> When it comes to the empowerment of women, the bid book states that the tournament would be used as a vehicle to promote government-supported gender equality and social development goals. It adds that the Colombian government has already indicated its commitment in this area, although concrete actions are not yet listed.

FIFA’s consideration of the likelihood that the tournament will increase gender equality in Colombia, along with the stated desire for more specificity regarding actionable government support, indicates it takes plans to promote gender equality seriously, in football and beyond.

Similarly, when evaluating the Australia/New Zealand bid, FIFA (2020b: 72) writes with approval that

> The football development and legacy objectives outlined in the Australia/New Zealand bid are clear and concise. It is evident that there is a strong overlap with the objectives and targets set out in the FIFA Women’s Football Strategy, and that hosting the tournament in Australia and New Zealand is viewed by the bidder as a catalyst to grow women’s football throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

By continuously measuring bidding nations’ success in emulating their own *Women’s Football Strategy* (FIFA, 2018), FIFA makes it clear it has established baseline expectations in relation to investment in women’s football that bidding nations must meet to be successful.

These demands are somewhat hypocritical, considering FIFA’s long history of misogyny and disinterest in the women’s game. For example, the first FWWC was held in 1991, 61 years after the first Men’s World Cup, exemplifying FIFA’s historic failure to support women’s football. FIFA’s recent failures are exemplified by the continuing pay
gap in prize money: the women’s tournament receives US$30 million whereas the men’s receives US$400 million. FIFA’s failure to respond to the 2014 gender discrimination lawsuit headed by American player Abby Wambach, which argued that use of artificial turf for the 2015 FWWC constituted unfair working conditions, is another example of FIFA’s lacklustre support. The continued disregard for women’s football is perhaps unsurprising, considering the casual sexism displayed by former FIFA president Sepp Blatter, who urged women footballers to wear tighter shorts to increase sponsorship.

Despite FIFA’s historic and continued sexism, it has begun improving its support for women’s football (to what degree this improvement is motivated by new respect for women’s sport as opposed to a desire to capitalise on an untapped market is a question beyond the scope of this article). Reflecting FIFA’s new commitment, the bid books are dominated by plans to grow the women’s game. However, the decision to mobilise narratives of existing gender equality rather than merely highlighting future potential – a recurring theme explored below – was a rhetorical strategy voluntarily adopted by each bidding nation.

The current state of women’s sport and national gender equality

Bidding nations emphasise current levels of gender equality by presenting themselves as champions of women’s sporting emancipation. Japan (Japan Football Association, 2019: 1) states that as it is the only country to win the FWWC in all age categories, it is ‘keenly aware of the value of women’s football’. Australia and New Zealand (Football Federation Australia and New Zealand Football, 2019: 7) boast that they ‘are leaders in women’s football’, highlighting player pay parity agreements at the senior levels of football, New Zealand’s award-winning football development programme and existing commercial investment in Australia’s national women’s team, among other examples of support. Brazil (Brazilian Football Confederation, 2019: 5) states, ‘our dedication to women’s football and aspiration to put the sport on a pedestal and use the women’s game to give greater visibility to female athletes can be seen in our modernist approach to the sport’, emphasising the significance of its existing women’s league championship and record of hiring female coaches. Bidding countries take pains to highlight the advanced state of women’s football in their own country, and their role in allowing it to flourish.

Positioning themselves as champions of women’s football allows bidding nations to mobilise discourses of gender equality to sell the nation. This strategy is clearly apparent in Australia/New Zealand’s bid. They write, ‘women’s sport, and in particular women’s football, is on the rise in our confederations. Now is a time of unprecedented momentum for women’s sport. Never before has there been a better time for women to play football’ (Football Federation Australia and New Zealand Football, 2019: 44), going on to detail recent pay parity deals. New Zealand Football and the New Zealand Professional Footballers Association signed a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) in 2018 guaranteeing pay parity, equal prize money and travel parity for the men’s and women’s sides. The 2019 CBA signed by Football Federation Australia and the players’ union improves parental leave and guarantees pay equity, equal shares of revenue generated by the national team and equal off-field benefits. Australia/New Zealand list several other signs of investment in women’s sport, including national strategies for increasing participation
in female sport, thus helping to ‘move the dial on gender equality’ (Football Federation Australia and New Zealand Football, 2019: 44). They conclude by stating, ‘These initiatives reflect the growing support for and public appeal of women’s sport in our countries’ (Football Federation Australia and New Zealand Football, 2019: 44). Australia/New Zealand present the moves they have made towards gender equality as a selling point intended to position their bid favourably.

