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# **GOING FOR GOLD:**

**NEW ZEALAND WOMEN'S ELITE RUGBY SEVENS**

**IN A NEW OLYMPIC-ERA**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Master of Sport and Exercise  
at Massey University, Palmerston North,  
New Zealand

May 2015

## **ABSTRACT**

Rugby sevens will appear in the Olympics for the first time in Rio 2016. As the 2016 Olympics approach, many rugby organisations and nations are investing in rugby sevens, and the women's game in particular. This thesis examined the ways in which the International Olympic Committee's decision to include rugby sevens as an Olympic sport has influenced the socio-cultural, political-economic and organisational landscape of the women's game, globally and in New Zealand, where the sport is of significance to the nation's sporting identity. This study adopted a multi-method approach that combined document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 13 participants from different perspectives (global and local) to understand the link between global sport decisions and local sport implementations and address several issues of central importance related to globalisation, the social context of sport policy and initiatives, gender equality and rugby sevens in New Zealand. Key findings to emerge include the nature in which the Olympics has presented opportunities, challenges and dilemmas associated with women's elite rugby sevens. Ultimately, the unique contextual moment presented by the decision to include rugby sevens in the Olympics has contributed to our understanding of the International Rugby Board's and New Zealand Rugby's mandate to progress and develop women's rugby sevens. The extent of the IRB's efforts to embrace women's sevens into its global rugby community has evidenced both crises and opportunities; underscoring the significant research context for this study (predating the actual Olympic appearance of rugby sevens in 2016) in understanding and tracing the changes in women's rugby sevens in the current Olympic-era.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to show my appreciation and thank a number of people who made it all possible. Without their involvement and support I would not have been able to complete this research project.

Firstly, I would like to thank “the number one” supervisor, Dr Sarah Gee, for her encouragement, approach, and assistance throughout this entire project. You have taught me some life-long lessons about hard work, dedication and have opened my mind up to new possibilities. Cheers.

Next, I would like to thank Dr Andrea Geurin-Eagleman, for her friendly advice, enthusiasm, and “educational documentaries” which served me well during tough times. I would also like to give a special thank you to Ashleigh, someone who has always led me in the right direction and has had to put up with my nagging. Good luck with your PhD.

To all of my participants, a huge thanks. I am extremely grateful for your time and assistance during this project. I am also appreciative to my close family and friends; I thank you for your patience, continued support and love throughout this last year. I know I it has not been easy but you all have been there in one way or another.

Finally, to Mum and Dad, thank you for your unconditional love, support and everything else in-between. Through the highs and lows, you have always been there...So, this is for you!

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American International Group – AIG

High Performance Sport New Zealand – HPSNZ

International Ice Hockey Federation – IIHF

International Olympic Committee - IOC

International Rugby Board – IRB

Key Performance Indicators – KPI

Ladies Professional Golf Association – LPGA

National Basketball Association – NBA

New Zealand Olympic Committee – NZOC

New Zealand Rugby - NZR

New Zealand Rugby Players Association – NZRPA

Professional Golf Association – PGA

Sport New Zealand – Sport NZ (formerly known as SPARC)

Transnational Corporations - TNC

United States Olympic Committee – USOC

Women’s Sevens World Series - WSWS

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

The inclusion of Sevens rugby in the Olympics provides a fantastic vehicle to showcase and promote the women's game. (NZR, n.d.-a, p.3)

With women's rugby crossing cultural and sporting boundaries, the race to become the first female athletes to represent the sport at the Olympic Games is well and truly underway in 2015 as we look forward to rugby sevens at Rio 2016. (World Rugby, 2015)

On October 9, 2009, members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) unanimously voted to include rugby sevens as an official Olympic sport at the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. With the Olympic Games becoming the focal event for rugby sevens, several top-ranking officials forecasted the potential impact this Olympic decision would have on the sport. According to the International Rugby Board's (IRB)<sup>1</sup> President, Bernard Lapasset, the Olympic inclusion would mark a "historic moment for our sport and the global rugby community" ("Golf & rugby...", 2009). Following the Olympic announcement, women's rugby sevens soon became a prime development strategy throughout the global rugby community. For example, over 85% of national rugby unions intended to increase female participation in rugby, over 90% of unions believed the sport of rugby sevens will be a popular choice for women and girls by the time of the 2016 Olympics, and as a result over 95% of unions have incorporated women into their strategic plans (IRB, 2012a). Even in the New Zealand context the Olympic decision had a profound effect. For example, New Zealand Rugby (NZR)<sup>2</sup> Chief Executive Steve Tew stated, "given New

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst they were recently rebranded as World Rugby, for the purpose of this study, the current organisation will be referred as the IRB. The IRB is the sport's global governing body, responsible for: implementing laws, regulations and their enforcements; tournament owners and managers; provide global development through funding, grants and strategic investment programmes, and delivery of education and development programmes; and, design game promotion (NZR, n.d.-b).

<sup>2</sup> The NZR was formerly known as the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU). This organisation aims to "lead, grow, support and promote New Zealand's game" (NZR, n.d.-a).

Zealanders' shared passion for rugby and the Olympic Games, I am sure all Kiwi rugby fans would be excited at the prospect of our sevens team representing New Zealand on the Olympic stage" ("World's biggest stage...", 2009). Clearly, the Olympic inclusion would "deliver a new profile for Rugby...[and] provide new opportunities for unions that have so long promised to contend at the highest level" (IRB, n.d.-a, p.13). Never before has there been such an extensive impetus for women's rugby development than the current Olympic-induced rugby sevens environment.

With rugby sevens on the verge of making Olympic history in Rio 2016, the sport continues to grow and expand the global competition. To mark the increases in participation numbers, in 2014 the IRB reported that over 121,000 women and girls across 138 nations were introduced to the game via the '*Make It Happen*' and the '*Get Into Rugby*' initiatives (World Rugby, 2015). One of rugby's global ambassadors, Jonah Lomu, recently stated, the Olympics "is just taking it [rugby sevens] to the next level. It gives teams from lesser nations that can't play 15's an equal opportunity to play the best teams in the world" (Johnstone, 2015). Perhaps the popularity of women's rugby has become more significant than ever before, especially considering women were added to the rugby sevens programme for the 2018 Commonwealth Games ("Women get nod...", 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Rugby sevens is an abbreviated version of the fifteen-a-side game. By definition, the reduced number of athletes (e.g., seven-a-side) on the field of play and the reduced time the game is played (e.g., seven minutes per half) has contributed to its attractiveness as an exciting, spectator-friendly sport. The combination of fast-paced and electrifying play with

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<sup>3</sup> Since the 1998 Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games rugby sevens has only been played by men.

the renowned carnival atmosphere of Rio de Janeiro,<sup>4</sup> appears particularly appropriate for the Olympic debut of rugby sevens.

In New Zealand, rugby has always had “a proud and illustrious” appeal to many New Zealanders (NZR, n.d.-b, p.14); an appeal many scholars suggest has a deep connection with New Zealand’s national sporting identity (Chu, Leberman, Howe, & Bachor, 2003; Fougere, 1989; Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002; McConnell, 2012; Nauright, 1990, 1996, 1997, 2007; Palenski, 1992; Phillips, 1987; Scherer & Jackson, 2010). According to some scholars, rugby has served as a mirror of New Zealand society. It is a site where national and gendered identities are created and contested (Chu et al., 2003; Scherer & Jackson, 2010, 2013), and where racial tensions have been played out (Fougere, 1989; Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002), creating a sense of unity among New Zealanders and a heightened sense of what makes this small country, with a population of just 4.5 million, so unique (Nauright, 2007). All of New Zealand’s national rugby teams (the All Blacks, the men’s national team; the All Blacks men’s sevens team; the Black Ferns, the women’s national team; and the women’s rugby sevens team), have been internationally recognised for their rugby prowess and their dominance in global sports events (Chu et al, 2003; Johnson, Martin, Palmer, Watson & Ramsey, 2014; NZR, n.d.-b).

In light of this new ‘Olympic-era’ for rugby, it is acknowledged that Olympic sport inclusion is a significant motivator for changes in sport policy priorities regarding high performance sport (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). In 2011, many national rugby unions intended to incorporate the women’s game into their strategic plans, which in turn, would serve as a popular choice for female athletes in time for the 2016 Olympics (IRB, 2012a). As Somekh, Burman, Delamont, Meyer, Payne and Thorpe (2005) claim, these international trends are a

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<sup>4</sup> Gee, Jackson, and Sam (2014) provide evidence from the carnivalesque atmosphere at the Wellington, New Zealand event of the Men’s Sevens World Series.

product of the impact that global institutions impose on the strategic direction at a more localised level. Through a global-local system, new relationships and opportunities manufacture a distinctive set of processes whereby specific initiatives are produced (Blackmore & Lauder, 2005). Part of these initiatives is the necessity to develop a quality pool of talent that can supplement national Olympic ambitions on the medal table (Green & Houlihan, 2005).

### ***Purpose and Research Questions***

The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine in what ways has the IOC's decision to include rugby sevens as an Olympic sport influenced the socio-cultural, political-economic and organisational landscape of the women's game at the global-local nexus. Based on a case study design, this thesis analyses the link between global sport decisions and local sport implementations and seeks to address several issues of central importance related to globalisation, the social context of sport policy and initiatives, gender and rugby sevens in New Zealand. The following three sub-questions guide the research process:

- 1) According to key stakeholders, what are the perceived opportunities, challenges, dilemmas and trade-offs of rugby sevens as an Olympic sport?
- 2) How have the IRB's *Women's Rugby Plan* and *Rugby Sevens Plan* strategic documents impacted on localised sport initiatives for women's rugby sevens in the New Zealand context?
- 3) How do female elite rugby sevens athletes in New Zealand experience the transition of rugby sevens to an Olympic sport and associated local sport development programmes?

Using interviews with key individuals from both global and local perspectives, this thesis specifically aims to: (a) explore the trials and triumphs of developing high performance strategies for women's rugby sevens, (b) examine the complexities of gender identity for female rugby sevens athletes and governing ideals of Olympism, and (c) contributes to

current socio-contextual understandings of the relationship between globalisation and local reform. Ultimately, this study endeavours to reveal new and significant insights into the changing nature and profile of women's rugby sevens at the global-local nexus.

### ***Theoretical Approach***

Theories provide logical explanations of people's actions and relationships and the organisation and dynamics of social worlds. (Coakley, 2009, p.53)

Recognising women's rugby sevens as a unique social world, this thesis intertwines aspects of cultural and social theories with contextual approaches used to conceptualise ideas about globalisation, gender and sport development. First to be considered is critical cultural theory. According to Coakley (2009), cultural theories are "important to examine the narratives or ways of representing and talking about objects, people, and experiences that are used in connection with sports" (p.36). Further, Hall (1996) suggests that this approach enables you to reflect into the past, which is advantageous when examining the present and the future. Therefore, cultural theory helps the current study to exemplify the processes that has aided the transformation of specific values, norms, ideas and beliefs about the meaning of developing and participating in global elite women's rugby sevens (Coakley, 2009; Messner, 2002), and thus provides a unique lens that forms an interpretive approach to understanding this historical contextual occasion (Andrews, 2002).

Also of consideration in this research is the feminist theory. Key to applying this theory is the "interpretation of sport as a gendered activity" (Birrell, 2000, p.62). In the past researchers have clarified how gender relations, specifically the subordinate nature and relationship women have with men, have been analysed in sport (Birrell, 2000; Hargreaves, 1994). As Hargreaves (1994) suggests,

the important impact of feminist intervention into sport sociology has been to uncover ways in which men's power over women in sports has been institutionalized;

it has provided a practical and symbolic challenge to male privilege which has resulted in general recognition of gender as a basic category of analysis. (p. 26)

However, as sport has evolved and men have slowly become accustomed to and females have become increasingly more involved in sport, it has led to new developments in women's elite sport. So, this research intends to understand the obstacles and allowances as females contest the male sporting preserve of rugby (Carle & Nauright, 1999; Chu et al., 2003). In addition, many scholars regard this theory as an idea that challenges and confronts the view of gender equality (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Messner, 1988; Offen, 1988; Squires, 2007; Theberge, 1981). One major sports event that attempts to encourage equality is the Olympic Games, by way of its Olympic Charter (IOC, 2007, 2014a). Since this thesis examines the after-effects on rugby sevens due to the 2009 decision to include the sport in the Olympics, it will contribute to a number of studies that indicate that "women have come a long way, and the Olympics have become a symbol of their success" (Antunovic, 2014, p.124). Subsequently, the feminist approach enables the researcher to navigate through the complexities and opportunities associated with women playing a masculine sport, and help guide the context of this study.

### ***Significance of Research***

Due to the timely appearance of rugby sevens in the 2016 Rio Olympics, and the "push for double gold" for both the New Zealand men's and women's teams ("NZ Rugby makes...", 2013), this analysis explores a context that becomes highly relevant to those with a vested interest in the Olympics, elite sport development, rugby and gender. Firstly, findings from the current study would be relevant to those associated with the IOC in terms of tracing the outcomes from decisions they make for the Olympic programme; thus leading

to a further understanding of Olympic sport inclusion and its impact on sport, especially those involving the participation of women.

In addition, it has been documented by researchers that there is a need to explore the role of international sport development and organisational structure and how this influences national and local contexts (Houlihan, 2009; Jackson, 2013). Hence, this research offers further evidence to international sports organisations hoping to join the Olympic programme with a recent account of the process undertaken by the sport of rugby. Also, an exploration into athlete perspectives is not necessarily new to the New Zealand women's rugby context (Chu et al., 2003), but this research will help inform those who govern sport nationally with a recent account from these perspectives. Undoubtedly, New Zealand's collective sense of identity and national unity stems from the sport of rugby (Fougere, 1989). Over time, this has been forged by traditional values linked with the long-standing reputation of the men's national team (Phillips & Nauright, 1996), indicating that New Zealand will always have a deep appreciation for everything rugby. Yet, the role of the women's teams and their attempts at making inroads in gaining public affinity for nationalism is a significant point of departure from previous literature. As such, this thesis will be of interest to academics, especially scholars who analyse various features related to women's elite sport and rugby. It is hoped that researchers will use this study as a foundation to understand recent events that have influenced the brief history of women's rugby sevens.

### ***Chapter Overviews***

This thesis is an investigation of how decisions to include one particular sport into the Olympic programme have influenced the development and profile of women's rugby sevens, both globally and locally. Beyond this Introduction chapter, four chapters provide a

theoretical overview that applies to the context of this study; outlines a methodological approach that ensures the provision of a clear contextual basis for the data analysis; provides a discussion of the key findings; and delivers future considerations and the overall conclusions found from this research.

Chapter two identifies key scholars and their work, and presents certain gaps in the literature that exist in regards to sport mega-events, women in sport, and development in elite sport. The chapter discusses literature that relates to the Olympics as a sporting mega-event and emphasises the specific characteristics of the event's overall importance to elite sport and to women. From here, the focus then shifts to linking ideas about women who participate in masculine sports and especially attention that centres on their involvement in rugby union. This is followed by a review of work that introduces sport policy as a development tool and how sport policies are used in international, New Zealand and global-local contexts. Finally, the chapter refers to sport programmes and initiatives that primarily develop elite sport.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology utilised for this study.<sup>5</sup> Initially, the chapter highlights the benefits of using a qualitative pathway and that different sociological assumptions help to understand the deeper theoretical meaning that is associated to this framework. Next, the chapter illustrates how the context of the present research is easily positioned into a case study design and then identifies several approaches that were applied when selecting participants. Following this, the chapter identifies that data was gathered through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with participants who were chosen based on their expertise in women's rugby. The chapter ends with a discussion of the process used to analyse the data and the impact of biased representations.

