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Levelling the playing field: the case of The Hundred and gender equality in cricket

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ABSTRACT

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) introduced 'The Hundred', a flagship domestic cricket competition, in July 2021, as part of their 'long-term commitment to making cricket a gender-balanced sport'. Despite The Hundred's success in attracting a new audience to cricket, there is still a limited understanding of the spectator experience and specifically how this aligned tournament brought about greater gender equality within cricket. This study addresses this gap using a mixed-methods approach, combining online surveys with a series of focus groups. Our findings point to the success of The Hundred in creating a positive experience for female spectators, increasing the audience for women's cricket, and breaking down men's negative perceptions of women's cricket. However, poor/drunken crowd behaviour detracted from the match-day experience for some spectators, highlighting a clash between this behaviour and the marketing of the tournament as family-friendly.

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Introduction

Cricket in England is currently governed by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB). The ECB is responsible for men's and women's amateur and professional cricket and is also largely responsible for generating interest and consequently revenue in the sport. It is also responsible for tackling the gendered, racialized, and elitist inequalities that have been a longstanding feature of English cricket (McMillan 2024). It is gendered inequalities that we focus on in this paper. Histories of women's cricket in England and Wales (Nicholson 2019, Velija 2015) reveal the systematic exclusion of women from cricketing spaces like Lord's Cricket Ground in London and from institutions like the Marylebone Cricket Club, which was all-male until 1998. Cricket was historically a 'male preserve' (Dunning 1986) and a 'manly game' with close links to imperial masculinity (Malcolm 2013). Recent sociological studies (Nicholson 2019; 2021; Parry, Richards, et al. 2021) highlight that men retain

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hegemonic control of the structures and culture of cricket, and that women remain ‘on the margins of male cricket’ (Velija 2007, 213), with a ‘normative priority’ placed on the men’s game while women’s teams struggle to access resources (Lusted and Fielding-Lloyd 2017). The report of the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket (ICEC), published in 2023, echoed these findings concluding that English cricket is institutionally sexist and that ‘women and women’s teams are frequently demeaned, stereotyped and treated as second-class’ (ICEC 2023).

Although cricket is associated with traditions and history, the sport has also seen adaptation and progression with innovations designed to appeal to new audiences and to generate income. Cricket now exists in a variety of formats, with games lasting as long as five days in the case of international Test cricket or as short as a few hours in the case of formats of the game such as Twenty20 (T20) cricket, which is named as it is in reflection of the two innings of twenty overs, each consisting of six balls (making 120 balls each innings) per team. Twenty20 cricket, which lasts around three hours, was introduced as a domestic competition by the ECB in 2003 and is now popular globally with major T20 competitions in countries such as India, Australia, South Africa, and the fifteen nation-states and territories in the Caribbean and South America that make up the West Indies. However, this format of cricket spread around the world before the ECB could trademark it, meaning that they have been unable to capitalize on its success financially (Martin 2021).

Domestic professional men’s cricket in England is organized around a longstanding framework, with the County Championship the pinnacle of the traditional first-class, four-day game. Originating in 1890, the County Championship now includes 18 county clubs divided into two divisions. Although once highly regarded for fostering talent and serving as a gateway to the national team, the County Championship has increasingly been relegated to less favourable periods of the cricketing calendar in England and attendance figures at matches have been dwindling.

Alongside this competition, the domestic men’s cricket structure features the Twenty20 Blast, a shorter format competition that has become popular since its launch in 2003. The Blast involves the same 18 county teams but draws much larger crowds and television audiences. These high-energy, shorter matches are typically held on summer evenings, creating a vibrant atmosphere that appeals to a wider and younger demographic, but which have been characterized by drunken behaviour. The Blast has significantly boosted cricket’s visibility and commercial appeal in England, offering a contrast to the traditional County Championship.

Women’s cricket in England has undergone significant development and restructuring in recent years. Unlike in the men’s version, women’s cricket has recently revolved around eight regional teams competing in limited over, one-day formats such as the Rachael Heyhoe Flint Trophy and the Charlotte Edwards Cup, which have become key components of the domestic structure. The Rachael Heyhoe Flint Trophy, launched in 2020, was a 50-over competition named in honour of a former England cricketer. It featured eight regional teams that competed in a format designed to mirror the international one-day game, thereby providing a crucial stepping stone to the national team. The Charlotte Edwards Cup, introduced in 2021, was a Twenty20 competition that offered a shorter, more dynamic version of the game, similar to the men’s T20 Blast. Most recently, it was announced that the counties would take on responsibility for the women’s teams (Nicholson 2024), with new 50-over and 20-over competitions introduced for the 2025 season which mirror the men’s One-Day Cup and T20 Blast.

It should be noted that cricket is not alone in this historic and systemic marginalizing of women. The involvement of women and girls in many sports, globally, has been either discouraged or restricted at various times (Bowes and Culvin 2021). While these restrictions have generally been removed, the impacts continue to be seen with men's sport viewed as the 'standard' to judge others against and gender ideology therefore defining women as invaders (Parry, Richards, et al. 2021). In practical terms, women athletes are faced with poorer playing conditions, less support, and they continue to be paid less than their male counterparts. As one example, the most successful franchise cricket league, the Indian Premier League (IPL) did not add a corresponding women's competition (gender marked as the Women's Premier League) for fifteen years.

In recent years, global franchise cricket leagues such as the IPL have overtaken the traditional English cricketing ecosystem to become much more popular and commercially successful, draining talent and income from the county-based and regional-based systems. To provide an alternative format to T20 cricket that could be commercialized and sold (as took place in early 2025), the ECB launched The Hundred, a new domestic franchise competition featuring aligned women's and men's teams in July 2021. In addition to seeking a commercial boon, the introduction of The Hundred also sought to address some of the systemic inequalities within cricket. In this article, we focus specifically on the extent to which The Hundred can be seen to have acted as a pathway to greater gender equality within cricket. We argue that The Hundred has been successful in creating a positive experience for female spectators, increasing the audience for women's cricket, and breaking down negative perceptions of women's cricket amongst male spectators. However, there has also been limited engagement with other forms of cricket by those who attended The Hundred, suggesting that the ideals of gender equality promoted in the tournament have not necessarily permeated across the sport as a whole.