In emphasising their capacity to grow women’s football successfully, bidding nations situate themselves – alongside FIFA – as benevolent rescuers of struggling women’s sport. This positioning disguises their contributions to current levels of gendered inequality and understates the benefits they would reap should they succeed in their bid to host the event. Although this hypocrisy exists in varying levels in each bid book, it is perhaps most blatant in Brazil’s submission. In the introductory letter that opens Brazil’s bid book written, by Brazilian Football Confederation President Rogério Caboclo, he writes that he wants the FWWC 2023™ to ‘serve as both a springboard and an inspiration for young girls all over the planet who are considering a career in football, a sport traditionally considered a primarily male exploit – all that is about to change, on our watch’ (Brazilian Football Confederation, 2019: 6). It was illegal for women to play football in Brazil from 1941 to 1979, an institutional act of gender discrimination supported by the Brazilian Football Confederation, with severe repercussions for the development of women’s football that affect the sport to this day (Knijnik, 2012). Given the Confederation’s problematic recent history, its decision to position itself as the best means of inspiring girls and changing gendered assumptions about football participation, rings hollow, because it willfully distances the Confederation from its own complicity in creating the atmosphere that discourages women and girls from participating at present.

Brazil is not the only nation with a troubling record with regard to women’s football. Lack of resources, investment, misogyny and homophobia have plagued women’s football across Latin America (Elsey and Nadel, 2019), and this has had an impact on Colombia as well as Brazil. As far as Colombia is concerned, Biram and Martinez-Mina (2020: 5) state, ‘in a country where football has an increasingly discernible symbolic role, the point to which women remain relegated to the margins cannot be emphasized enough’, arguing that a long history of gender discrimination has been made increasingly apparent during Covid-19, during which time professional women’s football has been consistently overlooked in favour of supporting men’s leagues. Colombia’s bid was comparatively humble when asserting its role in advancing women’s football, acknowledging ‘deep traditions [that] made us believe, for many years, that football, as many other activities, were exclusively for men’ (2019: 3) and that ‘there is still a long way to go’ (Colombian Football Federation, 2019: 12) in developing professional women’s competitions. Despite acknowledging flaws, Colombia emphasised its ‘constant support’, stating ‘women’s football in Colombia has achieved a significant growth. Little by little, the myth of being a sport exclusively for men has ended’ (Colombian Football Federation, 2019: 12), a questionable statement given Colombia’s almost exclusive support of male footballers during Covid-19.

While positioning themselves as leaders in women’s football is a common trend across bid books, the degree to which this was done varied. As mentioned, Colombia was less fervent than the others in asserting its leadership. Additionally, the degree to which
claims of leadership are supported materially varies. Australia’s and New Zealand’s recently created CBAs, as described above, offer significant material support for their national women’s teams; such material support lends credence to Australia’s and New Zealand’s leadership claims, particularly considering none of the other bidding countries had enacted pay parity deals at that time. However, such support is new, and it remains limited. For example, Cox and Pringle (2012) point out the extraordinary lack of official involvement in women’s football in New Zealand throughout much of the 20th century, which, ironically, allowed the sport to proliferate in the shadows because women’s involvement was neither supported nor discouraged, but just ignored. Therefore, New Zealand Football’s recent attention to women’s football is making up for lost time. Additionally, McGowan and Downes (2018: 66) argue that Football Federation Australia’s recent failure to improve the structure of the W-League, the top women’s league in Australia, by implementing a full home and away contest ‘illustrates a lack of respect’, thus showing the Federation’s support for women’s football remains partial. The amount of support offered to women’s football by each federation varies, and these differences have considerable impact on the future possibilities for women’s football; none of the federations, however, have impeccable records.

It is important to consider historical and present contributions to gender inequality to put claims to leadership in advancing women’s sporting equality into context. Given that the bid books are promotional materials, it is entirely reasonable that the bidding nations obscure their role in creating gendered inequality, instead highlighting their contributions to women’s sporting success; focusing on the positive is a much more effective marketing technique. However, in doing so, they employ neoliberal feminist logics, thus commodifying gender equality as a selling point and minimising issues of inequality while divorcing inequality from its political context. The concept of commodity feminism, understood as ‘the way feminist ideas are appropriated for commercial purposes, emptied of their political significance and offered back to the public in a commodified form – usually in advertising’ (Gill, 2008: 1), is useful here. Numerous scholars have critiqued the ways in which feminism has been co-opted to sell products and services in a manner that at best depoliticises and at worst undermines feminist principles (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Windels et al., 2020; Zeisler, 2017). Critiques of commodity feminism align with Rottenberg’s (2014) critique that neoliberal consumer culture spawns individualist, depoliticised streams of feminism. The use of discourses of gender equality by each bidding nation in an effort to appeal to FIFA is a clear example of the commodification of feminist ideas.

