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## Vote for women: a discussion over breakfast

**On the morning that the Us Girls project announced it was a finalist in the National Lottery Awards *The Leisure Review* convened a round table to discuss women in sport.**

Despite having taken the initiative and invited three leaders in the sports development sector to meet for breakfast and a discussion of the place of women in sport, *The Leisure Review* still felt constrained to open proceedings by asking whether such a discussion had any relevance in the 21st century. That one of our number had been prevented from attending by a family emergency rather answered that question; had our guests all been male, the chances that an injured dog would have delayed one of them are remote. As it was Karen Keohane of StreetGames and Hayley Lever of the Community Sports Trust were happy to continue without Anne Ibrahim of Sport Cheshire but were less certain about the proposition that women are badly done to in the sport and leisure industry.

Keohane, from her perspective as national manager for the Us Girls project, was clear that, as far as participation is concerned, there may be a case to answer: "The issue has bubbled along for some time now but has moved onto, rather than under, the radar." Many in sports development will be able to cite interventions, from the Nike Girls in Sport research from 2000 through to the Fit for Girls programme which Sport Scotland ran with the Youth Sport Trust from 2009 to 2011, but Keohane feels the recent high-profile increase participation may engender transformative change: "The fact that people, thank goodness, are seriously looking at gaps in participation has heightened awareness that there is a massive gender gap in sport."

Looking specifically at the issues faced by women working in sport, she was again clear. It is her experience that compared to many contexts the sports development sector is refreshingly free of bias: "In my 25 years working in sport I have never once faced any issues relating to being a woman working in sport."

That the business of sport is a gender-blind meritocracy is often evidenced by the place of women in sport's hierarchies and by the place of one woman, Baroness Sue Campbell, in particular. During the period when she was an adviser to both the education and the culture departments in Whitehall she was the most powerful person, let alone woman, in sport in the UK. Both Keohane and Lever were sure that having a secretary of state at the DCMS and a chief executive of Sport England who are women and empathise with the situation women find themselves in will, as Lever said, "have helped raise the profile of the work required and also been powerful role models to other women working in sport".

Lever, who initiated Derbyshire's Village Games project and who has a passion for local, grassroots involvement, was also positive about the influence of powerful women like Maria Millar and made the point that the different perspectives of people like Jennie Price, who famously, or infamously, depending on who you listened to at the time, joined Sport England from a non-sporty background, can only enrich the profession.

Perspective is of course the key to any discussion of prejudice and

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Lever looked beyond direct personal experience and considered her working environment, the county of Derbyshire. “In my working life, most of the more senior people I work with are men,” she said. “I’d be interested to know what the statistics are across the sector and if they suggest that there is some work to be done in supporting women to progress within the industry. This could be done with mentoring, training and support. It also might require us as an industry to look at how jobs can be done differently – more flexibly. This would be a benefit to the whole profession, not just women.”

For a brief period the table played spot the woman in a powerful job before another salient point was made. Keohane stated, “My perception is that sports development is a very equal profession” and Lever added, “Especially lower down.” While one sector of the industry can be rightly be proud of its record on employing women, is it enough that the equality becomes less apparent the higher up the greasy pole you look and that, as Keohane noted, “On the facilities side of the industry things are less equal.”

While some might seek to blame “men” or “the system”, Keohane and Lever were happier finding a more positive rationale for what appears to be a classic case of a glass ceiling. “I think women thrive in development roles because of the skillset required”, Keohane suggested and then between them they picked out communication skills, negotiation and partnership working, with Lever noting that in her experience women are also very strong in community sports development roles, where relationship-building skills are essential. In career development terms, Lever thinks women need more encouragement to progress: “This is something we are trying to do with our team – support them to look at their longer-term career, and where they might contribute in the future... I’d be keen to see some best practice from the industry and other sectors, showing what works best in addressing the glass ceiling issue”.

Lever also noted that when her organisation finds the right people they are keen to keep them and to “support their work-life balance as they go through different life stages”. Part-time working, home working and job shares are considered normal, and she is certain she gets the best from her team because of it.

With the skills under discussion having been identified as “soft”, the natural progression was into the arena of relationships. Both women were pleased to have been afforded the opportunity to spend time “off agenda” and to have met someone with similar challenges and rewards. They bemoaned the paucity of opportunity for people in sports development to come together in less formal settings and realised something that The Leisure Review has been banging on about for some time: it really is good to talk.

As we closed the conversation Keohane, a late substitute at the breakfast table, explained what had detained her colleague Helen Crowley. By now many readers will already know that Us Girls, the women’s section of StreetGames, has been nominated for a National Lottery Award but the announcement was being made as we ate. Keohane was obviously both pleased and proud. “Winning it will be a big deal for us, helping the project to grow in the next few years,” she said. “The programme has been running in 50 areas across England, but we want to grow to others areas and become bigger and better.” Naturally, The Leisure Review promised both to vote and to be scandalously overt in suggesting our readers do the same.

As the waiter cleared the coffee cups Lever and Keohane parted, using the often empty phrase, “We should do this again.” If a bookie could be found to offer odds, this correspondent would bet that these two influential and engaging women actually will.

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