The Hundred

Internal research by the ECB, carried out in 2018, suggested that audiences for cricket remained overwhelmingly male (82%), white British (94%) and had an average age of 50. 'The Hundred', which consists of 100 balls for each side, was a brand-new version of cricket that was meant to be simpler and more easily understood than other versions. Another driver for the tournament was to diversify the audience for cricket. The Hundred was marketed explicitly as being family-friendly to attract more women and children. The tournament is a professional franchise competition involving eight city-based teams: Birmingham Phoenix, London Spirit, Manchester Originals, Northern Superchargers (Leeds), Oval Invincibles (London), Southern Brave (Southampton), Trent Rockets (Nottingham), and Welsh Fire (Cardiff). The women's and men's teams compete in separate competitions, but with the guiding principle of *one team, two squads, one fanbase*. Each men's and women's squad is made up of 15 players, of whom a maximum of four can be overseas players.

The ECB described the tournament as part of their 'long-term commitment to making cricket a gender-balanced sport', heralding it as the first sporting tournament in the world that from the outset would feature fully aligned men's and women's teams. The offer of equal prize money (initially £300,000 apiece for the men and the women) was also one of the founding principles of the competition. However, it should be noted that the salaries

on offer were not equal. In the first year the highest salary for men players was £125,000 while for women it was only £15,000.

Another key component of The Hundred was television coverage on one of the key domestic free-to-air broadcasters, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) - the first time that cricket had regularly featured on free-to-air television since 2005. In the first year of the tournament, the BBC broadcast ten men's games and eight women's games, including both finals. Significantly, the opening match of the tournament was a match in the women's edition between the Oval Invincibles and Manchester Originals, with the match televised on both the BBC and subscription broadcaster Sky Sports in a prime time viewing slot. However, this was the only women's match to be scheduled for a weekday evening fixture throughout the competition.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the launch of the tournament was delayed by a year. The first edition of the tournament took place in July and August 2021, coinciding with the school summer holidays in England and Wales. The women's matches were originally scheduled at separate, smaller grounds; but due to concerns about biosecurity, all matches in the first year of the competition (except for the opening game) were 'double headers' with the women and men playing at the same ground on the same day. One ticket gave access to both the women's and men's games. Double headers have remained a key element of the tournament, featuring in each year.

The first year of The Hundred was successful both in terms of reaching a new audience for cricket and building a new fanbase for women's cricket specifically. According to ECB data, 55% of tickets were bought by people who had never purchased one before. In contrast with cricket's existing skew towards an older male audience, The Hundred appears to have attracted more diverse, younger crowds with 19% of ticketholders children, 21% women, and 36% families. This greater diversity was also the case with TV audiences: of the 16.1 million people who watched the first year of The Hundred on television, 57% had not watched any other live cricket in 2021.

Due to the recent establishment of The Hundred, academic research on its impact is sparse with the limited articles focused on organizational aspects of the competition (Fletcher, Sturm, and Malcolm 2024a, Fletcher, Velija, and Nicholson 2024b, Read 2023). These articles mainly concentrate on the perspectives of individuals involved in organizing or reporting on The Hundred, rather than on the experiences of attendees. Read's study examines the ECB's efforts to legitimize the competition, using data from news reports, press releases, trade magazines, and the ECB's website. It highlights the conflicts identified by journalists between attracting new fans with a novel format and potentially alienating traditional cricket supporters. Fletcher, Sturm, and Malcolm's (2024a) research draws on interviews with stakeholders from the MCC, ECB, counties, journalists, broadcasters, and players, all of whom have vested interests in the competition's success. Particularly relevant to our own study is the finding of Fletcher, Velija, and Nicholson (2024b) that The Hundred has advanced gender equality in cricket by serving as a pathway for female players to enjoy greater levels of professionalism. However, the experience of spectators remains largely unexamined. Our research, therefore, set out to discover:

- (1) What did the match-day experience look and feel like for those attending venues, and what could be done to improve the experience?

- (2) To what extent has The Hundred served as a gateway into engagement with other forms of cricket, especially women's cricket?
- (3) To what extent has attending The Hundred challenged entrenched views about women's sport?

The study also aimed to provide the ECB with a series of recommendations that would allow them to enhance future iterations of The Hundred. Our findings were subsequently presented to them ahead of the third season of the competition. Interestingly, while the Independent Commission speaks to 'equity' in cricket, the ECB has focused on equality and gender-balance. Following their terminology, we examine whether men and women were provided with equal opportunities while acknowledging that the situation may remain inequitable.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach, adopting an Explanatory Sequential Design (Creswell 2013). The problem was first explored through an online survey with these findings then interrogated through a series of focus groups. Sports fandom and consumption has largely been researched and understood through the interpretation of quantitative data (Parry, Jones, and Wann 2014) despite longstanding calls for more mixed methods research in this domain. More specifically, studies on women sport fans and women's sport have often lacked the depth of detail into these experiences that can be provided through the inclusion of qualitative data (Sveinsson and Hoeber 2016). Therefore, our research aimed to move away from the traditional postpositivist worldview to embrace more constructivist and pragmatic philosophies, thus allowing us to explore the multiple norms, values and meanings shared by examining real-world practice. Before embarking on both phases of data collection full ethical approval was applied for and granted by Bournemouth University's Social Sciences & Humanities Research Ethics Panel and ethical guidelines adhered to. Informed consent was sought and provided by participants, and full anonymity ensured.