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<sup>5</sup> A research methodology is a specific technique that not only acknowledges the methods applied but also considers the logic behind those methods and explains why we use them (Kothari, 2004).

Chapter four draws together and critically analyses the findings. This chapter makes clear links between discourses obtained from key strategic documents with relevant viewpoints; and identifies similarities and differences between global-local and local-local perspectives. In particular, the chapter presents a socio-contextual analysis of the perceived value of the Olympics and its importance to women's rugby sevens in the global-local context.

Finally, chapter five discusses how the findings connect with previous literature. The chapter acknowledges several limitations and constraints encountered throughout the research project. The chapter concludes with a summary of key considerations and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

In 1999, George Wright discussed several tendencies related to globalising changes in sport (Wright, 1999); changes that continue to be scrutinised by scholars as new possibilities for elite sport emerge (Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, Bradley, & Maguire, 2002). For instance, global processes have had significant effects on local culture, such as the labour migration of athletes (e.g., Grainger, 2006; Kanemasu & Molnar, 2013; Maguire & Bale, 2013; Shachar, 2011), revenue generation through television rights and the media sport cultural complex (e.g., Rowe, 2004a), international sports organisations and events (e.g., Roche, 2006), and the sponsorship and advertising practices of transnational corporations (TNC's) and their association with sports teams and brands (e.g., Jackson, Batty & Scherer, 2001; John & Jackson, 2011; Scherer & Jackson, 2007, 2010, 2013). As a consequence, many scholars often discuss globalising changes and global processes within the context of a global-local nexus (Morley & Robins, 1995). Several sports studies researchers have debated the effects of globalisation on local contexts, highlighting the nature and extent to which local cultures adopt global forces (homogenisation) or resist, negotiate and indigenise them (heterogenisation), in relation to their own ideas about and practices in sport. This thesis engages with globalisation broadly as a socio-contextual phenomenon that illuminates particular social, economic, political and cultural sporting dimensions and realities. This chapter draws from the existing literature to provide a review of scholarly work and indicate the present gap in our knowledge regarding the Olympic Games as a vehicle for national elite sport development of women's rugby sevens in New Zealand.

The chapter begins with a discussion of sport mega-events, with particular reference to the Olympic Games. Then, the chapter conceptualises the ideology of Olympism. This is followed by an examination of sports that have joined the Olympic programme and how the Olympics have affected women's participation in sport. From here, the chapter locates theoretical groundings linked to gender in sport, with specific consideration given to women's participation in what some have classified as masculine sports and rugby, in particular. Following this, the chapter gives an overview of research on sport policy, sport programmes and initiatives in relation to elite sport development. Collectively, the chapter seeks to highlight a growing importance of contributing to what Roche (2006) claims as the quality of evidence-based research into Olympic sports and policy-making processes.

### ***Sport Mega-Events***

A sport mega-event is widely described as an internationally staged, cultural spectacle that periodically has a lasting impact on society (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Malfas, Theodoraki & Houlihan, 2004; Roche, 2003). Traditionally, sport mega-events like the Olympic Games, the Commonwealth Games, the FIFA World Cup, and the Rugby World Cup have been celebrated in the literature for their unique status, distinct appeal and overwhelming reach to mass audiences through extensive media contracts (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2013; Jackson & Scherer, 2013; Jones, 2001; Roche, 2006, 2008). Additionally, sport mega-events have the capacity to socially transform collective and personal behaviours, affect different sporting communities, and influence urban reform (Taks, 2013). Along with these characteristics, much of the literature on sport mega-events also emphasises the impact of political, economic and ethical controversies on an event's overall significance (e.g., political protests, national boycotts, intense rivalries, uneven levels of wealth, cheating, winning at any cost and doping scandals) (Abelson, 2010; Askew, 2009;

Caffrey, 2008; Chappelet, 2008; Davis, 2008; Milton-Smith, 2002; Roche, 2003; Toohey & Veal, 2007).

Many studies examining sport mega-event events have discussed a host of different aspects linked to the interaction between global processes and society. These include: (1) the media coverage given to mega-events (Baker & Rowe, 2012; Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings, Eastman & Newton, 1998; Cui, 2013; Ngomba, 2014; Panagiotopoulou, 2012; Roche, 2006; Tomlinson & Young, 2006); (2) the outcomes of hosting large-scale events (Achu & Swart, 2012; Andersson, Armbrecht & Lundberg, 2008; Balmer, Nevill & Williams, 2001; Billings & Holladay, 2012; Chalkley & Essex, 1999; Cornelissen, 2004; Gold & Gold, 2008; Grix & Lee, 2013; Horne, 2007; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2004, 2006; Jones, 2001; Malfas et al., 2004; Rowe, 2012; Whitson, Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Xu, 2006); (3) the influence of new developments in technology, mass communication and the changing landscape of elite sport and professionalism on the nature in which global audiences are connected to sport (Hirst & Thompson, 1999; Horne, 2007; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Houlihan, 1997; Stevenson, 2002); and (4) the use of these events as political tools for national organisations (Black, 2007; Caffrey, 2008; Cornelissen, 2010; Finlay & Xin, 2010). Therefore, it is worth recognising sport mega-events as sites of investigation and their relationship with society (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2004; Jackson & Scherer, 2013; Malfas et al. 2004; Roche, 2006). One popular sport mega-event that is unrivalled with its ability to promote elite sport and bring people together is the Olympic Games.

### ***The Olympic Games***

According to Segrave (1988, as cited in Berry, 2007), the Olympic Games is “the most powerful expression of international sport” (p.113). Horne and Whannel (2012) claimed that the Olympics is a phenomenon that far extends beyond the fields of play which makes it

“unquestionably the greatest sporting event on earth” (p. i). To extend these perspectives, Papanikolaou (2012) proposed that the global reach of the Olympics is extensive, where the event has the power to leave a certain type of legacy that embraces social and cultural activity; a legacy that includes opportunities in finance, tourism, trade, communication and urban regeneration. Furthermore, Davis (2008) suggested that the Olympic legacy has become fundamental when gaining an understanding of why this mega-event continually surpasses society’s expectations and how it continues to be one of the most well known and highly sought after global sporting brands for corporations. Such factors contribute to the Olympics’ remarkability and are key rationale to the overall context of this thesis.

Beyond the prestige of this mega-event, another aspect of importance to the Olympic spectacle is the level of competition. While often overlooked by corporate capitalism and controversies associated with the Olympics, athletes should be at the core of what makes the Olympics special, including their national identities and their ambitious pursuit for perfection (Davis, 2008; Garcia & Miah, 2005; Papanikolaou, 2012). The Olympics occur every four years, which means that athletes engage in multi-year training regimes leading up to the Olympics. More specifically, athletes are allured by the notion of competing against the world’s elite in sport, which sets the stage for a level of competition that is of a compelling and irresistible quality (Davis, 2008). Indeed, athletes’ heroic performances or against-the-odds achievements inspire and captivate global audiences. In addition to athletes’ physical feats, Houlihan and Zheng (2013) noted that part of the value of the Olympics is the influence of political forces that control economic spending. That is, many nations and their elite sporting agencies rely on government funding to gain an advantage over international rivals and dominate the medal table. As a result, elite athlete-focused organisations are offered incentives in the hopes to improve the standards of their

elite sporting systems. Underlying these cultural practices are links with the symbolic value and philosophy of the Olympic Games, namely the ideal of Olympism.

**Olympism.** According to the Olympic Charter (IOC, 2014a), Olympism is a social philosophy that blends culture and education and transforms sport into life. The root of this ethos is universalism and the harmonious development, preservation, and coexistence of human dignity, peace, morality and justice (IOC, 2014b; Malfas et al., 2004). Supported by McNamee and Parry (2012), Olympism also celebrates diversity and equality. In effect, nations participating in the Olympic Games are encouraged to include all cultures, genders and people with different religious beliefs to share elite sport and the experiences it offers. In the New Zealand context, Olympism and cultural equality has been explored by Culpan, Bruce and Galvan (2011), who suggested that Olympism has provided a social platform that creates a rich expression of both Pakeha and Maori and their need to be culturally interdependent, yet interconnected. Thus, signalling the effect and the deep connection elite sport has with New Zealand and its sporting identity.

As part of the overall Olympic spirit, Olympism is also connected with another key principle, the pursuit of excellence (IOC, 2012). Expressed through the motto: Citius, Altius, Fortius, (swifter, higher, stronger), Olympic athletes are encouraged “to give their best when they compete” (IOC, 2012, p.5). While the impetus behind this expression is to take part and “fight well” (IOC, 2012, p.5), Timmers and De Knop (2001) revealed that from an athlete’s perception the importance of winning an Olympic gold medal is the main factor that influences their participation. Furthermore, Timmers and De Knop suggested that sport is no longer just an activity, but a substantial influence that supports desirable characteristics of individual personality and social life. Overall, these social and cultural factors are fundamental to what distinguishes the Olympic Games from any other sporting

event (Schaffer & Smith, 2000), and arguably the association with “prestige, achievement, honour, and competitiveness” (Davis, 2012, p.52) is part of what inspires non-Olympic sports to acquire Olympic status.

***Sports gaining Olympic recognition.*** Central to the social and cultural appeal of the Olympic Games is the Olympic Movement and the emphasis to uphold all the values linked with Olympism (IOC, 2014a, 2014b).<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, then that sports and their international federations wanting to gain Olympic recognition must prove that they incorporate these values on and off the fields of play. Most notably, to gain Olympic entry a systematic review of the Olympic programme must take place by the IOC (IOC, 2014a). Part of reviewing the Olympic programme includes a discussion on the addition or removal of sports and requires the assessment of the strengths, weaknesses and overall value of each sport against a set of criteria (IOC, 2005). Additionally, the IOC is tasked with “adapting the event to meet changing sports interests around the world”, where “the mix of sports is important to the success of the Olympic program, directly affecting fan and, consequently, corporate sponsorship interest” (Davis, 2008, p.53). It is imperative to acknowledge that different types of sports attract different audiences and the IOC, together with its sponsors and partners, continually seek ways to capitalise on new niche markets. For example, extreme sports, which are part of the Winter Olympic program (e.g., snowboarding), have a more alternative culture associated with its followers and fans (Humphreys, 1997), in comparison to conventional sports like soccer or swimming.

Once the IOC finalises an evaluation criteria, international sport federations and their sporting disciplines go through a rigorous process which involves designing a proposal that

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<sup>6</sup> “The Olympic Movement is the concerted, organised, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism” (IOC, 2014a, p.11).

demonstrates: information on technical components (e.g., competition formats and international officials); venues and equipment; and the overall appeal (e.g., a rationale and the impact of inclusion) (IOC, 2005). In order to leverage their bid to the IOC and the voting committee, international sporting federations also experience an internal evaluation process. This includes: gaining the support of national member and associated member unions and organisations; implementing specific governance and organisational structures; and competition and professional pathways. Yet, the context of examining Olympic inclusion and the various impacts and changes a sport can experience from gaining entry into the Olympics has only recently become a prevalent case of inquiry, with several scholars offering insights that underpin why Olympic sport recognition is vital.

When a sport gains inclusion into the Olympics, global developments are often shaped by government investments, increased media coverage and corporate sponsorships (Jackson & Scherer, 2013). While gaining more awareness through these political and economic mediums can seem beneficial, this is not without implications to an organisation's structure, a certain level of control lost to external entities, and conflicts within national governing boards (Berry, 2007). Following curling's re-emergence into the Winter Olympics in 1998, Wieting and Lamoureux (2001) revealed that the pressure of maintaining integrity whilst remaining popular and marketable to a global audience as one of the biggest obstacles for the future of the sport. Villamon, Brown, Espartero and Gutiérrez's (2004) examination of judo considered how the sport evolved from 1946 to 2000 and they concluded that the sport's inclusion in the Olympics played a substantial role in shifting judo's philosophical values and traditional eastern beliefs toward a more westernised competitive ethos, which meets the high demand linked to elite sport (e.g., the introduction of state sponsorship, implementing weight categories, and changing the rules to suit mass

audiences). Berry's (2007) work on elite trampolining in England found that the sport's organisational governance towards professionalism, its amalgamation with gymnastics, and funding allowances aligned with expectations for athletes to finish on the podium were the most significant outcomes from becoming an Olympic sport. Berry concluded that with limited academic studies on how certain sports have institutionally changed, more research into the effects of sports gaining Olympic recognition is needed. Given that "the IOC regularly seeks balance between men's and women's sports to increase the appeal" to global audiences (Davis, 2008, p.53), one particular area that warrants attention is the addition of women's events at the Olympic Games.

***Gender and the Olympic Games.*** The evolution of women's involvement in competition and administration has long been associated with the progress and the pitfalls of gender equality in the Olympics (Defrantz, Landry, Landry & Yerles, 1991). In the early stages of the modern Olympics, women were excluded from participating. It was not until industrialisation and, more importantly, the introduction of social reform that led to a change in women's involvement in elite sport (Defrantz, 1997). This social movement meant that women's participation in the Olympics slowly evolved, opening up further possibilities into other sports. For example, in the 1900 Paris Olympics women participated in golf and tennis – notably, these are sports that are considered gender-appropriate for women to participate in and are linked to the wider acceptance of women in sport. Four years later, women competed in archery, followed by swimming in 1912 (Defrantz, 1997). Carpentier and Lefevre (2006) indicated that this gradual transformation in women's participation in the Olympics challenged the gender order of masculine domination in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As the evolution of women's involvement in the Olympics further unfolded in the last 30 years, some researchers have pointed to issues such as: the distribution and availability

of women's sports events (Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1991); issues over the control and frailty of female ideologies (Theberge, 1991); the symbolic change in women's Olympic status (Wilson, 1996); and, the under-representation and depiction of gender-appropriate sports (Urquhart & Crossman, 1999). Hargreaves (1994) offered some critique on the justification for the issue of limited female participation in the Olympics, founded on the fact that it contradicted the traditional perception of womanhood. Furthermore, she debated that in the case of gender stereotyping and the Olympics, control over women's events have been traditionally suited towards female biology, minimising the threat of masculinity, and the risks to a woman's reproductive system. These myths, however, have been well debunked by sport scholars and unmasked through quality physical performances by females in elite level competitions. As such, pressure on decision-making bodies of Olympic sports, government legislation that equalise opportunities with men, and the influence of specific strategies has since afforded women the right to compete in various events at the Olympics (Hargreaves, 1994). Since 1976, women's events have been regularly added to the programme in both Summer and Winter Olympic Games (see Table 1).

In 2013, Donnelly and Donnelly published a report entitled *The London 2012 Olympics: A gender equality audit* that indicates:

while there has clearly and importantly been an extended period of increasing gender equality at the Summer Olympic Games, to the point where women now compete over 44% of the participants and are represented in all of the sports, there are still substantial differences in terms of opportunities to participate, and in terms of the structural characteristics of the competition. (p. 29)

Further, Donnelly and Donnelly (2013) offer a number of priority recommendations aimed to change the way that Olympic events are governed (e.g., the rules) and structured, and identify that athletes need to be a part of the equality conversation in the future.

