I want to begin with a question: what will it take for a woman to be President of FIFA?

Coming from Australia, a country with a modern economy and strong democratic traditions which has had a woman Prime Minister and Governor-General, speaking to a group in another country with similar attributes, Denmark, you would think – or at least hope – that a discussion on gender inclusivity in sport shouldn’t need to take place.

It starts from what I believe is the inarguable premise that there are not enough women in sport – in its administration, its executive management and in media.

I also think that if we had more women in football - on which I will focus – from the grassroots through to FIFA – it would only contribute to improved outcomes, relevance, profitability and perhaps most importantly, its reputation.

I am going to use Australia as an example - obviously because I know it but also because, if a nation such as ours can’t get it right, how far is there to go for other nations that may not have the same values that we have – or rather, espouse? In that sense, I must also acknowledge that, having had a woman Prime Minister, who was immensely unpopular, with seven women in her Cabinet, we now have only one woman in Cabinet – so if our political class cannot show the way, who can?

There are four issues I wish to raise about women being part of the main game that are relevant to outcomes, relevance, profitability and reputation.

**Outcomes: the best talent for the job**

The first is the obvious one of the best person for the job.

It is more or less conventional wisdom in modern economies today to tap a more diverse talent pool by having women on Boards and in senior management positions in business. Increased competition in a global economy means that more and more business needs both to attract and retain the best talent possible.

But while this is generally accepted policy in other sectors of the economy, Australia is not at best practice levels, and it has not yet translated to professional sport. It particularly hasn’t translated to football.

Only last week, Ernst & Young Australia released a report on gender equity in corporate Australia. Amongst other things, it quoted an eminent Australian business leader, David Gonski, as saying that he thought many Australian companies have a problem with women in senior roles because men “fear having to compete with women”.

He also said that it is “easier for everyone to go along with the norms of today than it is to challenge them.”
However, if leading business men are openly acknowledging the gap between policy and practice in the corporate sector, just imagine what it is like in professional sport and especially in a sport dominated by men.

Anyone who thinks the recent inclusion of three women on the FIFA Executive Committee – one voted, two co-opted for a year – is a sign of gender inclusiveness at the top levels of football, probably also thinks pigs fly.

In any case, a quota system as FIFA has employed is something that is introduced to gloss over a fatal flaw. It doesn’t actually address the systemic failures from the grassroots up.

And while it is relatively easy to focus on the top levels of professional sport, as it’s prominent and something we all follow, it is grassroots where real change can happen. No professional sport can survive and prosper without strong grassroots. Of itself, this brings inclusivity, it grows interest in the sport, it is the source of future players and it helps enhance credibility and reputation.

**Relevance: ‘No taxation without representation’**

The second reason is a related issue of social justice.

If you accept the principle of the American revolution – no taxation without representation - does football administration and management reflect its base?

This is a legitimate question in Australia as every registered player is, in effect, taxed by the national governing body and the state governing body. Registration fees account for roughly 7.5% of FFA revenue.

But amongst the boards of Australia’s ten A-League clubs, the 2015 Asian Cup organising committee and Football Federation Australia itself, there are only three women members – one of whom is a government nominee. Football goes nowhere near reflecting its base.

- One-third of all 5-14 year old registered players are girls.
- Upwards of 40,000 adult women play.
- Up to 35% of spectators at the professional game are women.
- At least 35% of the volunteer workforce of 100,000 are women.
- The Matildas – the national women’s team - are the most successful of Australia’s nine national football teams, having competed in all but one of the six Women’s World Cup tournaments.

Through the Australian Sports Commission, national sporting organisations that receive public funding are required to “demonstrate gender diversity”. Football’s three women Board members – or less than 5% amongst 61 positions - apparently ‘ticks the box’…. or at least there are no funding consequences. It is a very disappointing standard.
This is not to say you have to be a woman to understand and promote women and football.

Ideally, the people involved in the game’s management and administration should be men and women of talent who are able to represent all of its interests, irrespective of who is playing the sport. In other words, I don’t believe we need women on the FIFA Executive Committee to ‘be’ the women’s football representative, just as I don’t believe we need a man on the FIFA Executive Committee to ‘be’ the men’s football representative. (If I could take that further, I also don’t believe that being a former professional player automatically qualifies someone to be a sports administrator).

All FIFA Executive Committee members, just as all FFA Board members, should be there for the best interests of the sport overall: for women, men, girls and boys.

However, history suggests that many men who have run football over the past decades have had very few interests outside their own.

Profitability: Yes, the future is increasingly feminine (as well as Asian)

The third reason is about the growth of the game at both the grassroots and professional levels.

Even when the former national soccer league was on its last legs, and the game was without the corporate and media support it enjoys today, grassroots participation was strong in Australia.

For boys up to 14 years, it has remained relatively steady over the past 15-20 years at around 20%. But amongst girls, it has really taken off: from around 1% to 6.5% in the past decade to make it the third most popular sport for girls after swimming and netball.

It is also the fastest growing team sport for women. There are many young – and not-so-young – mums who play the game today. And, just as it is in other commercial considerations, it is the ‘mum’s market’ which is so critical to the growth of both the amateur and professional game.