Survey

A survey was administered via Jisc Online Surveys for six weeks between 21 April 2022 and 2 June 2022 – running just before the second edition of The Hundred took place. An initial filter question (Did you attend one or more matches in The Hundred in 2021?) ensured that only those who matched this criterion responded to the survey. The survey was advertised using social media, including via a women's sport charity. The survey focused on the match-day experience of respondents and offered the chance to compare their exposure to cricket before and since attending The Hundred. From 245 survey responses, 164 responses were from men (66.9%), 77 from women (31.4%), and one from a non-binary individual. The overwhelming majority ($n=229$) of respondents self-identified as white and non-disabled ($n=232$). We received a very diverse mix in terms of age, with the 41–45 category accounted for the highest number of respondents ($n=35$), closely followed by 18–24 ($n=33$) and 25–30 ($n=32$). The majority of survey respondents were located in London ($n=60$) and the Southwest of England ($n=50$), but there was a good geographical spread of responses

from across England and Wales. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that The Hundred matches all took place in England and Wales we had no responses from Northern Ireland, and only five from Scotland.

Focus groups

Drawing from survey respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in follow-up research, we formed five focus groups to examine specific sub-groups who we felt were of particular interest. In total, 18 people attended the focus groups (11 men and 7 women). The sub-groups represented:

- (1) Those who were already engaged with both men's and women's cricket;
- (2) Those who had never watched any cricket before;
- (3) Those who had never watched women's cricket before and were exposed to it for the first time because of The Hundred;
- (4) Those whose involvement with cricket had increased since attending The Hundred;
- (5) Those who had attended The Hundred with children.

The focus groups took place in July 2022 (prior to the second edition of The Hundred) and were conducted and recorded via an online video conferencing system. Discussions were structured around why participants chose to attend The Hundred, the quality of their match-day experience, and whether the experience had changed their subsequent view of cricket and/or women's cricket. Ethical considerations were taken into account, and efforts were made by facilitators to ensure that all participants had a voice and were allowed the space to express their views in a safe, supportive and inclusive manner. Finally, the transcripts were analyzed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006) to allow for the emergence of common issues and concerns. This process involved two authors immersing themselves into the data by reading and rereading the transcripts. The initial codes were reviewed to find similarities and overlaps, which helped generate themes that captured key aspects of the data relevant to the research question. These themes were then reviewed against the initial codes and the complete dataset to ensure their relevance. Afterward, the themes were clearly defined and named to highlight their unique contribution to the research question.

Findings and discussion

Women's experiences of attending The Hundred

The vast majority of our respondents were either satisfied (29%) or very satisfied (49%) with their experience of attending matches in The Hundred. Critically, women were significantly more satisfied with several aspects of The Hundred than men, including the family-friendly atmosphere, the explanation of the rules at the venue, and the quality of the cricket. More women (77%) than men (63%) said that they would be attending The Hundred in 2022, which is arguably an indicator of a greater level of enjoyment in their first year of attending. Women's experiences of attending live sport have often been negative and involved marginalization (Toffoletti 2017), so The Hundred stands out as an event whereby (possibly uniquely) women feel more comfortable than men.

This can partly be explained by the fact that The Hundred appears to have shifted female views of cricket as a male space. We observed that The Hundred changed perceptions of cricket significantly more for women (36%) than for men (24%). Survey responses from women whose perceptions had changed included:

I like that this tournament attracted a wider more open audience.

Not just for old white men.

More fun for all the family and for non-loving friends.

More exciting and inclusive.

It gave me hope that young people can look up to women's cricket and not see it as lesser and instead see it as equal.

The tournament is viewed by female spectators as more fun, exciting, accessible and inclusive than other formats of cricket, or indeed than other sports. The final quote above also suggests that, at least for some respondents, the direct presentation of women players on matchdays alongside their male counterparts - as part of the same teams at the same grounds - is an important step towards shifting perceptions of the women's game. Indeed, our findings suggest that women are likely to enjoy the spectator experience more when they see themselves represented equally to their male counterparts. There was no evidence amongst our respondents of the kind of disparity between the presentation of women's and men's cricket which Parry et al. identified during the Big Bash and Women's Big Bash League in Australia (2021): food outlets, entertainment and merchandise are equally available during the women's and men's portion of the double header. While cricket's spectator base has historically been overwhelmingly male (Hoult 2020), our research suggests that placing the women's and men's games on an equal footing on match days has made The Hundred a useful tool to help diversify audiences.

However, there was also evidence of a shift in crowd behaviour during the men's portion of the double header. When we asked respondents to identify which parts of the experience they had least enjoyed, the most common open text responses related to drunkenness, 'laddishness' and/or poor crowd behaviour:

Being surrounded by drunks who had no interest in watching the cricket. (Female, white, aged 46–50)

I did notice a bit of a change during the game whereby after about 7 o'clock what was a nice family atmosphere for the women's game descended a bit into a typical T20 (more male, more alcohol being drunk). This is probably a reflection of kids going home to bed I guess and people coming in after work... as a fan, it felt like an event of two halves. (Male, white, aged 31–35)

A lot of people only came to the Men's game and got very drunk. There is nothing wrong with a rowdy crowd, as such, but I felt large sections of the crowd were disengaged from the cricket. It was not a family-friendly atmosphere. I have attended many sporting events including a lot of football so I am no stranger to lively crowds but there was something different about this crowd. High levels of drunkenness and bad behaviour. I also witnessed a bloody fight within Lord's [Cricket Ground]. I tell people now in all my time viewing live sport this is the most violent thing I have experienced at a sporting event. (Male, white, aged 41–45)

The latter comment is particularly worrying: this spectator not only identifies drunken and rowdy behaviour as having spoiled his matchday experience but suggests that his experience of The Hundred was worse than at other sporting events he has attended. Double headers at the same ground on the same day with the same teams are an important aspect of the appeal of The Hundred, due to the message of gender equality this conveys; however, this needs to be balanced against the fact that the matchday experience was in some cases one of ‘two halves’: one family-friendly, and the other decidedly not.