Table 1: *Women's sports included at Olympic Games*

| <b>Olympic Games</b>                        | <b>Women's events</b>                           |
|---|---|
| 1900 Paris Olympics                         | Tennis, Golf                                    |
| 1904 St Louis Olympics                      | Archery   |
| 1908 London Olympics                        | Tennis, Figure skating                          |
| 1912 Stockholm Olympics                     | Swimming  |
| 1924 Paris Olympics                         | Fencing   |
| 1928 Amsterdam Olympics                     | Athletics, Gymnastics                           |
| 1936 Garmisch-Partenkirchen Winter Olympics | Alpine Skiing                                   |
| 1948 London Olympics                        | Canoeing  |
| 1952 Helsinki Olympics                      | Equestrian sports                               |
| 1960 Squaw Valley Winter Olympics           | Speed skating                                   |
| 1964 Tokyo Olympics                         | Volleyball                                      |
| 1964 Innsbruck Winter Olympics              | Luge  |
| 1976 Montreal Olympics                      | Rowing, Basketball, Handball                    |
| 1980 Moscow Olympics                        | Field Hockey                                    |
| 1984 Los Angeles Olympics                   | Shooting, Cycling                               |
| 1988 Seoul Olympics                         | Tennis, Table Tennis, Sailing                   |
| 1992 Barcelona Olympics                     | Badminton, Judo                                 |
| 1996 Atlanta Olympics                       | Football, Softball                              |
| 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics                 | Curling, Ice Hockey                             |
| 2000 Sydney Olympics                        | Weightlifting, Pentathlon, Taekwondo, Triathlon |
| 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics         | Bobsleigh                                       |
| 2004 Athens Olympics                        | Wrestling                                       |
| 2008 Beijing Olympics                       | BMX   |
| 2012 London Olympics                        | Boxing  |
| 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics                  | Ski Jumping                                     |
| 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics                | Rugby sevens, golf                              |

(Source: IOC, 2014b)

Many authors assert that the specific case of women's ice hockey and its inclusion in the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics is a trailblazing moment for women's participation in elite team sports (Avery & Stevens, 1997; Etue & Williams, 1996; Theberge, 1995, 2002). This is predominantly because ice hockey is widely viewed as a masculine domain and a key indication of Canadian masculinity (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Argued by Theberge (2002), as the IOC's attempt to address a gender imbalance, whereby the Winter Olympics before 1998 excluded any women's team sports, "the impact of Olympic status on women's hockey has been profound" (p. 295). The cultural shift for women's ice hockey, due to its appearance in the Olympics, conferred legitimacy on the sport and the players (Theberge, 2000, 2002); a team sport where females could play and win in the pinnacle of all sports events – the Olympics. Yet, despite the inroads towards legitimacy, Theberge (2002) concluded,

For many supporters, the appearance of women's hockey in the 1998 Olympics was the culmination of a dream that marked arrival among the elite of sport. This appearance, however, has also provided the context for renewed questioning of the legitimacy of women's presence in the masculine preserve of sport. (p. 300)

Just because a sport is granted Olympic status does not automatically signify gender equity. Beyond the Olympics, female involvement in sport, especially sports of a physical nature (e.g., ice hockey and rugby), remains a contentious issue and is discussed in further detail in the next section.

### ***Women in Sport***

Whilst the Olympic Games has offered women gradual opportunities in elite sport, literature on sport and gender has routinely been guided by gendered stereotypes (Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Hargreaves, 1990, 1994, 2002; Scranton, Fasting, Pfister & Bunnell, 1999; Theberge, 1993). Central to these assumptions is that women are seen as inferior to men in

the gender order (Connell, 1987), and are therefore marginalised with respect to: media attention (Bernstein, 2002; Creedon, 1994; Duncan, 2006; Hardy, 2015; Wensing & Bruce, 2003; Wright & Clarke, 1999); commercial value (Dworkin & Messner, 2002); and professional experiences (Thompson, 1990). In addition, scholars have also argued that women have consistently contended with a range of gender-based issues such as: external critiques about their sexuality (e.g., being labelled a lesbian) (Birrell & Cole, 1994; Griffin, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994; Howe, 2001; McGinnis, McQuillan & Chapple, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009); traditional gender roles (e.g., social expectations with a focus on family rather than sport) (Krane, 2001; Miller & Levy, 1996); lack of power, leadership and control (e.g., limited career advancement) (Bennett, Whitaker, Smith & Sablove, 1987; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Cunningham, 2008; Hoerber, 2008; Theberge, 1987); and sexualisation (e.g., recognised for their beauty rather than their athletic ability) (Hargreaves, 1997; Stevenson, 2002). Furthermore, unlike men's sporting contests, Stevenson (2002) claimed that women's events rarely receive the media and sponsorship attention required to enter the global sports market, or even achieve a presence within their own nation.

Gilenstam, Karp and Henriksson-Larsen (2008) suggested that when both sexes are associated with a sport, this alters the traditional scope of each gender. In particular, women who engage in the same sports as men are often considered to violate gender roles and norms that threaten male superiority (McCree, 2011; Park, 2007; Stevenson, 2002) and their performances are often critiqued against those of males (McGinnis et al., 2005). Therefore, although women in sport in general is a multidimensional, complex theoretical subject to navigate, women who participate in masculine sports, those linked with physical characteristics such as strength, endurance and hand-eye coordination (Howe, 2001), are constantly viewed as threatening the last bastion of masculinity (Sabo & Jansen, 1998).

## ***Women participating in a masculine sport***

Historically, sport was created by and for men (Messner, 1992), regarded as a vehicle of masculine identity, solidarity and role differentiation out of difference to females (Postow, 1980). In the past, sports such as wrestling, weightlifting, boxing, long distance running and other combative team sports required a certain physical behaviour and attitude that constituted an image of masculinity (e.g., competitive spirit) (Postow, 1980). However, as with other areas of social life (i.e., work, education), women's liberation and feminist movements sparked their participation in sport, which further challenged gender ideology and beliefs about male-female differences. In particular, women participating in those sports of a masculine nature seem to contravene the most criticism, with respect to displacing gender norms.

In the last 15 years several scholars have investigated the experiences of women participating in non-conventional female sports. For example, Mennesson (2000) and Lafferty and McKay (2004) considered women's involvement in boxing through the display of aggression and violence. Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) examined female wrestlers' becoming accustomed to and accepting the demands of the sport. Shilling and Bunsell (2009) and Roussel, Monaghan, Javerlhiac and Le Yondre (2012) explored the social stigma regarding what was acceptable for women within the sport of bodybuilding. Such studies serve to illustrate the value in examining the many barriers women face when participating in a masculine sport. Moreover, scholars have investigated the link between masculine sports associated with national identity and women's participation (Harris, 2001; Migliaccio & Berg, 2007; Theberge, 1995, 2000, 2002; Wedgewood, 2004).

Harris' (2001) ethnographic study examined the experiences of women's involvement in English collegiate football (soccer). His findings indicated that women playing

football are seen as challenging male hegemony and, as a result, the women faced fierce opposition and ridicule. Wedgewood (2004) conducted a study that provided perceptions into the gendered embodiment of women who played Australian Rules football. The results revealed that female athletes gain the appropriate skills, such as being assertive and powerful; qualities that resist the fragile and defenceless notions attached to femininity. Finally, Migliaccio and Berg (2007) based their work on women playing American gridiron football. The authors identified that the social camaraderie and cohesion, and the opportunity to use their physical and mental abilities in a new way, were all referred to in a positive light. On the other hand, similar to Harris (2001), participants suggested that their involvement had received negative reactions, as well as being constrained by injuries, limited time and money and the pressure from family responsibilities. Taken together, these studies offer insight into a context where women and their participation in masculine, national sports have challenged notions of both gender and nationalism.

***Women participating in rugby union.*** Despite numerous efforts made in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, females have long been excluded from participating in rugby union (Carle & Nauright, 1999). While the first women's rugby league competition was established in 1921, it was not until the 1980's when its rugby counterpart, women's rugby union, began to develop internationally (e.g., in North America, England, Australia) as well as in New Zealand (Carle & Nauright, 1999), where rugby is considered the national sport. The growth of the game has marked significant phases in the history of women's rugby (see Table 2).

Table 2: History of significant women's international rugby competitions

| Date   | International Competition  |
|--|--|
| 1982   | The first women's rugby international was played between the Netherlands and France. France won the match 4-0.   |
| 1990   | The first international tournament, <i>Rugbyfest</i> , was held in New Zealand. Teams featuring in the event were: the Netherlands, America, Russia and New Zealand (who won the tournament).  |
| 1991<br>(coinciding with the men's competition)                                | The inaugural Women's Rugby World Cup (fifteen-a-side) was held in Wales. However, the sport's governing board, the IRB, did not sanction this. There were 12 teams that featured in the event, and the USA won the final against England. |
| 1994<br>(due to the clash with the men's event, the women's event was shifted) | Women's Rugby World Cup (fifteen-a-side) was held in Scotland. The event included Kazakhstan and Ireland with England winning the final against the USA (New Zealand did not attend).  |
| 1998   | The first IRB-sanctioned Women's Rugby World Cup (fifteen-a-side) was held in the Netherlands. Sixteen teams featured in the event including New Zealand who won the final against the USA.  |
| 2009   | The inaugural Women's Rugby Sevens World Cup was held in Dubai. Over a three-day period the competition was played alongside the men's competition. Australia won the final against New Zealand.   |
| 2012-2013  | The inaugural IRB Women's Sevens World Series. Six nations including Australia, Canada, England, the Netherlands, the USA and New Zealand competed in four rounds: Dubai, Houston, Guangzhou and Amsterdam. New Zealand won the series.    |

(Multiple sources used: Apted, 2009; IRB, 2014a; Mortimer, 2013)

In recent times, women's rugby has become a sport that has evolved and surpassed the socially defined feminine embodiment (Clearly, 2000). The popularity of the game has since been evidenced by the increase in registered female participants internationally. According to the IRB, "global participation has increased from 1.5 million [in 2013] to 1.77 million in 2014" (World Rugby, 2015), making it "one of the world's fastest-growing team

sports" ("Women embracing and...", 2015). As such, several scholars have analysed various social and cultural dimensions of female rugby participants in different national contexts.

In an Australian context, Carle and Nauright (1999) discussed that the sport encountered a range of obstacles from hostile family members to poor playing resources. However, their participants described that a genuine love for the game and the benefits from social interaction far exceeded the barriers. Whereas, in Wales, Howe (2001) explored the sport's legitimacy between the women's and men's game highlighting distinct differences. In effect, societal influences and how the game transformed into spectacle were two obvious barriers between the two genders (Howe, 2001). Shockley (2005) and Ezzell (2009) found that American women involved in rugby opposed the stereotypical views and identity dilemmas related to femininity. In particular, Ezzell found that females faced bigot and homophobic stigmas from people outside the direct environment and they reinforced the legitimacy of identity. Moreover, Joncheray and Tlili's (2013) study deciphered that the social ramifications attached to women's French rugby hindered participation. Not only do these authors suggest that the fear of social risk is mainly subjective and attempts to break down gender barriers, but they also illustrate that the social interactions generated with close friends and family have positively affected people's perceptions about the women's game.

Within the New Zealand context, rugby is widely considered as the national sport (Chu et al, 2003; Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002; Obel, 2004, 2010; Scherer & Jackson, 2010). Since the first provincial rugby match for women in 1980, the women's game suffered from a lack of awareness and it was not until 1992 when "the New Zealand Rugby Union accepted responsibility for women's rugby...and the New Zealand women's team, the Black Ferns, has remained unbeaten for a decade", garnering the attention in the women's game (Chu et al.,

2003, p. 110). Much of this was due to the success of the women's team in international competitions during the 1990's and early 2000's (IRB, 2014a; Mortimer, 2013). As a result, the sport had become "one of the fastest growing sports for women in New Zealand" (Hillary Commission, 2001, cited in Chu et al., 2003, p. 110). Clearly (2000) examined elite women rugby players in New Zealand who exceeded beyond the socially defined feminine embodiment and challenged masculine ideals. Similar to Theberge (1995), Clearly found that the social connection between female athletes was a major contributor towards their attainment and continual dedication to the game. Chu et al. (2003) explored the experiences of New Zealand's top women rugby athletes. Their results highlighted that the physical nature of the sport, the socialisation and enjoyment with peers, the challenge against masculine stereotypes, combined with the cultural significance of rugby, and the chance to play rugby and travel was very appealing to female athletes. Chu et al. also identified that athletes' sporting commitments led to several challenges, which included the frustration of being involved in a predominantly male sport and the sacrifices made around athletes' social and working lives.

Most importantly, and in tandem with the consideration of gendered self-identity and social support factors for female rugby players, a cursory view of the literature on rugby, especially within New Zealand, provides evidence that the men's game has existed for over a century and has developed into a highly organised, corporate sponsored, professional sport. Conversely, the women's game, its management and development, is arguably still in its infancy and largely occupies a subordinate position. In addition, rugby sevens is a relatively new, fast-paced, spectator-friendly version of the fifteen-a-side game, and with the decision to include it in the 2016 Summer Olympic programme in Brazil, women's rugby

sevens, in particular, is a unique site of investigation in terms of its development as an elite sport, both internationally and in New Zealand.

### ***Development of elite sport***

Elite sport development is a specific process designed to inspire sporting excellence (Green, 2004; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Green & Oakley, 2001; Houlihan & Green, 2008, 2008; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009). Much of the recent literature has suggested that to excel at the highest level requires: (1) government agencies, national and regional sport organisations, and other groups that have a vested interest in the elite sport (e.g., Olympic committees) to become increasingly involved (Collins, 2010; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Guest, 2009; Horton, 2008; Houlihan, Bloyce & Smith, 2009; Keat & Sam, 2013; Levermore 2009; Oakley & Green, 2001); and (2) as part of these political and leading sport organisations involvement, various support schemes, policies, programmes, and sport initiatives are used as tools to strengthen the elite sport system (Coalter, 2009; Green, 2004; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Levermore, 2008; Sam, 2005).

One key connection with the intention to achieve success in elite and high performance sport, whether in regards to winning medals at the Olympics or advancing in world rankings for a particular event or sport, has been the influence of governments and their sport organisations. Several scholars have highlighted that these governing entities have significant responsibilities for funding allocations and providing additional resources such as staff and technical support (Green & Houlihan, 2005; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Levermore, 2008; McDonald, 2005; Sam, 2012). Moreover, Houlihan and Green (2008, p.2) argued that governments are concerned with “international prestige, diplomatic recognition, ideological competition, and a belief that generates domestic political benefits...ranging from the rather nebulous ‘feel good factor’ to more concrete economic

impacts”, which are all symbolic of elite sport success. Within the New Zealand context, Sam (2012) recognised that governments distribute and increase their funding in elite sport because of public accountability and through performance management. These specifically relate to: (1) providing assurances that public funds are used effectively; and (2) holding sports organisations responsible (e.g., aligning resource allocation with performance) (Sam, 2012). One significant tool that underpins how elite sport is developed, organised, and managed is through the creation of sport policy.

