

‘AS ONE’: LEGACIES OF WOMEN’S MEGA SPORT EVENTS

ABSTRACT

Co-hosted in Australia and New Zealand, the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup attracted 1.9 million stadium attendees (Reuters 2023) and generated an induced economic impact of AU\$1.32 billion (DHAC, 2024). Despite their ever-growing reach, very few event legacy studies have been conducted in female-focused mega sport event contexts, where current impacts for host residents remain underexplored. Social impact assessments of ‘soft’ legacies are considered an important measure of legacy from the viewpoint of the hosting community as a stakeholder (e.g., Gibson et al., 2014; Shipway et al., 2020). As such, the present research explores residents’ subjective reflections and evaluations of the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup as a women’s mega sport event.

As long-term outcomes of mega events, event legacies are important for creating tangible and intangible benefits for the wellbeing and lifestyle of local residents of hosting destinations (e.g., Thomson et al., 2019). As direct impacts on residents, mega sport events are particularly associated with contributing to the enhancement of sporting infrastructure and participation, to social capital, to inclusion and diversity, and to skills and friendships development from volunteering for the event (Dickson et al., 2020; Kaplanidou et al., 2013; Mair et al., 2021).

Beyond benefits from event volunteering, there is limited research focused on legacies attached to women’s mega sport events, even though the importance of legacies is recognised in other mega event contexts such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games (e.g., Fairley et al., 2016). The sparse research on women’s sport events is mostly focused on pre-event messaging, rather than on post-event impacts (e.g., Desjardins 2021), where promoting women and girls’ sport participation was identified as 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup bidding’s primary legacy narrative (Beissel et al., 2022).

Semi-structured inductive interviews were conducted with twenty-five local residents in Australian host cities, providing rich insights on how the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup as a women’s mega sport event is perceived in relation to potential community legacies. All data were inductively thematically analysed into semantic patterns; first into codes and then into higher order themes. Analysis of codes and themes was conducted independently by authors, followed by in an iterative process of coding and critical discussion in which themes were assessed, and links between quotes and conceptualisations were cross-checked for congruence and relevance.

Primary findings were that women’s mega sport events not only provide inspiration and role modelling for women and young girls to engage in sport, but also generate interest among the wider population in participating in sport activities. Women’s sports in general beside soccer are recognised by residents as areas needing further investments and support from government bodies and sporting organisations, by promoting female leadership and equal opportunities for women’s sport development. The 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup also represented an opportunity for women to feel empowered in different life domains, to reflect on gender equality and inclusivity, and advance related discourses.

The 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup was associated with social inclusion through the representation of women athletes’ diversity in sexual orientations, religious beliefs, as well as physical appearance. Similar to other mega sport events (Kaplanidou et al., 2013), women’s mega sport events can generate social legacies by enhancing a sense of civic pride and community, and further social interaction and cohesion.

This study analysed the legacies attached to the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup as a women's mega sport event, and identified social legacies, gender equality legacies and women's sport legacies. Findings suggest that residents were supportive of the event and highlighted legacy types that are particularly unique to women's mega sport events, while at the same time not being limited to the sport being played or to female residents exclusively benefitting from the event.

The findings provide insights on how women's mega sport events can be further leveraged to achieve legacy aims. Beside investing in elite sport and making soccer more accessible, residents discussed community engagement initiatives such as social sport activities, events and local tournaments to improve social connection and overall wellbeing. Future studies should further analyse the role of women's mega sport events' perceived impacts and event involvement, in influencing future events and tourism development support.

Keywords: mega sport events; women's sport; legacy; social cohesion; FIFA Women's World Cup

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