This issue is not gender-specific: it was highlighted by both male and female respondents. Sveinson and Toffoletti (2023, 102) define family-friendly in a sport setting as ‘an interaction between consumers (i.e. parents and children) and the organization, which includes initiatives by leagues, teams, and stadiums to support greater participation of families in sport events’. Whereas previously family-friendly had been defined in terms of fathers and children, there has been a shift to encouraging mothers to attend with children, although it should be noted that the phrasing may still reflect heteronormative definitions of family (Fielding-Lloyd, Woodhouse, and Sequerra 2020). However, in various settings and sports the introduction of greater numbers of women has had a civilizing influence on sports crowds and has clearly been a focus in the marketing of The Hundred by the ECB (ECB 2022). Previous studies of women’s football and specifically the 2022 UEFA European Women’s Football Championship have shown that the public as a whole want to attend sporting matches which are safe and where they will not encounter vulgarity or aggression (Milmo 2022). However, our research overall suggests that The Hundred does not meet this bar and that there is a clash between two visions of the tournament – an alcohol-fuelled, social occasion; and an enjoyable day out for families.

The Hundred as a gateway into engagement with cricket by women and women’s cricket

A quarter of our survey respondents ($n = 64$) said that their involvement in playing cricket had increased since attending The Hundred. 42 of these were men, and 22 were women. This increased involvement manifested itself in different ways with half of these saying that they were now taking children or other family members to play cricket, with the others actively involved in playing themselves. Within the focus groups, some female attendees talked about The Hundred as a way to encourage their friends and family to come along to cricket for the first time:

A couple of occasions I took some friends who’ve never been to cricket before and I didn’t worry, I mean when I’ve done that in the past for a [women’s] regional game or something they have sometimes tuned out a little bit... But there was enough to keep them absorbed and to talk about cricket a bit more and want to go next time as well. (Female focus group participant)

The first one we went to as a kind of family unit, I went with my partner and her parents and we made a day of it. So that was good fun and it was kind of something that we hadn’t done as a family before, that was K’s first cricket match that she had ever been to... that was her first like proper cricket game. And she really enjoyed it and even said she would go back and do it again. (Female focus group participant)

However, there has only been limited engagement with and attendance at other forms of cricket since The Hundred. 85 of our respondents (35%) had not attended any other live cricket since The Hundred. Of those who have done so, the majority are men watching men's cricket (42% of men say they have attended men's cricket since The Hundred, compared with the 25% of men who say that have attended both men's and women's cricket). 49% of women have not attended any other form of cricket since The Hundred. It is undoubtedly the case that other forms of domestic women's cricket have not seen anything like the rise in crowd numbers which we have witnessed in The Hundred, with less than 1,000 people in attendance at the final of the 2024 Charlotte Edwards Cup (for example). Fletcher et al. found that some stakeholders within English cricket are concerned that The Hundred may be 'cannibalizing' other formats of men's cricket rather than creating a new audience per se (2024a: 40) and our findings echo this. However, our findings also explicitly highlight the gendered nature of this issue. If women are enjoying The Hundred, why is this enjoyment not translating into other formats of cricket? And if men are enjoying engaging with women's cricket during The Hundred, why is this not encouraging them to attend other women's cricket matches? Future research into cricket fandom needs to engage with these questions.

One issue with ensuring a sustainable supporter base in The Hundred is that these are brand new teams, meaning that strong fan allegiances have not yet had time to fully develop (Lock, Taylor, and Darcy 2011; Parry, Cleland, and Kavanagh 2020). The challenge in creating new allegiances was borne out by responses from several of those in the focus groups, who highlighted the lesser emotional connection they felt to 'their' Hundred team compared to other sporting allegiances:

You've got that emotional connection with your football or rugby team don't you as well...I will go to the other end of the country to watch my football team. But I probably wouldn't want to go more than an hour and a half to watch a Hundred game because I just don't care enough about the result. (Male focus group participant)

Even though the atmosphere was great, I didn't feel like everybody was like, 'go Manchester Originals', you know. I mean that's the team I adopted as my local team but it's definitely much more kind of crazier and hyped at Manchester Thunder, my netball team, it's a lot older... Whereas I felt with The Hundred you know if it was a good game and Birmingham won then I was pretty happy for Birmingham you know I didn't feel that sad about Manchester losing or anything, I don't really have that passion for my local team yet in that sense...I'm still very like, I just want to see all the teams playing cricket rather than my soul is Manchester Originals, I'm not really there yet. I don't know if I'll ever be, but we'll see. (Female focus group participant)

In both these examples, The Hundred is contrasted with other sports (football, rugby and netball) whereby fan loyalties are more developed. Our findings therefore suggest that a positive matchday experience is not enough in itself to translate into a deeper attachment to a team or to a sport.

Again, this finding is gendered. Women appear to identify more strongly as fans of the women's teams in The Hundred than they do of the men's teams, as measured by player recognition. 27% of women said they could name 11–15 of the women's team they support, while only 9% could name 11–15 of the men's team they support. While consumption of women's sport is an understudied subject (Delia 2019), this finding adds to a developing body of work which finds that some women identify more strongly with women's teams than men's ones (Kane and Maxwell 2011). We can theorize that women may also be more open to identifying with the brand-new teams in The Hundred because of a less established

attachment to existing cricket teams. The most stringent opposition to The Hundred has come from 'traditional' cricket fans who are overwhelmingly male (Hoult 2020) and who see The Hundred as undermining the existing county game (Hopps 2021).