### ***Sport Policy***

Sport policy acts as an effective tool that affords powerful agencies, governing bodies and sport organisations with an action plan and directives. One major focus in elite sport is success, therefore sport policies are often initiated to guide decisions that develop a direct pathway and create appropriate schemes such as strategic goals and performance indicators. Various scholars have highlighted that sport policies have contributed to the development of elite sport in a number of ways. Houlihan (2002) suggested that sport policies help foster the organisational commitment and interest in elite sport globally. In addition, other leading sport policy academics have stressed that sport policies have been used to learn about current trends, change or shift the strategic direction, or exercise control over the environment (Bloyce & Smith, 2010; Chalip, 1995; Gratton & Taylor, 1991; Green, 2007; Green & Houlihan, 2004, 2005; Grix, 2010; Hayhurst, 2009; Houlihan, 2002, 2005; Houlihan et al., 2009; McDonald, 2005; Sam, 2003, 2005; Shilbury, Sotiriadou & Green, 2008).

Other discussions in the sport policy literature are linked to: the construction of policy in elite sport or mass participation (Green, 2004, 2006, 2007; Houlihan & Green 2008; Houlihan & Zheng, 2013; Sam & Jackson, 2006; Skille, 2011); the extent of balancing

different fabrics of social or cultural dilemmas which have included gender inclusion and ethical considerations of doping (Green, 2007; Hartmann-Tews, 2006; Hoye, Nicholson, & Houlihan, 2010; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Skinner, Zakus & Cowell, 2008; Smith, Smith & Stewart, 2008); and country-specific case studies of sport development (see Table 3).

*Table 3: Examples of sport policy used in country-specific case studies*

| <b>Country of Case Study</b> | <b>Scholars</b>  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Australia                    | <i>Green, 2007;</i><br><i>Green &amp; Collins, 2008;</i><br><i>Sotiriadou, 2009;</i><br><i>Sotiriadou, Shilbury &amp; Quick, 2008;</i><br><i>Stewart, 2004;</i><br><i>Stewart &amp; Smith, 2010</i>                                      |
| Canada                       | <i>Green, 2003;</i><br><i>Green &amp; Houlihan, 2004</i>   |
| Denmark                      | <i>Skille, 2011</i>  |
| Finland                      | <i>Green &amp; Collins, 2008</i>   |
| Norway                       | <i>Enjolras &amp; Waldahl, 2007;</i><br><i>Skille, 2011;</i><br><i>Skille &amp; Safvenbom, 2011</i>  |
| Spain                        | <i>Puig, Martinez &amp; Garcia, 2010</i>   |
| Sweden                       | <i>Skille, 2011</i>  |
| United Kingdom               | <i>Collins, 2010;</i><br><i>Goodwin &amp; Grix, 2011;</i><br><i>Green, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009;</i><br><i>Grix, 2009;</i><br><i>Houlihan &amp; Lindsey, 2013;</i><br><i>McDonald, 2000;</i><br><i>Phillpots, Grix &amp; Quarmby, 2011</i> |

***International sport policy.*** Since 1970, sophisticated elite international sport systems have largely intensified the growth of competition for the Olympic Games (Houlihan, 1997; Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). Recent literature in sport policy has expressed that governments

and those in power delight in formulating policies that utilise targeted investments and search for a competitive advantage (De Bosscher, van Bottenburg, Bingham, & Shibli, 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Hayhurst, 2011; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Levermore, 2009; Sam, 2012). De Bosscher, van Bottenburg and Shibli (2006) claimed that an evolving industry where international sporting systems are increasingly transformed into a more unified approach help elite sport excel at the top level. Green and Houlihan (2005) considered that gaining a momentum of success ensures that governments support their athletes. This draws from the idea that as the interest in elite sport continues to grow, and in order to be successful on the world stage, countries can no longer afford to invest at a static level but rather increase their financial expenditure. It is, therefore, not surprising that TNC's, private stakeholders, and corporate sponsors also have a stakeholder's interest in global sport policy and the promotion of sport (Scherer & Jackson, 2010, 2013).

Indeed, politics facilitate the globalisation of sport through the development of elite sport, which affects contemporary sport policy and links national identity, sport agency involvement, elite sport policy initiatives, and "Olympism" (Houlihan, 1997; Houlihan, Tan, & Green, 2010). In addition, the growth of the modern Olympic Games as a sport mega-event has also shifted the political and cultural status of elite sport (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). With the "prestige, achievement, honour, and competitiveness" (Davis, 2012, p.52) associated with the Olympics, a number of nations have established objectives to maximise their chances at the Olympic Games (e.g., winning medals or finishing within the top 10 of the medal table) (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013).

Sam (2012) noted that government organisations devote a considerable amount of financial sources aimed towards targeted investments like Olympic medals. Consequently, as these organisations are required to produce tangible outcomes, Sam (2012) proposed

that this potentially results in limited or diminished returns. For example, if a targeted investment fails to meet expectations it could result in a reduced level of financial support. Conversely, Green and Oakley (2001) believed that this level of commitment is sometimes directed at softer medals, those sports that are almost guaranteed to provide the best return on their investment with little risk, especially in women's sports or events. When women's participation becomes a major focus in elite sport, it can, in part, lead to a certain degree of social progression and help with gaining equality, a key characteristic associated with the Olympic legacy (Girginov & Hills, 2008). For example, the 2012 Summer Olympics in London were the first Olympic Games where women were able to compete in every sport and the first time that countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei sent female athletes.

***New Zealand sport policy.*** Chalip (1996) underlined two critical techniques related to empowerment that help policymakers with their implementation of social change. He labelled the New Zealand's sporting system as "conservative" and one that follows the status quo – awards further control to those in power, whereby lacking consideration for the athletes and the resources needed to help support those athletes (e.g., development programmes). Chalip further suggested that to be effective when delivering policies in this context there needs to be more emphasis on a wider social context rather than directly on political powers. Furthermore, Sam (2003, 2005, 2009) and colleagues extensively examined the nature in which sport policies either create problems, offer solutions to these problems, or provide government involvement and institutional approaches. The main context of their interpretive analysis is based on a ministerial taskforce – who are not only responsible for developing certain issues or presenting new approaches but also provide inquiry into the government's participation in sport (Jackson & Sam, 2007; Sam & Jackson, 2004, 2006). One

strong argument these authors make is how these problems relate to a “wicked” situation whereby a modified policy solves one issue but creates another (e.g., generates a trade-off, an unintended consequence or a further dilemma) (Sam, 2009). Ultimately, this raises questions into how local and global policymakers implement their policies, to what effect do they influence other (global on local and local on global), and whether they achieve what they were intended to.

As global processes intensify and the symbolism of elite sporting success becomes a significant factor, in 2009 New Zealand’s National Party government replaced and reformed the focus of regional sport in New Zealand (Keat & Sam, 2013). Sport New Zealand (Sport NZ),<sup>7</sup> restructured mass participation around organised sport using a core business approach (Keat & Sam, 2013). Furthermore, Sam (2012) highlighted that Sport NZ and its involvement played a substantial role in other local sporting organisations. That is, Sport NZ focused on a targeted-sport investment model designed around performance-based funding. In effect, this model has contributed to the distribution of funding, where sports that succeeded at sport mega-events were financially favoured over other, underperforming sports.

In this regard, government-directed sport agencies have simultaneously constrained their capacities to the multiple demands of its stakeholders (e.g., prioritised a major emphasis on elite sport) and the level of manipulation (e.g., through their control of funding). Although this provides successful elite athletes with the necessary financial support on the one hand, on the other, it applies a pressure to perform, which may create a dilemma for all stakeholders (Sam, 2009). Piggin, Jackson and Lewis (2009) exposed that a restructure motivated those in decision-making positions to implement a medal target

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<sup>7</sup> Sport NZ was formerly known as SPARC.

policy for New Zealand teams and athletes the 2006 Commonwealth Games. As a result of not reaching the forecasted 46 medals, the Games were deemed a failed performance, which, in turn, led to a public outcry.

***Elite sport development at the global-local nexus.*** As sport grows exponentially, so too does the emergence of global and local sport systems. This relationship is transformed into a dual process where both systems work in tandem, or more evidently, domestic demands flow from or are dictated by international trends (Houlihan, 2009; Manzenreiter, 2004). With a direct focus on elite sport and the impact of globalisation, Houlihan (2009) illustrated that international influences affect domestic sport policy. In particular, Houlihan explained that it is a responsive relationship where the local follows the more unified global system. However, there is an increasingly strong notion that “little research into sport globalisation takes the mechanisms of international influences on domestic policy for sport as its central concern” (Houlihan, 2009, p.54), which partially attributes to the ambiguity and obscurity surrounding the concept of globalisation (Gray & Lawrence, 2001; Hirst & Thompson, 1999).

Despite a fragmented and modest display of analysis into the global-local context, discussions into Olympic initiatives or other high profile global organisations have been a popular area of scholarly attention (Augestad, Bergsgard & Hanses, 2006; Green & Oakley, 2001; Houlihan, 2009; Kelly, 2011; Shachar, 2011; Tan & Houlihan, 2013). Maguire (2004) examined the connection of elite sport with the global context. In particular, he investigated the nature of sports labour and the migration of international talent. One key link Maguire suggested was that movement of people across the globe can contribute to the enhancement of many countries’ expertise and knowledge, which potentially assists them with international success. One particular case by Houlihan et al., (2010) argued China’s

ambition to improve its national success at global sporting events like the Olympics led to an imported and transferred western policy that would help refine their elite basketball system.

Houlihan et al. (2010) study investigated the development of basketball in China through a strategic partnership with the National Basketball Association (NBA), a professional league in the USA. In response to disappointing performances by China's national team and individual Chinese athletes receiving national acclaim for their success in foreign environments (e.g., Yao Ming), Houlihan et al. explored the notion that the Chinese government opened up its local basketball market to the NBA. Despite efforts from the Chinese government to transform their national team into a global phenomenon, the authors suggested that expanding the competition of a global-local initiative and reformed policies in basketball led to straining pressures such as organisations and government agencies having different goals and priorities, organisational approaches and elite athletic standards.

There is much to consider when researching sport policy and the role it plays in globalising changes and global processes with respect to their effects on local contexts. Even though sport policy provides a sense of direction for decision-makers it does not necessarily mean that sport will fully develop. Therefore, attention on other areas of sport development, more specifically, sport programmes and initiatives needs to be further explored.

### ***Sport programmes and initiatives***

Interconnected with policy are sport-related programmes and initiatives that provide the application for sports groups and governing bodies to develop sport. Whilst the purpose behind these developmental methods are to aid people's involvement in sport, there is little

knowledge on what programmes have been successful and even a lesser understanding into how mechanisms in sport foster existing developments (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Hartmann and Kwauk (2011) recently identified one practical consequence when implementing sports development. They claimed that those responsible for development, including sports officials, decision-makers and advocates, have an “unsophisticated understanding of development and the role of sport therein” (p.1). As a result, this oftentimes leads to unfocused, ineffective and counterproductive programmes and initiatives (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011).

Houlihan (2009) found that countries are establishing specialist training facilities for elite athletes. For example, Canada has developed a new rugby facility where athletes live and train together in the hopes of gaining a competitive edge at different global tournaments (Rugby Canada, 2011). This initiative highlights Canada’s dedication and commitment to develop rugby at the elite level and their drive to ‘Own the Podium’.<sup>8</sup> In part, this relates to the idea of Olympism and the pursuit of success at the Olympic Games. Therefore, by design, Olympic sports can affect the nature of elite sport policy and sports initiatives, essential for elite sports development.

From the context of rugby, Carney, Smolianov and Zakus (2012) examined USA Rugby and how the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) removed government funding for the grassroots format and invested heavily in the development of rugby at the elite level. The authors concluded that this would have a negative effect on participation numbers at the grassroots level. With more emphasis focused on the top level and away from developing grassroots rugby, it strained USA Rugby’s international ambitions to succeed on the world stage. That is, the talent pool that supports the national teams was reduced,

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<sup>8</sup> Canada’s ‘Own the Podium’ strategy was designed to provide national sporting organisations with financial support and high performance programme, which ultimately led to Olympic success (Own the Podium, 2015).

creating further dilemmas for USA Rugby (Carney et al., 2012). Indeed, future sport practitioners need to understand how sport can contribute towards fundamental change and transformation, and also how this would foster development (Carney et al, 2012).

### ***Summary***

This chapter has discussed some of the literature central to the Olympics, gender, rugby and elite sport development. Whilst much of the debate into sports participation and gender has been largely associated with the stronghold of male hegemony and the control over women, various scholars have suggested that the Olympic Games, and its associated Olympism, serve as valuable sites for understanding gender equality and national elite sport development. As a result, sports like women's ice hockey and women's boxing have slowly gained legitimacy via the Olympics and raise further possibilities to investigate other women's sports and contexts, like New Zealand women's rugby sevens. The next chapter introduces the methodological approach and the qualitative data collection and analysis employed in this thesis.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Methodological Approach

This chapter outlines a qualitative research methodology that draws upon a case study approach and employs document analysis and semi-structured interviews. According to Gratton and Jones (2010), a case study is based on a holistic understanding of: how the development has progressed over time, an in-depth look at the environment (how individuals relate to a particular group or organisation), and an overview of the context in which the activity occurs. In this regard, the inclusion of rugby sevens in the 2016 Olympics offers a unique contextual moment in Olympic and women's rugby history that warrants attention.

This chapter begins with an explanation of how a qualitative approach helps to construct a deeper understanding, through key perspectives, into the policies, processes and politics of developing women's elite rugby sevens in this unique contextual moment. The discussion then highlights the research design including how participants were selected. Here, it is argued that the recruitment of a purposive sample, where identified individuals are chosen due to the specific opinions, experiences and expertise they offer is necessary and justified as it provides a more desirable representation (Andrew, Pedersen & McEvoy, 2011). Following this, the chapter describes how the data was gathered, through document analysis and semi-structured interviews, which is substantiated by the claim that mixing different methods aids creative thinking and further extends logic of qualitative explanation into our social experiences and lived realities (Mason, 2006). Additionally, using multiple representations of particular realities allows for the exploration of how sport strategies are understood by individuals that are linked to them (Ritchie, 2003). The chapter concludes by

discussing how the interview data were analysed. Overall, this methodological approach explores participants' roles and perspectives specific to the unique contextual moment of the inclusion of rugby sevens in the 2016 Olympics, to gaining an understanding into how changes in policy, management processes, decisions and sport industry relationships have influenced the landscape of women's rugby sevens at the global-local nexus.

### ***A Qualitative Pathway***

Several qualitative scholars emphasise that the nature of their research is a field of inquiry that strengthens the construction of knowledge and corresponds to a specific context (Cho & Trent, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Yin, 2009). This key characteristic is further supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), who suggest that when a researcher captures what a subject is about, it ultimately uncovers a more in-depth look at how social experiences are created and given specific meanings. Whilst these scholars highlight some benefits associated with qualitative research, others argue that it can potentially be "brief, persuasive, data extracts" (Silverman, 2001, p.33), criticise it for its practicality (Hammersley, 2008), and suggest that it is "too subjective" and "difficult to replicate" (Bryman, 2012, p.405). However, despite some of these critiques about the nature of qualitative research it is insisted that this approach illuminates complex process(es) of organisational change, decision-making, and how these affect interactions and interrelations between individuals, groups and institutions (Barbour, 2008; Howlett & Ramesh, 2003). In light of this, the current study adopts a qualitative framework that seeks to examine how and why particular strategic developments have been created and how these are, in turn, perceived by key actors.