**Plans for the future**

Each country makes bold claims about its plans for the future of football. For example, Colombia (Colombian Football Federation, 2019: 18) invites ‘the entire planet [to] see in Colombia 2023 the happening [sic] of women’s football revolution’, whereas Brazil (Brazilian Football Confederation, 2019: 6) hopes to ‘break new ground by helping to elevate the women’s game to unprecedented heights around the globe’. Both statements express a desire to advance the status of the women’s game radically. The theme of growth is prominent throughout each bid book. Aligning with FIFA’s 2018 strategy, each
bid outlines plans for commercial growth. Japan (Japan Football Association, 2019: 10) aims to ‘attract new national supporters’ via commercial investors, whereas Australia/New Zealand (Football Federation Australia and New Zealand Football, 2019: 168) promise to ‘deliver an unprecedented commercial return, driving uplift in current investment and unlocking new investment into the women’s game’. Alongside commercial growth, ambitious plans for increasing participation at all levels are highlighted. Brazil (Brazilian Football Confederation, 2019: 12) argues that hosting the tournament in Brazil ‘would leverage women’s football in the country not only by increasing possibilities for young generations of female players but by awakening the same passion the Brazilian population have for the men’s team’. Colombia’s (Colombian Football Federation, 2019: 11) main objective is to

increase participation from the youngest age group (girls between 6 and 12 years old) so that members can develop new skills. This offers more and more girls the opportunity to compete and, thus, motivates them to continue in the training processes as they get older.

Continuous references to advancing women’s sport indicate that FIFA and bidding nations acknowledge existing gender inequality in football, although they frame such issues as potential for improvement, rather than resulting from lack of investment. In their stated plans to advance the women’s game, structural issues are largely glossed over: Japan and Australia/New Zealand make no mention of factors causing less investment in women’s sport; Brazil does not address latent sexism that may inspire more passion for the men’s team; and Colombia downplays cultural causes that may preclude girls from continuing the training process. This aligns with Rottenberg’s (2014) assertion that neoliberal feminism paradoxically acknowledges and disavows gender inequality, wherein gendered emancipation is stripped of societal context and refigured in individualised terms. Some tenets of feminism, such as equal opportunity and freedom of choice, are put forward by bidding nations as solutions to gender inequality. Overall, the framing of growth by FIFA and bidding nations utilises neoliberal feminist logics by choosing not to acknowledge societal causes of gender inequality while presenting solutions to inequality; inequality is largely downplayed, instead framed as a potential growth area, a narrative shift that is vastly more marketable than admitting flaw.

Bidding nations also cite women’s empowerment as a key goal, echoing FIFA’s (2018) goal of educating and empowering women. Although the empowerment of women and girls is a laudable aim, the lack of specificity and framing of empowerment reveals that goals need not be actionable to remain saleable. For example, Japan states, ‘What we aim to promote is not just the empowerment of women. By effectively combining Japan Football Association’s various experiences and tangible assets of social activities, we can contribute to the realization of a diverse and tolerant society that includes all people’ (Japan Football Association, 2019: 1). Although this certainly sounds positive, Japan’s goal is unsubstantiated, with no indication of how empowerment will be achieved or what empowerment means in the Japanese context; here, empowerment operates as a buzzword to indicate women-positive principles. Similarly, Colombia (Colombian Football Federation, 2019: 13–14) views football as
the means of achieving the social changes that Colombia needs, insofar as it empowers women in the different dimensions of this sport to be footballers, judges, coaches, technical and medical staff, as well as supporters. This ecosystem creates spaces in which women can develop skills and, thus, break cultural paradigms aimed at creating gender equality.

Purposefully or not, Colombia’s assertion that women will be able to ‘break cultural paradigms’ and achieve equality by virtue of learning skills implies that it is women’s lack of skill that causes inequality, an issue that can be solved with training; this ignores systemic and cultural sexism that precludes women from gaining and employing skills in the first place, presenting an individualised solution to a societal problem in a classic manifestation of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014).