This finding was borne out in our focus groups, whereby the most vocal opponents to The Hundred tended to be male and die-hard county supporters. One focus group participant had supported Yorkshire for 25 years and expressed resentment towards the new 100-ball format: 'Having been, I don't really see that there's that much that this is doing that the Blast didn't do'. This comment is an example of the entrenched resistance that existing supporters of county cricket have demonstrated towards The Hundred. Several of our focus group participants remain sceptical about the tournament:

Although The Hundred is a success, at what cost, what cost financially to the ECB and the counties? And to what opportunity cost to other things that could've been done to promote the game such as simply beefing up the Twenty20 Blast? As a member I'm losing a lot, I'm losing the entire August for red ball and white ball cricket at the highest level of the English game in order to slot this thing in. (Male focus group participant)

Someone has clearly said like, 'let's design this to piss off the people that really like cricket because we are deliberately looking for a different audience'. (Male focus group participant)

There is a recognition here that The Hundred is different to existing formats of cricket and that the ECB's marketing of the tournament has successfully achieved the aim of convincing the public that it is designed to reach a new audience. As one Yorkshire supporter put it: 'Basically, The Hundred was everything the county championship isn't'. However, these quotes also point to a divide between more 'traditional' cricket supporters, who remain resistant to the tournament, and those who are 'brand-new' to cricket, who found The Hundred more accessible than other formats. The following quote from a focus group participant highlights the tension that exists and also a gender divide within cricket:

As a women's cricket fan, I love The Hundred... Whereas, as a men's fan, I don't like The Hundred at all. I think I don't like the gimmicks of the format... And really, I want to see my county play, I don't want to see the franchise cricket and I am genuinely torn. (Male focus group participant)

There is a suggestion here that The Hundred has divided loyalty along gender lines, encouraging the development of new attachments to women's cricket while simultaneously creating a new form of role-conflict within supporters of the men's game who are torn between their existing emotional ties to men's county cricket and their new ties to a competition which they recognize has promoted principles of gender equality.

This conflict also manifests itself in another area of the matchday experience at The Hundred. Our findings suggest that women are more satisfied with their matchday experience than men and one explanation for this is in differing views of the entertainment on offer (including the live music and mid-phase entertainers). Many established men's cricket fans found that the more 'interactive' audience engagement attempted during Hundred matches was inauthentic, awkward, and detracted from their experience:

You can feel the whole crowd is sort of just [cringing]. And when like twenty thousand people, thirty thousand people are cringing at the same time you can feel it. It's not a baseball game... It's like someone has just got a checklist of things, 'this is how we make sport fun and engaging', and they have just followed it. (Male focus group participant)

This is in keeping with the work of Kuenzel and Yassim who, when they surveyed those attending men's county cricket, found that women and spectators under 35 enjoyed noise, crowd involvement, and an intense sensory experience more than older, male spectators (Kuenzel and Yassim 2010, 62–63). Overall, therefore, our findings suggest that the ECB may need to do more to overcome the divide between more traditional (male) cricket supporters and those who are new to cricket (who are more likely to be female).

Attendance at The Hundred as a form of challenge to entrenched views about women's sport

A sizeable number, 28% ($n=68$), of our survey respondents had never watched women's cricket before attending a game in this competition. The Hundred changed this dynamic. As 87% ($n=212$) of respondents indicated that they had watched both women's and men's games during the tournament it is clear that some participants were watching women's cricket for the first time. As such, the format of the competition, with double-header matches, is likely to have contributed to exposing a significant number of individuals to women's cricket.

The double header model was viewed by our focus group participants as a unique aspect of The Hundred, when compared to other sports and an important way to ensure women's sport gains a new audience. Interestingly, when asked to identify the parts of the day they had most enjoyed, 24 respondents specifically highlighted the double-header model as a positive aspect of their experience, with several stating that being exposed to women's cricket for the first time was the most enjoyable aspect. Fans viewed double headers as excellent value for money – a factor which will become increasingly important during a cost-of-living crisis. Although other sports (for example football and rugby) have attempted to organize double headers, The Hundred can be seen as an example of how to ensure that they achieve their purpose. As one focus group participant explained:

If you put them [women's cricket matches] in the larger venues and market them to an audience who is interested, you will get rid of those tickets, you will get people attending. But if you put them in a smaller ground and just kind of mention it as an afterthought and don't show them on the television, then you are not going to build that level of support who will then come back next year and make it bigger and just grow it there. (Female focus group participant)

As identified here, fans see equal presentation of men's and women's teams as key to building up support for a sporting competition like The Hundred. Having fully aligned team brands and equal marketing of male and female players are other important aspects of making double headers a success. While our research showed support for double headers, the issue with this format is that the women's game could be reduced to a 'warm-up' and misses the opportunity to be televised during prime-time evening hours. Putting the men's game in a prime-time television spot relegates the women's game to a less beneficial afternoon time slot when many potential spectators and viewers are likely to be working or at school in the case of children.

When asked whether The Hundred had changed perceptions of women's cricket, 45.3% ($n=112$) indicated that it had; considerably higher than the 27.8% whose perceptions on

cricket generally had been changed. In the open-ended responses to the request to explain the reason for their changed perception of women's cricket, answers included reference to women's cricket being of a higher standard than expected and the fact that participants had not seen any women's cricket previously. One stated:

It gave me hope that young people can look up to women's cricket and not see it as lesser and instead see it as equal and maybe even better with the qualities it promotes that men's cricket does not. (Female, white, aged 18–24)

In this case, the respondent was already engaged with women's cricket and was enthused at the prospect that the equal presentation of teams in *The Hundred* might encourage others to see it in the same way as she did.