## ***Sociological Assumptions***

In order to integrate a network of sociological ideas and contextualise them with sport, including their links to political, economic and social issues, this investigation considers both an ontological and an epistemological assumption and key features of these assumptions. From an ontological position, this relates to “a theory of ‘reality’ or being” (Stanley & Wise, 2002, p.194). In a feminist sense, this assumption relates to theorising ‘being’ with the reality of differentiation (Stanley & Wise, 2002). As highlighted in the previous chapter, the differentiation relates to the notion that men control most sports. The current study also uses an epistemological position that applies to a framework that comprehends reality (Stanley & Wise, 2002). Stanley and Wise (2002) note that epistemology becomes essential for the feminist approach when challenging “non-feminist frameworks and ways of working” (p.189), for example, confronting gendered stereotypes that are linked to women’s sport (outlined in Chapter 2). Overall, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that these assumptions allow the researcher to construct an explicit meaning that interconnects and explores ways that contribute to knowledge development. Given the emphasis to visibly transform the social world into a realm that makes sense, these methodological assumptions will help to understand how certain actors use their experiences to shape ideas about globalisation, gender, sport development and elite sport.

Aligning with the ontological approach, this research employs a social constructivist lens that enables social phenomena and their meanings to be produced through social interaction and recognises that meanings are continually evolving (Bryman & Bell, 2007). As highlighted in the previous chapter, this relates to the gradual acceptance of women and their involvement in Olympic sport. That is, “if gender is understood as a social construction, gender differences are not ‘natural’ but acquired and enacted, and also vary according to

the particular social and gender order” (Pfister, 2010, p.234). Schwandt (2000) reinforces this lens claiming that social and cultural constructions are developed through new experiences. For example, the inclusion of new sports into the Olympic programme has enabled more women to become involved (and slowly accepted) in masculine, national sports like ice hockey. Thus, with a social constructivist lens this becomes important when understanding the significance of the Olympic Games, a sport gaining Olympic status, and the onset of policies, processes and politics that have affected women’s rugby sevens.

In support of the epistemological view, the current study is also centred on an interpretivist view; specifically an “understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bryman, 2012, p.280). For the purpose of this study the researcher took the role of an “outsider”, which allowed the researcher to “make a much more objective assessment of the field...and is more likely to offer fresh ideas from which the field can benefit” (Eitzen, 1987, p.116). Furthermore, other scholars reiterate that through an interpretivist view researchers can develop ways of thinking and classify knowledge and truth that help underpin human experiences (e.g., discovering how things really are and how things really work) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Somekh, et al., 2005). As a result, this allows the researcher to take into account and reflect individual perspectives in their specific contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Schwandt, 2000).

### ***Research Design: A Case Study Approach***

Given the inclusion of rugby sevens into the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, in addition to the importance of rugby to both the NZR and New Zealand national identity (Scherer & Jackson, 2010), and the recent success of the New Zealand women’s

rugby sevens team,<sup>9</sup> this research uses a case study approach that recognises that the development of women's elite rugby sevens at the global and local levels is both timely and a unique contextual moment. In viewing this research as a case study, it is an effective tool that holistically engages the collection of knowledge through in-depth descriptions and explanations of phenomena (Cho & Trent, 2006; Yin, 2003). Moreover, a case study approach provides this research with a specific opportunity to investigate inter-organisational relationships and key perspectives following the decision to include rugby sevens in the Olympic Games. As such, employing a case study framework allows for "the sense-making processes created and used by individuals involved in the phenomenon, event, group, or organisation under study" to be examined (Weick, 1995, cited in Berg, 2007, p.285).

Furthermore, several scholars indicate that by attempting to investigate specific information we can explore areas where little is currently known and offers new learning about real-world behaviours, contexts and relationships (Berg, 2007; Gratton & Jones, 2010; Kumar, 2011; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2012). For instance, Stark and Torrance (2005) highlight the significance of individual actors in particular contextual settings and argue that when a researcher "aspires to tell-it-like-it-is from the participants' point of view, as well as hold policy to account in terms of complex realities of implementation and the unintended consequences of policy in action" (p.33), it creates an overall site of intrigue. Therefore, one of the key strengths of this case study is the manner in which it integrates social actors with cultural activity.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2014 the New Zealand women's rugby sevens team won their second consecutive IRB Women's Sevens World Series (Strang, 2014).

### ***Purposive and Snowball Sampling***

The nature of this case study necessitated that the primary method for selecting appropriate participants was based on a purposive sampling design, which targeted multiple viewpoints and specifically focused on relevant sources of information. Bryman (2012) claims that this technique can be used to locate “sites” of an organisation or groups of people that pose a significant link to a phenomenon. In the current study, the purposive sample has strategic links to the development of women’s elite rugby sevens in New Zealand. Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (2003) further indicate that gaining perspectives from organisations can produce a “representation of particular understandings that can be a useful way of generating a sample framework which cannot be identified through official or administrative documents” (p 93). Moreover, seeing through the eyes of others allows for a greater appreciation of what is occurring in that social world, environment or event (Bryman, 2012). Andrew et al. (2008) further highlight the need to select a more manageable group that ultimately collects a sample that is sufficient enough to be representative of that group. From a qualitative perspective, the process of selecting key participants heavily relies upon virtues of their characteristics and their specific vantage point of a certain phenomenon.

During the initial stages of this study, desk research located information from organisational websites that identified key individuals who were believed to provide valuable insights according to their involvement and association with particular organisations and their vantage points, both global and local, in the development process of raising the profile of women’s rugby sevens. From this method, six participants were identified. Participants were sent an email that included a brief outline and intended objectives of the research project and asked for their interest to participate in the study.

While all six participants responded, only one responded with a willingness to participate in an interview, while the other five responded having stated that they forwarded the information to a more suitable colleague. Given the limited responses from initial contact with prospective participants, snowball sampling was employed to broaden the pool of participants.

Categorised as an effective referral tool in recruiting often hard-to-reach participants who possess certain attributes or characteristics (Barbour, 2008; Berg, 2007; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), snowball sampling was used in the current study to gain access to other potential participants. Furthermore, Ritchie et al. (2003) suggest that this technique can be a useful method in obtaining additional data from dispersed populations that can be incorporated into the research. This sampling method led to a further 22 participants being identified, and 12 willing to participate in an interview. A list of participants and their respective perspectives is given in Table 4.

*Table 4: Selected participants and their significance to this investigation*

| <b>Participants</b>       | <b>Significance</b>  |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>Global 1</i>           | Since 2009 this participant has been a member of rugby's global governing body, whose role is to develop women's rugby globally. Ultimately, this participant was considered to be extremely relevant in conveying a 'global' perspective for this study.  |
| <i>Global 2</i>           | This participant was selected on the basis of their involvement during the planning stages of developing specific strategies for women's rugby globally prior to and after the decision to include rugby sevens in the Olympics.   |
| <i>Local 1</i>            | In 2011 this participant became a key member of the New Zealand Olympic Committee who are responsible for the performance and organisation of New Zealand representatives competing at the Olympic and Commonwealth Games. They were chosen to participate in the research to help support the 'local' perspective of elite women's rugby development. |
| <i>Local 2</i>            | This participant was selected due to their continued involvement in the delivery of specific women's rugby sevens initiatives and their level of expertise of women's rugby in New Zealand.  |
| <i>Local 3</i>            | As one of NZR's Regional Coach Development Managers, this participant was selected because of their knowledge about initiatives specific to women's rugby sevens that have been implemented at the national level.   |
| <i>Local 4, 5 &amp; 6</i> | As key members of their provincial unions (one from the South Island and two from the North Island) these participants represent a range of perspectives that would help support an overview of the development process of women's rugby sevens in New Zealand.  |
| <i>Athlete 1</i>          | After participating in the Go 4 Gold programme this participant was selected for the study due to her becoming a New Zealand women's rugby sevens contracted training squad member at the end of 2013.   |
| <i>Athlete 2</i>          | An athlete with over 15 years' experience playing several forms of rugby including representing New Zealand in rugby league, this participant was selected due to her athletic involvement with the Go 4 Gold programme and her perspective on being in a developing elite rugby environment.  |
| <i>Athlete 3</i>          | This participant was chosen because she was a member of the New Zealand women's rugby sevens team in 2013.   |
| <i>Athlete 4</i>          | This participant was selected on the basis of her prior experience being a member of the New Zealand women's wider training squad member in 2009.  |
| <i>Athlete 5</i>          | Since 2012 this experienced participant has been a key member of the New Zealand women's rugby sevens team and was selected due to her experiences in the current New Zealand rugby environment and global and local rugby development initiatives.  |

Li, Pitts and Quarterman (2008) suggested that understanding specific experiences (e.g., Global, Local, and Athlete perspectives) is essential when trying to gain a better appraisal of the global-local relationship in sport strategies and initiatives. As a result, this allows for greater accuracy when interpreting reality, which helps to answer the overall research question (Jick, 1979). Therefore, to be a participant in this study hinged on their identification of being 'relevant' in their position or vantage point to the purpose of the study, or by 'referral' from other participants.

### ***Data Collection***

Previous research has indicated that qualitative researchers utilise a wide range of empirical material and interpretive practices that enable a better understanding of the matter at hand (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; and Yin, 2003). Additionally, Atkinson and Coffey (2011) claimed, "we cannot...learn through written records alone how an organisation actually operates day by day. Equally, we cannot treat records – however official – as firm evidence of what they report" (p.79). Therefore, for the purpose of gathering relevant information this study employed a method that coupled independent sources of information together (Creswell, 2003). Utilising multiple sources of evidence enables a deeper understanding of the strategic direction by specific organisations and how end users perceived the implementation of strategies and initiatives. Performed effectively, this process can provide an opportunity to access and uncover vital information (Li et al., 2008). Therefore, this investigation used a multi-method qualitative approach that combined an analysis of strategic sport policy documents and semi-structured interviews with key individuals central to the development and implementation of sport strategies and initiatives.

## ***Document Analysis***

According to Bryman (2012) documents can be considered ‘windows’ that allow the observer to not only view social and organisational realities but also to make connections with other documents and directives. This is because institutional documentation can be linked or in response to other official data, which aids in forming a specific background or context. Considering the aforementioned epistemological assumptions taken for this research, a social constructivist lens and interpretivist view studies the context (socially, culturally and historically situated) in which the documents were produced and accounts for the audience for whom they are intended (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011; Bryman, 2012). Therefore, in order to develop such a hermeneutic overview,<sup>10</sup> and further related to the inter-textuality of documents,<sup>11</sup> this investigation gathered information from key documents that included material from organisational websites, annual reviews, and strategic plans. These documents are listed in Table 5.

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<sup>10</sup> That is, one that considers the process of document production and sensitivity to the context (Bryman, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> According to Atkinson and Coffey (2011), inter-textuality refers to the extent to which documents are connected to each other, as one document may identify the context or the foundation for another document.

Table 5: Global and Local documents designed to develop women's rugby sevens

|               | Organisation | Document  |
|---------------|--------------|---|
| <i>Global</i> | IOC          | Olympic Charter<br>Evaluation criteria for sports and disciplines: 2012<br>International Federations  |
|               | IRB          | Rugby sevens plan: 2011-2020<br>Women's rugby plan: 2011-2016<br>Qualification system – Games of the XXXI Olympiad – Rio 2016<br>Year in review: 2011<br>Year in review: 2012<br>Year in review: 2013 |
| <i>Local</i>  | NZR          | Towards 2016: Empowering rugby<br>Women's rugby: Strengthening the women's game   |
|               | HPSNZ        | Strategic plan: 2013-2020<br>Investment table for 2013-2016   |

According to Houlihan (2005) analysing sport policy can create a foundation for understanding emerging patterns, trends and themes. However, it was considered that to use document analysis alone, would only portray a superficial and distinctive view, or “documentary reality” (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011), of what each organisation wants the public to know about their strategic direction in relation to women's rugby sevens. Therefore, information from these documents was used to provide an initial platform to identify relevant aspects to explore in greater detail and create an interview guide for semi-structured interviews with participants.

### ***Semi-structured Interviews***

Interviews are considered to be a quintessential tool when exploring certain issues in a way not possible through the sole analysis from other forms of data collection (Amis, 2005). In this regard, interviews are an exclusive avenue that uncovers missing truths, allows certain realities to unfold or provides further insight into a specific context. Thus,

interviewing becomes a critical process in exploring what has happened, how it has happened and why (Pettigrew, 1990, cited in Amis, 2005; and Pettus, 2001, cited in Amis, 2005). In highlighting the significance of semi-structured interviews, Noor (2008) believes that a semi-structured approach is unique whereby different participants can act differently while the researcher still explores the same material. Given the dynamic nature of exploring multiple perspectives, interviews can allow participants to express their own points-of-view about relevant interactions and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and enables the interviewee to highlight certain events, patterns and forms of behaviour (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews can also offer the interviewer a certain degree of latitude in probing for themes, information and insights beyond the interviewee's initial response, permitting the researcher to dig deeper into phenomenon being explored (Bryman, 2012).

For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted via face-to-face or over the telephone with participants from global, national and regional levels of organised sport (see Table 1). Undoubtedly, face-to-face interviews enable a more personal experience and allow for an explicit exploration into relevant issues (Amis, 2005), yet due to geographical locations, interviews with six of the participants were conducted by telephone. In order to replicate a similar rapport of conducting face-to-face interviews, participants with whom an interview over the telephone was most efficient, given cost and time restraints, exchanged multiple email correspondence with the researcher. This assisted participants to feel comfortable and confident that they were informed of the nature of the project. By design, the semi-structured interviews used in this study were crucial in facilitating flexible interaction between the researcher and the participants as well as the freedom to explore issues of interest (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

In order to obtain an accurate account of the narrative created in each interview, and with the permission from the participant, each interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes in length and discussed a range of issues including the impact of the decision to include rugby sevens as an Olympic sport; global, national and regional development strategies and decision-making processes for women's rugby sevens; comparisons between the past and present state of the women's game; and organisational relationships between key stakeholders. Once completed, each interview was transcribed verbatim and returned to the participant for approval. During this time, participants were encouraged to provide further comments they thought were missing, amend anything that they may have thought needed to be explained in greater detail, or highlight comments they wished to be kept confidential. Formally known as member checking, this process acknowledges the accuracy of data collected and allows the opportunity to clarify information that is discovered through the interview that participants might not otherwise understand is included for analysis (Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Indeed, member checking establishes further credibility that the data presented is a true representation and contributes to the trustworthiness of the research and the ability to tell an accurate story (Creswell, 1998; Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999).