Why? Because mothers are almost always the decision-maker in what sport their children will play, what is affordable and on the leisure time pursuits of the family. Adding further to this, is a recent report from the University of Canberra which showed that one-in-four Australian women are the major breadwinners in their household.

The scope for increased profitability from tapping into women was further evidenced by research conducted by Australian research firm Core Data for Motherpedia – of which I am a co-director – in September. The research was not about football, but social activity within families and amongst mums and dads, so the 1,000 respondents were not ‘rusted on’ football fans.

Less than half of the women had even heard of the A-League, but one-in-four mothers have at least ‘a little’ interest in it. This is approximately the same as the proportion of children who play football - which suggests that there is a relationship between the two. More importantly, it also suggests there is scope for ‘conversion’ of those mums into being at least occasional, if not regular, attendees at games of both the A-League and W-League.
If a woman goes to a game, she is generally accompanied by one or a combination of a partner, friends, kids, the kids’ friends and more.

And they always spend money. Another study that I conducted some years ago specifically of 1,700 attendees at a football match showed that the multiplier effect of a woman’s attendance was almost eight times more than that of a man. That’s handy revenue for perennially cash-strapped clubs.

This also applies to the funders of professional sport – the host broadcasters.

In the Australian television market, the competitive edge in broadcasting is ‘live’ events and particularly live sport, most of which are tied-up by subscription television generally in concert with a free-to-air channel that has limited rights. Add women’s purchasing decision power with the fact that they tend to more actively manage what their children watch, the growth in subscriber numbers is more likely to come from women than men.

**Reputation: The ‘grass ceiling’**

The final issue is the leadership we need from the women who have so far managed to crash through the ‘grass ceiling’ in sport.

*Are* they leaders?

That is not for me to answer but, with the greatest respect to the professionalism and qualifications of individuals, the sad truth is that many women in such positions tend to be those who are ‘acceptable’ to men. In general, they:

1. don’t have a profile – you wouldn’t see one of them speaking out about an issue that may be deemed controversial
2. don’t rock the boat – if you ask no questions, everyone is happy
3. don’t have a reform agenda – to the extent that they may push for something, it will be something relatively soft and non-controversial; not the structural, cultural and attitudinal change needed to advance other women
4. don’t expect work-life balance
5. have to be prepared to leave their principles at the front door every morning.

It can be argued that it is always such people who ‘get on’ – men and women – and it is naïve to think otherwise. But I do think men who are inclined to push the boundaries are more likely to succeed than women who do so. Conversely, I also think men who are willing to take the role of challenging the status quo are seen more positively than a woman who does so.

As David Gonski said, and I noted earlier, it’s “easier for everyone to go along with the norms of today than it is to challenge them.” I would add that not challenging the status quo is
almost a pre-requisite for women if men are going to give them a seat at the table – such as the FIFA Executive Committee or the Board Room of FFA or an A-League club.

It’s 2013 and we’re still talking about it

So what can we do? It’s 2013, and we’re still talking about the same sort of gender issues we talked about when I was a girl.

Here are five things that could be done to start with.

1. For a start, instead of paying lip-service to the issue of gender diversity in sport administration, I would like to see Australian governments as major funders of Australian sport, championing women in sport by holding sports to account in a more rigorous way. Less than 5% of Board members being female is simply unacceptable: rather than giving FFA a ‘tick’ of approval on gender diversity, their funding from government should be at risk if they do not do better.

2. FIFA should give an additional contribution to a member association for every woman Board member.

3. In Australia, FFA should do the same for A-League clubs.

As I mentioned earlier, this isn’t about quota positions; women are quite capable of being there on merit. But it does mean advocating and rewarding women’s roles in sport as an incentive, until it becomes the norm.

4. I would like to see some male 'champions' stand up for cultural change as well – from men already on these Boards, from male CEOs, from men in the media or even players. I know many players – past and current – and A-League CEOs who wouldn’t disagree with a word I’ve said, so get on the right side of history and say so. This is a challenge to the more broad-minded and creative in football’s midst.

5. And finally - it’s only one small effort but my business partner and I at Motherpedia are establishing an online launch pad for women who want to serve on Boards of sporting organisations – community and grassroots boards, as well as boards at professional levels of sport. We will be inviting women to register their interest and sporting organisations to make use of it. Perhaps an enlightened corporate organisation might want to sponsor it! While a government register exists for the professional level, very few women know about it and very few sports access it. Australia – just like Denmark - has one of the highest rates of educated women in the world, and we are not making use of them. So we want to help make it as easy as possible.

It is only by giving women the opportunity to be active ‘players’ in the main game ... it is only by women putting their hands up to say ‘I want to be part of this’ ... and only by women like me raising these issues and trying to do something positive that we might, in another few decades time, be no longer talking about it.

Just as business leaders such as David Gonski acknowledged that there is still a long way to go in business in Australia, there is an even longer way to go in professional sport before we
see more women at the top table managing sport and managing football in Australia, in the Asian Confederation and – eventually – at FIFA.

Not because of a quota introduced by out-of-touch men leading a bunch of other out-of-touch men. But an acknowledgement that involving women in the main game will lead to better outcomes, improve the management and relevance of the sport, increase its profitability and enhance its reputation.

If we consider FIFA, or football associations around the world, today – what is there to lose?

So I ask again: what will it take for a woman to become President of FIFA?

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