The focus groups allowed us to explore the extent to which this occurred. Notably, a higher percentage of men (49%) than women (40%) said that *The Hundred* had changed their perceptions of women's cricket. Within the focus groups, it was men who were more likely to express surprise that the standard of elite women's cricket was higher than they had expected:

I did find that the women's games were more enjoyable in some aspects because it's been quite a while since I've seen women's cricket and it was back in the early 2000s, I watched a day of it, a match between England and India, and the standard has come on massively since that time. (Male focus group participant)

The amount of advance in the women's game in the last twenty years is astronomical and it's a brilliant watch. (Male focus group participant)

This finding, and the somewhat condescending nature of some of the comments from male participants is indicative of earlier attitudes towards women's cricket by men (Parry, Richards, et al. 2021). It was therefore critical that double headers 'forced' some men to engage with women's cricket:

I was kind of strong armed into watching a women's event, but I was really glad that I was. (Male focus group participant)

If it had been one or the other, I probably would've gone, 'well I want to go and watch Joe Root, I want to see the men's match,' which maybe reflects how I'm maybe being old-fashioned... now, I would be like 'actually, I want to go and see Nat Sciver and I want to go and see Katherine Brunt and all those people'. (Male focus group participant)

However, we also found evidence for more progressive attitudes towards women's cricket amongst some men. A number of male participants in our focus groups actively advocated for greater moves towards equality for men's and women's cricket. Several expressed support for moves towards more equal pay between the men's and women's teams, as seen in other sports (Velija 2022), while another was outraged at one incident which he felt suggested that the ECB was not placing enough value on the women's tournament:

I thought by miles the worst thing that happened for *The Hundred* last year, there was a game at Lord's [Cricket Ground] where the women's game was completed, a hundred per cent, it was fine. Then it rained and the men's game didn't even start. And the ECB decided to give one hundred per cent ticket refunds, which was not a good look. Like there were ten thousand people there that had watched the whole of the women's game and it was great and they enjoyed it and they were given all their money back. As a way of saying, 'well obviously the value that we place on this game is nothing, so have all your cash.' (Male focus group participant)

The fact that this incident was raised without prompting by the focus group moderator is striking and suggests that The Hundred has encouraged some men to begin to both recognize and critique existing gender disparities, something that has not previously happened (Parry, Richards, et al. 2021). The professionalization of elite women's sport in recent years has led to a sea-change in improvements in standards on the pitch (Bowes and Culvin 2021). The Hundred demonstrates the importance of getting fans (especially men) to attend matches, to witness these improvements.

There was also a name awareness of individual women's players, including a number who had not (at the time of the focus groups) represented England internationally. Women's sport often struggles for this type of name recognition, so to hear men casually name-dropping the likes of Alice Capsey, Lauren Bell, and Issy Wong in focus groups can be considered a breakthrough moment in terms of public awareness of women's cricket. Indeed, when asked how many women's players participants could name from their favourite team, 40.5% indicated 1–4 players, 29.4% knew 5–10 players, and 22.1% suggested that they could name between 11 and 15 players. When asked the same question about men's players, while the percentages were similar, only 20.1% said that they could name between 11 and 15 players.

It was also interesting that multiple participants said that they preferred the women's competition to the men's version, to the extent that they would be happy in the future to attend standalone women's matches. The women's game was seen as 'more relatable' and less 'brutal' than men's cricket. Such a finding is reflective of the changes that have taken place in elite men's sport, where professionalization has resulted in a focus on strength and size (Coakley and Pike 2014). However, this can also be critiqued as another form of 'othering' of women's sport whereby men continue to categorize women's cricket as 'different' and confine them to outsider status (Velija 2007). While The Hundred has increased awareness of female cricketers, it has not fully overturned existing gender hierarchies amongst male fans, as evidenced by the fact that the large crowds seen as The Hundred are not replicated in other domestic women's cricket (see section B above).

Our research demonstrates that when a particular sport attracts a greater female audience and a greater audience for the women's version of the sport, this can benefit women's sports across the board. For example, some of those in our focus groups reported increased interest in other women's sports as a result of attending The Hundred:

It has probably helped us get more into the women's football. We went to see the Euros match, England versus Northern Ireland last week, which was really fun. (Female focus group participant)

I've become a lot more interested in women's sport I think probably since watching it actually, just generally. And not just cricket... even the Euros this year and women's football on that side of things, like since actually seeing and kind of sitting down and watching continuously a couple of fixtures of female sporting events, I've become a lot more, I guess, invested again in that as well. (Male focus group participant)

Promoting women's competitions and women athletes should therefore never be seen as a zero-sum game: a successful competition like The Hundred is beneficial to the women's sport movement as a whole.

Conclusions

In major markets, women's sport is witnessing rapid growth. Record-breaking crowds have been seen in sports such as association football and cricket across Europe, North America, and Australia. Elsewhere, the Women's Premier League has also been a success in terms of both revenue generation and attendances (Gupta 2024). The increased professionalization of women's sport (Bowes and Culvin 2021) has seen a rapid growth in consumption at an elite level with increasing evidence for a demand to watch and to engage in various fandom activities – fans are increasingly willing to invest in women's sport (Sveinson et al. 2025). We found evidence that attitudes towards women's cricket have shifted from misplaced sexist views to an acceptance of the quality on offer, indicating the commercial and social potential of co-presenting men's and women's sport as part of a unified entertainment product. A key role in this shift was the visibility of women's cricket in terms of marketing, television broadcasts on free-to-air channels, and the scheduling of women's games before men's matches. As has been found in other women's sport contexts (Guest and Luijten 2018), fans valued the quality of the women's matches – identifying professional women's cricket as a high-quality entertainment offering. Again, in line with Guest and Luijten (2018) findings, our respondents identified a distinct crowd and atmosphere at women's games in The Hundred. This atmosphere was argued to be more wholesome and welcoming and to be more appealing for women in particular, in line with reports on crowds in women's sport generally (Milmo 2022; Sveinson and Toffoletti 2023). Changing the atmosphere at sports matches by attracting more women fans may be a crucial step in promoting gender equality.