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis is fundamental to the research process and is significant in deciding how the analysis will be carried out, how these decisions influence the rest of the design, and develop solutions to the research question (Li et al, 2008; Maxwell, 2008). Underscoring the exploration and analysis of the data gathered for this case study, is the process for inductive analysis of qualitative data. According to Thomas (2006), engaging in an inductive approach involves a five-step procedure. First, data cleaning or formatting of the raw data

files ensured that all transcripts appeared in the same format, so as not to detract the reader with different font types and sizes. Following this, a close reading of the transcripts was completed, where the transcripts were read multiple times until the content was familiar to the researcher. Once familiar, the researcher began the process of identifying themes and categories from the texts. During this step, any and all possible categories and themes were included with no limitation on the number of categories developed. Upon completion of this step, there were 24 categories identified. In an effort to reduce overlap and redundancy between categories, the researcher, together with a second coder who was also familiar with the interview content, then recoded the data to merge smaller categories into larger “superordinate” categories (Thomas, 2006) of similar content, based on whether the category was discussed from any one perspective (e.g., global, local, or athlete) or across all three. This part of the process enabled a “check on the clarity of categories” (Thomas, 2006, p.244). At the end of this step, 16 categories remained. A further organisation of the data adjusted for sub-topics within categories, and links to similar meanings, with the final analysis exposing three superordinate categories (e.g., opportunities, challenges and trade-offs) with seven sub-topics (e.g., strategic direction, career pathways, sport policies and initiatives, awareness, gender and expectations). These will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

### ***Considerations: Biased Representations***

One consideration for the analysis of this study centred on a strategy that Miller (2000) explains as representation through storytelling, where the researcher will tell a story, through explicit perspectives (and their discourse), for what it is rather than actual facts. According to Polkinghorne (1995) storytelling draws together events and actions by means of a specific ‘plot’ (e.g., how women’s rugby sevens has changed since being included into

the Olympics). In particular, this allowed participants to construct social phenomena and make connections between the significance of the Olympic Games and the profile of women's rugby sevens (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Initially, each participant's interview responses was analysed individually. This created significant narratives to be interpreted and evaluated. In addition to asking questions that sought answers regarding "what actually happened", the interview narratives also focused on "how do people make sense of what happened and to what effect" (Bryman, 2012, p 582). Several scholars support this strategy and argue that this becomes important in measuring the quality of qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2007; Krefling, 1991; Li et al, 2008; Seale, 1999). Once these narratives are identified the researcher is be able to link recurring and significant realities together and, as a result, ensure consistent and quality findings. Krefling (1991) refers to this as piecing together a 'credible' and 'dependable' story.

Understandably and considering the nature of this case study, it is necessary to acknowledge the potential for biased representations of the truth to be linked to this investigation. That is, individuals from key sports organisations will naturally have a particular opinion that may support the purpose of their organisation (Kothari, 2004). Yet, whilst perspectives in this investigation can be believed to be in favour of specific directives, they still provide a significant understanding and reveal particular insights of the direction of women's rugby sevens that are not available from more publicly circulated means (e.g., strategic documents or annual reports). Aligned with this, the nature of qualitative research and critical examination can sometimes produce knowledge and insight that can uncover sensitive issues (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). The disclosure of sensitive data and the anonymity of all participants in this study were treated to remain confidential and private (Bryman, 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2007; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Kaiser, 2009).

## ***Summary***

This chapter has outlined the qualitative methodological approach undertaken in this thesis. A social constructivist lens and interpretivist view is adopted and document analysis and semi-structured interviews are employed to explore the unique contextual moment of the inclusion of rugby sevens into the Olympic Games. Given the scope was based on constructing meaning and developing new knowledge about the global-local process, this case study selected relevant participants for semi-structured interviews based on their specific expertise and experiences with the policies, processes and politics of developing women's elite rugby sevens in this unique contextual moment. These perceptions together with critical interpretation are presented in further detail in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### Perspectives

According to Smith and Sparkes (2009) meaningful perspectives are generated through transforming experience into making sense. The significance of each perspective offered in this chapter is represented by the specific context through which each individual has experienced the change(s) in women's rugby, both globally and locally in New Zealand. The purpose of this chapter is to present these perspectives in a critical way that links with discourse from key strategic documents. In doing so, the chapter compares perspectives from global and local participants as well as between local participants themselves. This provides scope for some unique insights that are reflective of the participants' experience(s) and their role(s). As such, the chapter: (a) explores the trials and triumphs of developing high performance strategies for women's rugby sevens, (b) examines the complexities of gender identity and equity for female rugby sevens athletes and governing ideals of Olympism, and (c) contributes to current socio-contextual understandings of the relationship between globalisation and local reform.

The chapter begins by highlighting the perceived value of the Olympic Games by relevant participants and how this Olympic association has created a variety of opportunities following the inclusion in 2009. From here, a discussion on a range of emerging themes such as strategic directives, sport initiatives and career pathways further examines how the sport, the IRB, the NZR and other supporting organisations have maximised this opportunity. Having mentioned the opportunities, the dialogue then offers insight into challenges currently facing the game. In particular, this section disseminates two distinct sub topics, gender equality and professional expectations, identified by participants

as hindrances on the success of women's rugby. Finally, the chapter presents several trade-offs, dilemmas and areas of future concern.

### ***Opportunities***

The transition of rugby sevens into an Olympic sport, together with the inherent prestige and significance that accompanies that status, has presented the sport with numerous opportunities. According to a statement the IRB made in 2009, it envisaged that the Olympics would "provide an even stronger platform for rugby to reach out to new audiences...[and] unlock additional sponsorship activation and government funding to further the development of the game worldwide" (IOC, 2009, p.89). Indeed, aligning this view from the IRB with key global and local perspectives, the difference the Olympic decision has made to the exposure, support, expansion and expected investment in women's rugby sevens, globally and locally, has been substantial:

I have noticed that women's rugby and women are getting mentioned more and more now than a few years ago because it's in the Olympics. ... It has had a huge impact on women's rugby, women's [rugby] sevens, and the interest in it, and it has grown...because everyone wants to go to the Olympics. (Global 2)

Before it became an Olympic sport, women's rugby was left up to its own devices. There was no support pre-Olympic decision. ... There was a team for the 2009 World Cup that was pulled together, but other than that there's been no New Zealand [sevens] team. No World Series (or anything) for them to play in. (Local 2)

What we are already seeing is that when a sport becomes an Olympic sport everyone wants us [New Zealand] to win a medal. So you are already seeing sevens countries starting to target women's [rugby] sevens as a possibility. ... Nations will start picking up sevens and investing in it simply because they believe they can get to the Olympics and perform at the Olympics. So it is significant for rugby because they [these nations] would have never been there without the Olympic window. (Local 1)

I do not think it was really acknowledged until it was included into the Olympics. I mean how often did you hear of anything to do with women's rugby? ... I do not think it was really anything as far as I am aware of. (Athlete 2)

From these insights it is evident that the attention garnered at the Olympic Games and the recognition of being an Olympic sport is largely unparalleled by any other sport mega-event. Moreover, one participant from a global perspective not only acknowledged the Olympics as a significant, strategic space in its own right, but also signalled that the period leading into the 2016 Games was crucial for rugby sevens and stated, “It’s around maximising this space and this opportunity to grow the women’s game. ... Opportunities like this do not last forever” (Global 1). Certainly the assertion here is for an accentuated urgency to seize the opportunity for the growth of women’s rugby sevens in time for the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Given that the IOC requires international sport governing bodies to include women’s events and to demonstrate some form of representation of women in leadership positions (IOC, 2007), one reason behind why rugby sevens has not appeared in previous Olympics is partly due to the sport’s inability to demonstrate gender equality. According to one global participant, “this wasn’t the first time that rugby had tried to get into the Olympics and that’s how women’s rugby became more powerful...because one of the criticisms was that it wasn’t gender balanced” (Global 2). This participant further suggested that in order for the sport to have a chance of being on the Olympic programme the test would be to have a different focus, “it was decided that there was a need to promote women’s rugby sevens. Therefore, the impetus was to get more women involved in sevens and get the development up and running” (Global 2). As a result, this indicates the necessary prescribed gender equality measures that need to be met when pursuing sport’s global showpiece.

In addition, since rugby is widely regarded as a male-dominated sport, a few participants commented on the added value the Olympic association has had in promoting gender equality in the sport:

What the Olympic Games have done to progress women in sport has been massive...regardless of who you are or where you're from. ... And it means a lot to people in rugby and for the sport to be on that global stage and to have that opportunity to showcase their sport, and to showcase the best female rugby athletes in the world is just incredible. ... Countries all over the world are putting their hands up and saying, "We want to be a part of this!" (Global 1)

I think they also felt that with regards to gender equality there were more women playing sevens globally than there were women playing fifteens. So it would be an easier game to promote to women. (Global 2)

What is most striking in all of these accounts is the link between the Olympics and the opportunity to globalise rugby, with the specific emphasis on the growth and expansion of rugby beyond traditional rugby nations, specifically for women. From the two global participants, it was seen as:

...a massive opportunity to grow the game globally and for the game to become a major sport in territories...the likes of China, the likes of Brazil, who are obviously hosting the Olympic Games. (Global 1)

...a huge opportunity where we wanted to make our game more global and this is going to be the way it's going to happen. ... It was more about creating this huge opportunity for rugby to expand. (Global 2)

Arguably, one of the ways to ensure that growth and expansion will manifest at a global level is to create comprehensive policies and strategic documents to identify, project and measure such expectations (De Bosscher et al, 2006; Houlihan, 1997; Houlihan et al., 2010).

### ***Strategic Directives***

Following the IOC's decision to include rugby sevens in the Olympics, the IRB's *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016* was released in 2010 (IRB, 2012a). Declaring that the Olympics will serve as the pinnacle event for rugby sevens, this strategic document explicitly identifies "Sevens as the primary opportunity to grow the Game for women and girls, as well as an elite sport in its own right" (IRB, 2012a, p.12). According to one participant, the development of the IRB's *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016* incorporated an extensive

consultation process with rugby unions and regional associations and “a review of the state of women’s rugby globally, [which] involved putting a working group in place” (Global 1). Another participant, who was an invited member of this working group, described their role as follows,

We were just an advisory group. We would come up with creating a strategic plan and have some recommendations but it then had to go to another committee where they would have the final say. We were one of those kinds of groups that weren’t really powerful, but we felt that it gave us an opportunity to put down our ideas and share them. (Global 2)

Part of this opportunity to specifically create recommendations for a separate strategic document on women’s rugby, that would eventually become the IRB’s *Women’s Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, was driven by the acceptance of rugby sevens into the Olympics:

We at that advisory group meeting just thought that it would be a great idea to be part of the Olympics because we thought it would make it more global. It attracts sponsors; it’s just a lot of positives and pluses for being part of the Olympics (Global 2).

Indeed, the IRB’s *Women’s Rugby Plan 2011-2016* is intended to be understood and implemented in tandem with the IRB’s *Rugby Sevens Plan 2011-2020* (IRB, 2012b), and also the IRB’s overall *Strategic Plan 2010-2020* (IRB, 2010). Likewise, the NZR, a member union of the IRB, also developed a strategic plan specific to the women’s game, *Women’s Rugby: Strengthening the women’s game to 2013* (NZR, n.d.-a). The NZR’s plan is not as extensive as the IRB’s *Women’s Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, being only three pages in length. However, the document highlights the organisation’s overall vision and commitment to support women’s rugby in New Zealand. All of these documents make various references to rugby sevens in this new Olympic era as being instrumental in considering “the future of women’s rugby, ...and how can sevens help...as a development opportunity as well as an opportunity at the highest [elite] level” (Global 1). In this light, four strategic directives were described as

opportunities by participants and are discussed in the subsequent sections as growth, investment, inter-organisational relationships, and athlete support.

**Growth.** In the Introduction of the IRB's *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, the IRB indicates that international growth of the sport for women is a clear derivative of the sport gaining Olympic status: "The IOC bringing Rugby Sevens into the Olympic Family has stimulated further interest in the Game for women and created many opportunities to grow the Game globally" (IRB, 2012a, p.4). In the plan, the IRB provides strategic goals, which include the following broad areas: participation and development, global events, commercial and marketing, governance, and acceptance and credibility of women's rugby. Notably, all of the strategic goals are underscored by growth, whether it be in regards to increasing participation numbers, implementing strategies for further expansion of new and existing women's rugby sevens programmes and competitions at both the development and elite levels, promoting female-focused administration structures and policies to govern the women's game, offering pathways for athletes as well as female coaches and referees, and also securing television broadcasters and commercial sponsors.<sup>12</sup>

Referring to the attractive platform of the Olympics, a participant with a local perspective insisted that females who had never previously considered playing rugby sevens might think about it now that they could represent their country in a sport that is regarded by most New Zealanders as the national sport:

...the impact is that it opens up opportunities for more girls to participate and perhaps those who have never played rugby before. It exposes more girls to that opportunity. ... It gives a greater opportunity for people to have a go at the sevens game with the view to try and make it to the highest level and ultimately achieve Olympic glory. (Local 5)

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<sup>12</sup> In order for a sport to be shortlisted into the Olympic programme they must adhere to a specific evaluation criterion that was designed by the Olympic Programme Commission. It stipulates that International (sports) Federations should demonstrate areas such as: gender equity within elected governing bodies; evidence of existing resources to assist athletes; and specific initiatives designed for women (IOC, 2007).

Whereas from a global perspective, one participant contextualised the timely significance for growth of the women's game due to the pairing of rugby sevens with the Olympics:

It is ensuring that we maximise the growth because it is a massive time to actually grow the game. In the build-up to the Olympic Games the focus will be to get more and more girls into the game, and the crucial thing is to get the structures set up in unions so that they are geared up and ready. (Global 1)

Here, they also focus on the responsibility of the global governing body for rugby to engage, facilitate and "maximise" growth for the women's game. In this regard, the participant suggests that a key focus for the IRB is to work with member unions to develop particular "structures" to safeguard their preparedness to showcase the sport at the 2016 Olympic Games. Therefore, in order for the game to gain momentum early on and for organisations to progress and facilitate this growth, one of the initial developments was the level of investment injected into the women's game.

**Investment.** According to the IRB's *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, in 2010 the estimated annual global investment for women's rugby at that time was £7 million per year, comprised of £2 million from the IRB (and their regional associations) and £5 million invested from both member and associated member unions (IRB, 2012a). However, the *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016* also acknowledges that in order to continually grow the game, the IRB understands that it is necessary to implement particular strategies wherein further investment would be required. In particular, the plan discusses the potential for rugby to "benefit financially and commercially from participation in the Olympic Games" (IRB, 2012a, p.34), in addition to member unions being able to secure additional funding from government agencies and sponsorship opportunities (IRB, 2012a). As one global participant noted, the inclusion of rugby into the Olympics has:

helped change the view and the attitude of women's rugby in terms of it's now being seen as an opportunity to invest in. ... It's a fantastic opportunity. It's absolutely

massive and that's where we invest, we prioritise new investment of new resources to sevens because that's how much of a massive opportunity that the Olympic decision has given us. (Global 1)

Again, the view was that this would not only benefit the organisation but the world of women's rugby both financially and commercially due to the link with the Olympics.