In fairness to the bidding nations, it would be unreasonable to expect them to share detailed social development and legacy goals in their bid books because of the limited nature of the documents and because of the fact that bidders are unlikely to use limited resources to develop comprehensive plans that may not be implemented, should they fail in their bid. Additionally, given that FIFA employed the language of empowerment in their 2018 strategy, it behoves bidding nations to follow suit. However, given that the concept of empowerment is so easy to invoke, even when unsubstantiated, this speaks to its viability as a sales tactic. ‘Femvertising’ – using pro-female, women empowerment messages as a marketing technique – is an increasingly popular strategy in advertising (Drake, 2017; Windels et al., 2020; Zeisler, 2016), and a prime example of commodity feminism, whereby feminist principles are stripped of meaning and repackaged in a commercially palatable form (Gill, 2008). Whether or not the bidding countries develop truly empowering programmes that address women’s individual success alongside structural constraints is almost irrelevant; although it would certainly be preferable if they did, utilising the concept of empowerment as a virtue signal is sufficient for the bidding countries to sell their hosting bid to FIFA.

Overall, each bidding nation echoes FIFA’s 2018 goals with regard to the growth and development of women’s football. They also elected to highlight their own successes – accurate or exaggerated – in championing women’s sporting equality in an effort to position themselves favourably in FIFA’s eyes. The mobilisation of gender equality discourses to sell the bidding nation to FIFA demonstrates that, in this case, gender equality is commodified as a marketing strategy in SME bidding. Neoliberal feminist logics, such as divorcing gender inequality from societal contexts and repackaging gender equality messages in de-politicised terms, enable bidding nations and FIFA to utilise pro-women messages such as equality and empowerment for commercial purposes.

Conclusion

This article analyses the ways in which gender is discursively mobilised within the bid books submitted by Australia/New Zealand, Brazil, Colombia and Japan in their quest to host the FWWC 2023™. Although Australia/New Zealand were selected as co-hosts, this article examines the bidding narratives used by each nation in an attempt to ascertain the political utility of such gendered discourses. Ultimately, discourses of gender equality were mobilised to varying degrees by each bidding nation in an attempt
to position themselves as uniquely equipped to host the FWWC because of existing gender equality within the nation, and their capacity to reduce inequality. The use of gender equality discourses by bidding nations as a means of marketing themselves to FIFA indicates that in the context of SME bidding, gender equality can be commodified as a selling point.

This politically and commercially motivated employment of gender equality discourses allows bidding nations to present themselves as leaders in women’s football while understating existing gender inequality. Rhetorically, bidding nations absolve themselves of their contributions to existing inequality to position themselves as benevolent saviours of struggling women’s sport. The presence of pro-women messaging in the bid books, even when unsubstantiated, speaks to its utility as a narrative strategy, and serves as an example of commodity feminism, whereby feminist principles such as equal opportunity and empowerment are divorced from political contexts and repackaged to be commercially palatable. This rhetorical move employs neoliberal feminist logics; by focusing on inspiring and empowering women and increasing women’s participation, attention is shifted away from broad societal level gender inequalities and structural conditions that preclude women and girls from participating in sport.

Considering disparities between men’s and women’s sport, it is preferable that organised competitions focus on improving gender equality; without concentrated effort, decades of inequitable investment will not be overturned. This article does not intend to chastise FIFA or the bidding nations for seeking to advance women’s football – this is a laudable effort – but, rather, to investigate claims that improvements are being made in an effort towards accountability. The article serves as an initial foray into the topic, as several important questions are beyond its scope. For example, future work might consider: to what extent is FIFA’s new support for women’s football an attempt at damage limitation following recent corruption scandals and/or inspired by commercial interest? How will the strategies identified by FIFA and other football associations shape the growth of the women’s game? Additionally, considering a number of studies cast doubt on the success of SME legacies aimed at increasing participation in sport (Grix et al., 2017; Ishigami, 2019; Potwarka and Leatherdale, 2016), the plans identified by FIFA and future hosts Australia/New Zealand should be scrutinised carefully, as should their success post-tournament. Finally, Covid-19’s lasting impact on elite sport is yet unknown, but considering pandemic-induced resource and financial scarcity has had a disproportionate impact on women athletes (Bowes et al., 2020; Clarkson et al., 2020), the repercussions will likely remain relevant for the 2023 tournament.

In the face of existing gender inequality that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic, moves towards equality are imperative. Sentiments expressed towards that end found in the bid books and made by FIFA are commendable. However, it is important to ensure that gender equality strategies are effective to avoid surface-level modifications that will not result in lasting change. Future study of women’s football in each of the bidding nations will reveal to what degree their mobilisation of gender equality was empty rhetoric as opposed to legitimate plans heralding change.

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