Yet, while female views about cricket as a male space have partially shifted as a result of The Hundred, there are ongoing concerns that some of the drunken aggression experienced on matchdays – especially during the men's portion of double headers that were later in the day – does not live up to the tournament's family-friendly billing and is similar to that found in other short-form versions of cricket in England.

It is important that women's cricket is not caught up in a new 'culture war' between existing supporters of cricket and new fans of The Hundred, and that women whose only experience of attending cricket has been The Hundred are not made to feel like 'second-class citizens' in a pre-existing cricketer supporters' hierarchy. Given that we found it more likely to be men that were attached to the traditional versions of cricket that have been entrenched in masculinity historically (Nicholson 2021), there may still be resistance to women's cricket. It remains to be evidenced whether arguments in favour of traditional forms of cricket are in fact arguments in favour of patriarchy specifically but adhering to norms and institutions that are associated with gendered, racialized, and elitist inequalities cannot be viewed as progressive or in support of social movements such as gender equality (Parry, Richards, et al. 2021). As inclusion narratives often encounter longstanding fan cultures and their norms, structural interventions like The Hundred have limitations in the absence of parallel cultural change.

Any claims of gender equality must be treated with caution. The ECB offered lofty claims that The Hundred would help to create a 'gender-balanced' sport. The ECB are not alone in making such claims; the International Olympic Committee claimed gender equality ahead of the Paris 2024 Summer Olympic Games on the basis that there would be equal numbers of men and women athletes (Donnelly 2025). However, as Donnelly goes on to argue, this was not the case with differences in the conditions that men and women competed in evident across many of the sports. There has also been limited engagement with

other forms of cricket by those who attended The Hundred, suggesting that the ideals of gender equality promoted in the tournament have not necessarily permeated across the sport as a whole. Gender equality in sport needs to be viewed as an ongoing and negotiated process, rather than as a destination.

That The Hundred has avoided ‘gender marking’ by specifically referring to men’s and women’s teams is commendable and could be seen as a big step forward when it comes to gender equality in sport. However, as discussed by Parry, Richards, et al. (2021), small differences in the presentation of women’s sport can provide evidence for ongoing gendered inequality in sport in the form of gender-bland sexism. Offering full refunds when fans had seen a complete women’s match, continuing to offer higher salaries to men players, and favouring men’s games for the prime-time weekday evening slots are not overtly sexist acts. However, these are all subtle ways that render the women’s game ‘bland’ and less worthy of attention than the men’s game.

Overall, our findings support the conclusion of Fletcher, Velija, and Nicholson (2024b) that The Hundred has been a positive development in relation to gender equality in English cricket, specifically – via double headers – in creating a new, mass audience who had little interest previously in women’s sport. While other sports may wish to embrace the double header model – which clearly offers a path towards greater visibility of women’s sport – it is important to recognise that this is not a panacea for gender equality, or a shortcut to broader cultural change across sport as a whole. Interventions like The Hundred must be supported by engagement with fan cultures, the lived experiences of spectators, and institutional practices.

Finally, our research strongly suggests that there is an appetite amongst some cricket fans to move faster on gender equality. Perhaps for the first time, The Hundred has created a situation whereby fans have not just begun paying attention to the women’s game but are also now critiquing the ECB when it fails to deliver on gender equality. This research highlights that the ECB may need to do more to realize their ambitions around gender equality and cricket.

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Appendix A. List of survey questions.

Demographics

- (1) To which gender do you most identify?
- (6) How old are you?
- (7) What is your ethnicity?
- (8) Do you currently have a disability?
- (9) Where do you currently live?

Before The Hundred

- (10) Before the launch of The Hundred, did you watch cricket on television?
- (11) Before the launch of The Hundred, were you involved in cricket (other than as a spectator/viewer)?
- (12) Please specify your involvement in cricket prior to The Hundred. Please select all options that apply:
 - Player
 - Member of local club
 - Coach
 - Umpire
 - Scorer
 - Groundstaff
 - Taking children or family to cricket
 - Other
- (13) Had you watched women's cricket before The Hundred?
- (14) Prior to the launch of The Hundred, did you support a cricket team/club? Please specify the team/club that you supported.

Marketing

- (15) How did you hear about The Hundred? (Please select all that apply.)
 - From a club
 - Television
 - From a county or region mailing list
 - Social media
 - Radio
 - Word of mouth
 - Newspaper
 - On the ECB's website
 - On a different website
 - I saw a poster

- (16) Did you notice anything different in the marketing of The Hundred compared to the marketing of other cricket? Please explain your answer to the above question.

Choosing to attend

- (17) Did you watch The Hundred on television?
(18) Before attending The Hundred, how well did you understand the playing regulations/rules of The Hundred?
(19) Why did you choose to attend The Hundred? (Please select all that apply)

- Love of cricket
- To experience a new format of cricket
- Live music/entertainment
- To see my favourite player(s) in action
- Socialising (with family/friends/colleagues)
- The shorter length of the matches was appealing
- I wanted to support my city
- I thought it would be family-friendly
- It was cheaper than other cricket matches
- It was cheaper than attending other live sport
- To give my child the chance to attend live sport

- (20) Which venue did you primarily attend?
(21) Who did you attend with? (Please tick all that apply)

- By myself
- With my partner
- With my family (excluding children)
- With my friends
- With colleagues
- With team mates
- With younger children
- With teenagers

The match-day experience

- (22) If you attended with children, in your opinion, how much did those children enjoy attending The Hundred on a scale of 1 to 5?
(23) Did you attend:

- Only women's games
- Only men's games
- Both women's and men's games

(24) At the venue, how well were the playing regulations/rules of The Hundred explained?

- 1 = Poorly
- 3 = Reasonably well
- 5 = Very well

(25) Overall, how satisfied were you with your experience attending The Hundred?