In regards to the local investment context of rugby sevens in New Zealand, in 2013 High Performance Sport NZ (HPSNZ) forecasted an investment of \$800,000 towards developing resources for a women's rugby sevens programme (HPSNZ, 2012),<sup>13</sup> and with the team's success in the inaugural World Series, the team received an increase in their annual investment to \$900,000 for 2014 (HPSNZ, 2013). This not only reinforces HPSNZ's stance on rewarding New Zealand teams who display the potential for an Olympic medal,<sup>14</sup> but also highlights the link between elite sport and politics. In this light, the New Zealand government's support of physical activity and sport has, in part, shifted its focus away from increasing mass participation towards a co-ordinated business-oriented approach to sport (Keat & Sam, 2013; Sam, 2012). As a result of this approach, several organisations in global and New Zealand sports system have formed relationships with other organisations in order to facilitate the support of developing women's rugby sevens.

***Inter-organisational relationships.*** One would expect that associating rugby with the Olympics would encourage different organisations to work together, between global and local ones as well as within the local environment itself. The IRB have well-established relationships with their member unions, including the NZR. Moreover, in their *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016* (IRB, 2012a), the IRB outlines several key performance indicators (KPI's) that specifically relate to fostering relationships with their member unions:

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<sup>13</sup> HPSNZ is the high performance arm of Crown agency Sport NZ, responsible for the organisation and delivery of elite sport in New Zealand.

<sup>14</sup> HPSNZ investment and support priorities are given to sports and individual athletes who have medal potential at the Olympic Games (HPSNZ, n.d.-a).

- Ensure all relevant unions have a specific plan for growing the women's game. (p.24)
- Assist each union to develop policies and strategies for women's rugby. (p.29)
- Work with unions to ensure access to appropriate facilities for women and girls. (p.24)
- Ensure that governance structures of IRB, regional associations and unions are effective to govern women's rugby. (p.29)

On paper, this indicates the IRB's commitment to offer support to its member unions to facilitate women's rugby development for 2016, which was further confirmed and reinforced in discussions with a global participant (Global 1).

Within the local context, the network of inter-organisational relationships exists between the NZR, all of their provincial unions, their partnership with government agency, HPSNZ, the national Olympic committee (New Zealand Olympic Committee: NZOC),<sup>15</sup> and the New Zealand Rugby Players Association (NZRPA).<sup>16</sup> According to the NZR's *Women's Rugby: Strengthening the women's game to 2013* plan, the support of the provincial unions is "critical to ensuring the growth of the women's game" (NZR, n.d.-a, p. 2) in New Zealand. Even though the NZR are the primary providers for leading and developing rugby in New Zealand, the support from provincial unions ensures that strategies to progress the women's game will be carried out regionally in the provinces. The impact of this relationship is discussed by one local participant, who suggested that "from a community perspective, the link between what we [the provincial unions] do and what the NZR does is a continuum and we can see what they [the NZR] are trying to do and how it impacts all the way through. ... So our relationship in terms of sevens is strong" (Local 4). Evident in these provincial

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<sup>15</sup> The NZOC are responsible for New Zealand's planning, operations and leadership during the Commonwealth Games and Olympic Games events which enables elite athletes to achieve on the world's stage (NZOC, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> The NZRPA is a representative body that strives to help support New Zealand professional rugby athletes on and off the field (NZRPA, n.d.).

relationships, therefore, are elements of transparency and collective ‘buy in’ towards creating a strong sevens environment throughout New Zealand.

Another influential relationship is the one formed between the NZR and HPSNZ. Arguably, the Olympic decision has prompted this relationship, which is responsible for developing high performance structures in women’s rugby sevens. In particular, part of HPSNZ’s mandate states,

To lead the high performance sport system in New Zealand, working in partnership with national sport organisations and key stakeholders by:

- Allocating resources to targeted sports and athletes,<sup>17</sup>
- Delivering world leading support to impact NSO, coach and athlete performance,
- Constantly striving to outperform international benchmarks. (HPSNZ, n.d.-a, p.4)

As a testament to this, one local participant highlighted the link between these two organisations and noted,

in terms of the rugby side of things, the NZR take care of this, whereas HPSNZ offer support in the way of the strength and conditioning coach, who is probably one of the top trainers and obviously all our girls are carded athletes so they [HPSNZ] fund a lot of what the girls get. (Local 3)

Ultimately, this highlights how the NZR-HPSNZ relationship shares the responsibility of resourcing New Zealand’s elite women’s rugby sevens system with HPSNZ providing athletes with access to services that only high performing, elite athletes are granted as well as coach-education development.

Other inter-organisational relationships with the NZR have included the NZOC, which has existed since rugby sevens’ inclusion into the Commonwealth Games in 1998. The NZOC, in particular, have:

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<sup>17</sup> Investment and support priorities go to sports and athletes that have medal potential at the Olympic Games (HPSNZ, 2012).

been helping the New Zealand women's team with some funding and support. We're starting to plan where the team will be based...all of the elements of Rio planning. We're already well engaged with rugby on that. ... Some of their people [NZR] have been to Rio with our people to look and start the early planning. (Local 1)

Also, the NZR also now collaborate with the NZRPA, who look after the contract agreements of the women's rugby sevens athletes. One athlete suggested that athletes' dealings with the NZRPA are "mainly to do with the contractual arrangements. Basically that's your salary, your terms of employment, how long you're away for, and assembly times" (Athlete 2). Ideally, the relationships between New Zealand sport-related organisations help form a coordinated approach to enabling success for New Zealand rugby sevens at the Olympic Games. Overall, this reflects how global and local organisations are able to work together in the women's elite sport environment.

***Athlete Support.*** Part of the global-local investment opportunity goes beyond monetary value to also include other forms of support for the athletes. Although more apparent in this study at the local level, one participant indicated that it was "probably the biggest thing (and a stroke of genius) was a philosophical change...in terms of this isn't just a rugby thing. Let's actually look at the athletes first, rugby second" (Local 4). Clearly aligning with one of HPSNZ's directives (i.e., athlete performance support services), the organisation highlights "athletes get performance support they need under the one roof which includes strength and conditioning, physiology, biomechanics, performance and technique analysis, medical services, physiotherapy, massage therapy, nutrition, and athlete life advice" (HPSNZ, n.d-b). From the athletes' perspectives, they believed this benefitted the current New Zealand high performance environment:

They are pumping money into the sport. As an individual athlete you are going to get the best treatment whether its nutritional advice, training advice, anything to develop yourself as an individual both on and off the field. If you can get to New Zealand [representative] level you are taken care of now. (Athlete 2)

When you are at New Zealand [representative] level the resources that you get is just high quality. You have got your nutritionist, sports psychologist, your strength and conditioning coach (sometimes there are two of them)...because of the level of professionalism. (Athlete 3)

These reflections reveal that the level of support the national team now receives, in comparison to what was offered before the sport's inclusion into the Olympics, has elevated their preparations accordingly. One participant expanded and stated, "there is a huge focus on the way we do things off the field. So that involves nutrition, the mental side of things, and just becoming conditioned athletes. So when we come into camp we are ready for selection" (Athlete 1). Indicative of the link of rugby sevens with the Olympics and arguably becoming considered a (semi) professional sport for women in New Zealand, an increase in the structures in place to provide athlete support at the local level suggests that New Zealand is both following IRB protocol and adjusting to meet the global shift in sport policy (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

Overall, these strategic directives, as outlined by the IRB and supported locally, have enabled the sport a sense of freedom and importance, financially and organisationally, to explore new and exciting enterprises. Specifically, these directives have laid a unique platform that has contributed to an orchestrated expansion of various initiatives both globally and locally. These specific initiatives will be explored in the next section.

### ***Sport Initiatives***

The purpose behind the IRB's global focus was to apply specific initiatives such as a competition pathway and support networks that would have an immediate effect to give the sport momentum in advance of the 2016 Olympic Games. With the IRB's and the NZR's ambitions to have the game played at the highest levels, particular initiatives were created on both a global and local scale to provide the opportunity for organisations to create

pathways for females to play rugby from grassroots to the elite level. At the global level, the IRB introduced a Women's Sevens World Series (WSWS, similar to the men's HSBC Sevens World Series),<sup>18</sup> with the intention for accelerated high performance programmes (e.g., in New Zealand, Australia, England) to underpin this competition structure (IRB, 2012a). One global participant explained that initially, "the priority was to get the series up and running...[to] progress the profile of the women's game" (Global 1). Taking this into consideration, the following sections discuss both global and local women's rugby sevens initiatives: the IRB's WSWS, the NZR's Go 4 Gold programme, and the New Zealand national rugby sevens tournament.

***The IRB Women's Sevens World Series.*** After extensive research and consultation with their member unions, the IRB recognised several objectives such as: the significance to progress the player pathways from novice to elite status and the need to implement an international competition structure that provided the opportunity to maximise the profile of the game on the world stage over a sustainable future (IRB, 2010, 2012a, 2012b). Therefore, in line with these key strategic objectives set in the *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, the IRB launched the WSWS competition model to operate, in the first instance, from 2012 to 2016 (IRB, 2012c). According to Mark Egan, head of IRB Competitions and Performance, this concept was seen as a prime opportunity for the sport to be exposed to new audiences and reach new markets. He stated:

the establishment of the IRB WSWS is probably one of the most exciting developments certainly in our competition's programme for a while...this is really the start of the process now of making sure we have a highly competitive Olympic Games programme in Rio 2016. We think the unions are ready now to come into this World Series and compete in four events...it's also strategically very important [to be

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<sup>18</sup>Since the inaugural season in 2012-2013, the WSWS has grown annually from four destinations (Dubai, Houston, Guangzhou and Amsterdam), to six destinations (Dubai, Sao Paulo, Atlanta, British Columbia, London, and Amsterdam) in the 2014-2015 season (IRB, n.d.-b).

involved in new] markets in terms of China, the USA, and with the Amsterdam event it gives us an IRB event in mainland Europe which is a very positive development. (IRB, 2012d)

One participant with a global perspective discussed that the next phase involved progressing:

the competition model for women's [rugby] sevens and that was linked with obviously identifying one of our key strategic goals as a world class event in Rio 2016. It was very important to progress the competition structure for women's [rugby] sevens and in terms of working towards achieving that goal. [Therefore] the priorities were around getting the competition up and running, ensuring that it is the right experience for the girls at the top level of the game. (Global 1)

As a result, establishing the WSWS was considered to be one of the most significant investments in the history of women's rugby, with the IRB spending US\$1.5 million (IRB, 2012c), and it was considered that the IRB "now have a very high calibre of international events programme for sevens athletes" (IRB, 2012d). In accordance with this perception, a New Zealand athlete commented, "it's great that the IRB have established a series and they have included more tournaments. I think next year they're including another circuit. It's developing the game and preparing for the Olympics which is awesome" (Athlete 3). This highlights how the wider global rugby community has perceived the WSWS high performance competition structure over its short existence and how this event is continually gaining momentum towards 2016.

Additionally, as the global profile of the men's HSBC Sevens World Series competition has "grown exponentially over the last 10 years" in which the sport was considered the "the most successful event at the 2006 Commonwealth Games attracting 150,000 spectators" (IRB, 2012b, p.9), the IRB decided to replicate the same competition model for the women: "We're following the model of the HSBC Sevens World Series for the men where we want to have a very clear pathway from the regional tournaments into the

pinnacle tournament which is the World Series itself” (IRB, 2014b). Interestingly from a global perspective, by mirroring the men’s competition, it was thought that:

The men’s series for sevens works brilliantly and that was the road we decided to go with for the women’s as well. And certainly that was part of the consultation with our member unions in terms of what they saw and what they wanted and that was a key consideration in terms of putting that in place. (Global 1)

This indicates that decisions by the leading organisation were guided by the overall emphasis for the sport to follow a proven competition pathway.

Subsequently, a range of participants with local perspectives commented on how this globally organised event has exposed a variety of benefits that have facilitated the development of rugby sevens in the New Zealand context. For example:

[Athletes] train with a purpose. There are tournaments to play. It’s on a regular basis. So they increased it from four to five, and I think they’re going even further. Who would not want to train hard to compete internationally? (Local 3)

We are getting a lot of young kids now that are experiencing exposure to a high level of rugby. ... It’s something for these kids to aspire to. ... There’s a big career path for a lot of them. (Local 2)

It’s been awesome. ... The level we are playing in and having five tournaments is massive and that’s increasing every year as well. I think it’s been massive to be able to play in those tournaments to get better for the World Cup and the Olympics as well. (Athlete 5)

In addition, the first event of the series is scheduled to be played in Dubai where the men’s and women’s tournaments occur simultaneously. Several athletes specifically commented on the positive effects of playing at the same venue as the men:

The environment and the crowd was huge. Some of the players were saying it was probably the biggest crowd of the World Series in Dubai. So that was pretty special playing in front of thousands of people. (Athlete 1)

In Dubai we were able to appear on T.V. and that’s a big thing for us. And that’s why we want to be [playing] on the number one [ground]. It’s not just because we want the big crowd or the big stadium. We want to be playing on T.V. to get people

around the world and people in New Zealand to be able to watch our games.  
(Athlete 5)

As these views illustrate, this heightened level of excitement, through the creation of a WSWS initiative, has positively influenced the state and lifted the level of the game not only on a global scale but also in the New Zealand context. In conjunction with this early development and new competition model, the NZR demonstrated an urgent commitment to up-skill current athletes and identify potential others by implementing their own high performance talent identification programme, Go 4 Gold (NZR, n.d.-a).

**Go 4 Gold.** Similar to the process for creating the IRB *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, in order for the Go 4 Gold initiative to gain support, work effectively, and achieve strategic direction, the NZR held discussions with key individuals invested in rugby sevens and women's rugby. One participant who was present at these proceedings confirmed that:

in late December 2011. ... Maybe half a dozen people that put this whole [Go 4 Gold] idea together presented it to probably 12 of us. From what I can remember it was people involved in women's rugby, people involved at a high level in NZR [male and female players], people involved in community rugby, ... coaches that had experience with men, women and sevens. ... So there was a wide group of people from all around the country. (Local 2)

As these preliminary discussions would indicate, this programme aimed at promptly adapting to the global expansion of women's rugby sevens. In light of the IRB's ambitions to create a world series, the NZR and key stakeholders responded by developing a high performance system specific to women.

The Go 4 Gold initiative was designed as an intense high performance programme to select and recruit talented athletes across New Zealand (NZR, n.d.-c). Several participants noted that the purpose of this programme was to:

identify potential Olympians. (Local 2)

broaden the reach of talent beyond those that were already playing women's rugby. In particular, [the Go 4 Gold] looked at all athletes with the emphasis being on Olympic participation. ... Whilst the Go 4 Gold campaign is 'top-end' focused, it has opened up the opportunity for all females, across all sorts of sporting endeavours that are athletes to be able to participate in the game of rugby sevens. (Local 5)

identify talent around New Zealand and not just in rugby orientated sports. So it was probably more allowing the opportunity for those girls who thought they may have what it takes to give it a go in a controlled environment where it wasn't as intimidating as just getting on a rugby field. (Athlete 2)

In addition, one participant described it as "a screening process across all sports and welcomed all female athletes wanting to give sevens a go. Just seeing all the different fitness levels and where it could take New Zealand as a country with sevens from there" (Athlete 1). Previously lacking a formalised talent identification process, the Go 4 Gold was viewed as an opportunity to acquire potential athletes from outside the NZR's usual catchment methods.