- 1 = Not at all satisfied
- 5 = Very satisfied

(26) Overall, how satisfied were you with each of these aspects of The Hundred?

- Quality of cricket
- Live music/entertainment
- Choice of food and beverages
- Price of food and beverages
- Crowd control
- Organisation of the venue
- Feeling at home in the venue
- Family-friendly atmosphere
- Value for money

(27) Which parts of attending The Hundred did you most enjoy (if any)?

(28) Which parts of attending The Hundred did you least enjoy (if any)?

Since The Hundred

(29) Since attending The Hundred, have you watched any other cricket on television?

- No
- Yes, women's cricket
- Yes, men's cricket
- Yes, both men's and women's cricket

(30) What men's cricket have you watched on TV since The Hundred? (Please tick all that apply.)

- Test match
- ODI
- T20 international
- First class
- Domestic one day
- Domestic T20 Blast

(31) What women's cricket have you watched on TV since The Hundred? (Please tick all that apply.)

- Test match
- ODI
- T20 international
- Rachael Heyhoe Flint Trophy
- Charlotte Edwards Cup

(32) Have you attended any other forms of cricket since The Hundred?

- No
- Yes, women's cricket
- Yes, men's cricket
- Yes, both men's and women's cricket

(33) Which form(s) of women's cricket have you attended since The Hundred? (Please tick all that apply.)

- Test match
- ODI
- T20 international
- Rachael Heyhoe Flint Trophy
- Charlotte Edwards Cup

(34) Which form(s) of men's cricket have you attended since The Hundred? (Please tick all that apply.)

- Test match
- ODI
- T20 international
- First class
- Domestic one day
- Domestic T20 Blast

(35) Since The Hundred, has your involvement in cricket increased?

- Yes/No

(36) Have you become involved with cricket as:

- Player
- Member of local club
- Coach
- Umpire

- Scorer
- Groundstaff
- Taking children or family to cricket
- Other

Fandom

(37) Did you start supporting a team from The Hundred?

- No
- Yes, Birmingham Phoenix
- Yes, London Spirit,
- Yes, Manchester Originals
- Yes, Northern Superchargers
- Yes, Oval Invincibles
- Yes, Southern Brave
- Yes, Trent Rockets
- Yes, Welsh Fire

(38) How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of this team?

- 1 = Not at all
- 5 = Very much

(39) For the team above, how many women's players can you name?

- 0
- 1–4
- 5–10
- 11–15

(40) For the team above, how many men's players can you name?

- 0
- 1–4
- 5–10
- 11–15

Perceptions and future engagement

(41) Did The Hundred change your perceptions of cricket? Please explain your answer.

(42) Did The Hundred change your perceptions of women's cricket? Please explain your answer.

(43) Do you plan to attend The Hundred in 2022?

- Yes/Maybe/No

(44) Who do you plan to attend with? (Please tick all that apply)

- By myself
- With my partner
- With my family (excluding children)
- With my friends
- With colleagues
- With team mates
- With younger children
- With teenagers

Appendix B. Focus group discussion topics

Opening question

- (1) Tell me about your experiences of The Hundred (e.g. which matches & venues did you attend, with who, what was it like overall).

Choosing to attend

- (2) Why did you choose to attend The Hundred? (Use this to bring out any perceived differences between The Hundred and other sporting events/other cricket matches.)

Match-day experiences

- (3) What did you enjoy about the match-day experience?
- (4) What did you dislike about the match-day experience?
- (5) How did it compare to other live sporting events which you have attended (especially cricket matches)?
- (6) What could be done to improve the experience?
- (7) Specific components to bring out, if not already covered in the discussion:
- (8) What did you think of the music/fireworks/entertainment?
- (9) Talk about your experiences of crowd behaviour. How did this compare to other live sporting events you have been to?
(If relevant)
- (10) For those who went with children, including teenagers - what was their experience like?
- (11) How did it compare to other experiences your children have had of live sport?
- (12) Was there anything about The Hundred which particularly ignited their excitement?
(Make sure to ask about ages and genders of children, and to discuss any differences between the experiences of boys and girls.)

Impact of the hundred

- (13) Have your feelings about cricket changed since The Hundred? (Explain why/why not.)
(If relevant – i.e. for women's group)
- (14) In the survey, some of you indicated that you went to The Hundred to show your support for women's sport – how do you feel about men's cricket?
- (15) Have your feelings about women's cricket changed since The Hundred? Explain why.
(Use this to draw out overall feelings about women's cricket & women's sport. e.g. for those with positive views - what was it that made you feel positively about women's cricket? For those with negative views - what did you dislike?)(If relevant)
- (16) What impact did being exposed to women's cricket for the first time make to you?
- (17) Have you played cricket since the Hundred? Why/why not? (Use this to explore barriers to participation e.g. accessibility, image of the sport, cost...)
- (18) Has your involvement in cricket increased in other ways? (Again, use this to explore any barriers to involvement.)
(If relevant)
- (19) What was it about The Hundred that made you want to increase your involvement in cricket?
- (20) What was different about The Hundred?
- (21) Have you attended other cricket matches since The Hundred?
- (22) Would you attend cricket other than The Hundred in future? Why/why not?
(Use this to bring out any perceived differences between The Hundred and other types of cricket.)
- (23) Did the ECB offer any follow-up marketing to try to get you to attend other cricket matches? (If no) - If they had done so, would you have gone along to other matches?
- (24) What can the ECB do to attract you to attend other cricket that is not The Hundred?
(If relevant)
- (25) For those who went with children, including teenagers - has their involvement in cricket increased? Why/why not?

Closing questions

- (26) What, if anything, do you think is unique about The Hundred compared with other sporting events?
- (27) Are you planning to attend The Hundred in 2022? Why/why not?