The next step was to implement this programme from the provincial level. One participant drew attention to the following phase of this process, stating:

So basically each provincial union was going to hold a trial night for any females interested in trialling out to show their abilities and potentially be picked for a sevens group in their province with the carrot of then being picked for the New Zealand team. ... People could come along and try it out. ... A resource coach would pick the best of the best that came along and then they'd have maybe four or five months of training to get them up to speed with the sevens game and the skills. And then the New Zealand coach would attend each of those provincial sessions and he'd identify the ones he wanted and then they went into the first New Zealand camp and he picked his first team. ... So it was a pretty big build-up. (Local 3)

Not surprisingly, the outcome of the Go 4 Gold programme enabled the NZR to reinvigorate national attention surrounding the women's game, and women's rugby sevens in particular. One local participant highlighted the risk and reaction from an organisational standpoint and noted that the NZR "found it really valuable. Until you do it, you don't realise what the appeal will be. And they were quite blown away with the actual level of interest in the Go 4

Gold” (Local 4). Here it emphasises not only the level of excitement but also that through this extensive process in developing an elite women’s rugby sevens programme, the NZR and with the support of their provincial unions, they managed to raise the game’s profile beyond expectations.

Marking this as a significant opportunity for New Zealand women and girls to become involved in rugby, one participant indicated “there was over a 1000 girls that went to that programme...[and from there] there were about 50 to 60 girls that were brought to camp” (Local 2). Other participants elaborated on what impact this had on aspiring athletes, even those from other sporting codes:

Given that it’s going to be in the Olympics, and it appeals to everyone, do we just simply focus on sevens in terms of our current rugby set-up or do we broaden it wider? And they took the view to broaden it wider and look at all women athletes. ... If you’re an athlete you could potentially switch codes and go to the Olympics. (Local 4)

It just helped to lift the profile. I think it was useful in that. It certainly identified some players we may not have come across ordinarily. (Local 6)

We saw individuals such as hockey players, netballers, sprinters or those involved in athletics, having a go at sevens rugby and one or two making it. (Local 5)

Indeed, these responses signal a dramatic transformation in the New Zealand sporting landscape for women, giving athletes from other sports codes an open opportunity to trial for a sport that will feature in the Olympics, which is unprecedented for other New Zealand Olympic sports. One athlete specifically credited the Go 4 Gold programme as the trigger for her rugby career and stated, “that’s probably where my career started” (Athlete 5).

Similar to the WSWS, the Go 4 Gold initiative has been influential in creating other developments in women’s rugby sevens at the local level. A common perception among the ‘local’ rugby community was the belief that this strategy helped revive the national rugby sevens competition for women. As part of the NZR’s strategy to strengthen the women’s

rugby sevens game (NZR, n.d.-a), they suggested that the Go 4 Gold programme would recapture “tournament participation of provincial union teams in regional Sevens tournaments to gain qualification for a national tournament” (p.3). In light of this, as one participant who was highly involved with organising the Go 4 Gold programme recalled, “because of that Go 4 Gold, there was a lot of girls identified at a provincial sevens level which meant Nationals was reinvented” (Local 2). The identification of more talent nationally meant that provincial unions could create and develop women’s rugby sevens teams to compete in a women’s national sevens tournament.

***The New Zealand National Rugby Sevens Tournament.*** In 2013, after a 10-year absence of a national sevens tournament, six women’s provincial sevens teams qualified for the competition (SKY Sport, 2012). Following the three regional qualifying tournaments (Northern, Central and Southern regions), the national tournament continued the excitement for women’s rugby sevens in the provinces. Neil Sorensen, the NZR’s General Manager for Professional Rugby, acknowledged the appeal that this tournament had with the national audience and stated that the NZR “knows that these [rugby] sevens tournaments are very popular family events, so it’s great to see so many more women having a go at rugby” (SKY Sport, 2012). Again, similar to the Go 4 Gold programme, clearly the emphasis behind the national competition was to enhance the profile of the game whereby attracting more families, which by default would attract a wider female audience.

Notably, from an athlete’s perception this tournament provided support to the national squad, “this has probably been the best and biggest thing for our team. The way that it brings in so many female rugby players and gives everyone an opportunity to get into the national side is awesome” (Athlete 5). Another participant with a local, managerial perspective had an identical view and commented that the national tournament “develops

our players such that they're in contention for national selection for the New Zealand women's [rugby] sevens team" (Local 6), ultimately replacing the Go 4 Gold programme as a national squad selection tool.

Furthermore, several participants indicated that this competition provided a number of additional benefits related to media coverage, athlete development and pride of provincial identity:

Ultimately what you're trying to do is provide a meaningful representative programme and play for your province on the national stage. I think that's fundamentally what that's all about and obviously it allows for exposure to the national selectors - giving them opportunities to potentially kick on and play for New Zealand women's [rugby] sevens team. (Local 6)

I think our success at Nationals, that first year when women were brought back into Nationals, opened a lot of eyes around: 1) the perception of women's rugby; 2) them [women] as athletes; 3) their skill level; and 4) people were quite surprised with the brand of rugby that they could play. (Local 2)

The women's national tournament on T.V. was massive. It's unreal. Being in a national tournament with the boys on SKY [T.V.]. You know some of these players can be household names. (Local 3)

Getting the opportunity to play against other elite athletes...getting the opportunity to play in front of the same crowd as the men. ... Having a few more supporters as well. (Athlete 1)

The potential to actually identify new talent and give players that may not be at New Zealand level just yet the opportunity to play alongside and learn from the New Zealand players. (Athlete 2)

This certainly opens up the opportunity to play in front of the cameras ... and the benefit of representing your province and your family. (Athlete 3)

With the competition growing from six [teams] last year to ten this year and despite some of the bottom teams aren't that great, the level of competition at the top end has been huge. The game has gotten a lot tighter and teams are pushing for that final spot. So it's been massive. (Athlete 5)

Collectively, the experiences of these athletes, combined with the perceptions of local sport managers, denote the tournament's major influence on the development of women's rugby sevens in New Zealand.

The development of global and local sporting initiatives have capitalised on the opportunity of the decision to include rugby sevens in the Olympics. In response to preparing for an annual international competition (the WSWS), 'local' member unions (in this case, the NZR) have implemented their own new developmental structures and high performance programmes. As a result, these initiatives have opened up new career opportunities for athletes (past and present), coaches, managers, as well as other types of leadership roles.

### ***Career Pathways***

Given the new 'Olympic era' of the sport, and the aforementioned discussion that has alluded to a growing professionalisation of women's rugby, another opportunity to emerge has been recent career advancements both on and off the field. Taking this into consideration, to supplement global growth the importance has been to enhance specific pathways. For example, the IRB identified that several member unions and regions required further knowledge in relation to the women's game and to drive high performance programmes in these countries (IRB, 2012b).

***New organisational roles.*** The allocation of additional resources (e.g., revenue) to women's rugby has also created opportunities for new organisational roles. Taking into consideration that there is a greater importance on elite performance and the strive towards excellence, organisations including the IRB, regional associations and member unions along with national government agencies have identified the need for women's rugby-specific and sevens rugby-specific professional personnel to support this growth. Part

of this has been the aim to encourage more women into leadership positions on global committees, boards and councils and an increased “number of females in the governance structures of regional associations and member unions” (IRB, 2012a, p.29). One global participant indicated how this has added significantly more value to the global scope and direction of the sport:

We have a women’s rugby representative on the [IRB’s] Rugby Committee and that’s to ensure that there can be specific considerations for the women’s game that we that we need to focus on within the decision-making process. ... She would certainly have a focus on the interests of the women’s game and within that structure. (Global 1)

At the local level, there has been a recent introduction of a Women’s Development Officer at the NZR, whose role is:

to grow the game at the girl’s level. ... Kiwi Sport provided funding to five major sports, rugby being one, and New Zealand Rugby had to submit to them a role, a programme or project that was going to increase participation. ... It was to target something new that NZR hadn’t targeted before. (Local 3)

It can be argued that these newly timed roles illustrate how both global and local rugby communities are slowly beginning to develop their organisational culture, which aligns more with the Olympic value of gender equality.

Additionally, this expansion has meant there is the opportunity to develop resources and materials such as athlete talent transfer strategies, planning and infrastructure, and women’s accelerated high performance programmes that promote sevens. More specifically, there is now a professional pathway for coaching, sports science, and medicine in rugby sevens (IRB, 2012b). From the NZR’s perspective, one key focus has been to lead innovative structures that will continue to attract and retain people with the right skills and attitudes (NZR, n.d.-b). This has been aided by a significant contribution from HPSNZ, which has enabled the appointment of a fulltime coach and 14 regional sevens resource coaches

who will assist with the implementation of a women's rugby sevens programme (Woodcock, 2012). One local participant suggested that "if you've got people in those roles then things are going to happen around player development, identifying players, and ultimately getting us ready for 2016" (Local 3). Overall, this illustrates a prominent trend in which global advancements in the sport are being met and replicated within the local context.

***Athlete pathways.*** One key goal of the IRB is to ensure that their member unions continue to raise the level of participation for women and girls that play the game at grassroots level to the elite level (IRB, 2012b). Within the New Zealand context, part of the NZR's vision towards Rio has been the implementation of clear pathways for their athletes (NZR, n.d.-b). In particular, several athletes highlighted how their involvement in the elite sevens environment has brought them more career opportunities:

Now that it has the Olympic tag it is a career and it can be a career after rugby. Our life advisors help us through that and help us with getting into careers that we want to pursue. (Athlete 5)

Being a female and to be given that opportunity to train fulltime, reach your potential, and be the best you can be for your sport and for your country is just amazing. ... I know it is only a short term career but it is pretty cool that you can be given that shot. (Athlete 4)

The girls are getting paid now so it's almost like a professional sport in a sense, not so much that you're making a living off it, but your expectations are that you're living by the New Zealand women team values and you have to uphold those responsibilities. So you need to train. (Athlete 3)

These perceptions reinforce how the women's rugby sevens profile is changing, professionally, especially in a country renowned for male rugby career opportunities. In addition, with the global game continually expanding, and due to the level of experience and expertise of some female rugby athletes, they are being persuaded to undertake other roles within the women's game.

**Careers beyond playing.** According to the IRB's *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, during the planning stages of developing the women's game, 60% of their member unions planned to focus on increasing the amount of coaching roles for women (IRB, 2012a). To ensure member unions would be supported with this development the IRB created leadership development programmes that trained and developed more female leaders in the game (IRB, 2012a). Part of the purpose for this strategy was to promote a pathway for coaches to become specialist sevens coaches (IRB, 2012b). From the NZR's perspective, in order to create a positive global presence, the organisation plans to continue to share its resources and expertise with other developing rugby nations (NZR, n.d.-b). Therefore, in the case of New Zealand athletes, one participant suggested there is potential for New Zealand athletes to remain in the game once their playing career had finished, and noted, "if countries are smart they will be tapping into Kiwis to start coaching" (Athlete 3). Interestingly, one former Black Fern, Anna Richards, was recently appointed as the Hong Kong women's rugby sevens coach (IRB, 2013). From her perspective:

This is obviously a great boost for the women's game. Being included in the Olympics is allowing more funding to become available for smaller countries worldwide and also enabling full-time staff and players to be recruited. ... I am looking forward to coaching Women's rugby full-time and working with full-time athletes as well. (IRB, 2013)

Again, this demonstrates how the Olympic decision has played a role in the advancement of women in leadership roles in rugby. Thus, for rugby sevens to be a sustainable, global, quality product and continue to expand the women's game, both global and local rugby organisations need to and, in fact, are employing a more professional approach. Through the changing nature of women's rugby sevens, these organisations are offering new career opportunities and are engaging in resource and knowledge sharing.

Ultimately, one key objective among women's rugby has been the universal effort to grow women's rugby sevens and maximise the Olympic opportunity. Through different directives and perspectives this section has revealed new insights into how organisations such as the IRB, the NZR and other local organisations have implemented specific strategies to develop the sport both globally and locally, and the ensuing initiatives that were also created in global and local contexts. Interestingly, one common perception from global and local participants was the inherent approval of how beneficial these initiatives were. In addition, the result of rugby's new found Olympic status has enabled rugby-related organisations to introduce new career opportunities with the specific purpose to develop women's rugby sevens. Such strategies, initiatives and purpose-laden positions align with professionalising the sport, which without Olympic status might not have been possible. Encroaching professionalism has allowed coaches, managers, and athletes to look forward to extended futures in the sport. However, despite the numerous opportunities, the women's game has also experienced some challenges in recent times, according to a range of participants. These will be discussed further in the next section.

### ***Challenges***

Although the association of rugby with the Olympics appears to offer positive opportunities for the sport's global community, alongside these prospective opportunities lies a number of challenges for the women's game. Once the decision was made to include rugby in the Olympics, the IRB's motivation was to demonstrate their commitment towards increasing the strength and demand of their product, the sport of rugby, for the 2016 Olympics. One participant drew attention to this and stated that the rugby community "can't wait until after the Olympic Games to put the development structures in and [need to] really make a massive effort to grow the sport across all countries" (Global 1). In

contrast, within the New Zealand context the decision was felt with less urgency. According to a local participant, the general perception in relation to implementing the provincial women's rugby sevens programme underwent a casual approach, "it's a summer sport, we'll just wait until December [2010]" (Local 4), which would have been 12 months after the Olympic announcement had been made. This lack of initial urgency locally could have been due to the existence of women's rugby teams (predominately rugby fifteens) in New Zealand, albeit with minimal support and development processes. Reflecting back, the same participant claimed, "what we know now to what we knew back then, we just had no idea what it actually meant" (Local 4). This indicates that directives given by the IRB were not clarified to the member unions, or the extent to which more established unions (e.g., New Zealand, Australia) needed to heed the IRB's strategies and timelines. In addition, despite participants' positive perceptions and attitudes towards the many opportunities that rugby sevens becoming an Olympic sport will have for females, participants also highlighted several barriers that were overwhelmingly linked to two distinct challenges, attitudes on gender and professional expectations.

### ***Gender***

One underlying social barrier that frequently exists in women's sport is the issue of equality. Rugby is no exception. The game involves a significant amount of physical contact that muddies discussions about the game being too violent and dangerous for females (IRB, 2012a). Moreover, in a strategic review, the IRB acknowledged that they lacked an understanding as to why girls would want to play rugby (IRB, 2012a), and indicated in another report that, "rugby is not seen as a mainstream sport of choice for women and girls to play" (IRB, 2012a, p.6). As such, social acceptance of women and girls in a sport widely regarded as male-centric and male-dominated remains slow. Specifically, participants with

perspectives from organisations in the New Zealand context, as well as the athletes themselves, identified the following:

Inherently there will always be that mind-set within our game about the role of females playing the game. There is indifference by some as to their acceptance in the game of rugby. ... It's almost a case of "well, it's a boy's game!" It's that traditional mind-set of "what are those girls doing playing rugby?" (Local 5)

We're always going to deal with those negative perceptions of how the sport is perceived, ... "It should be a male sport" and as a female athlete you want to challenge that assumption. However, you're always going to be in an uphill battle competing with the men, the public and how they perceive the sport and who should play it. (Athlete 3)

...coming up against those old school thinkers. You still find that stigma in those older rugby unions or those older districts, or smaller districts. They're still a male orientated sport...the women will be the last to benefit from anything that trickles through. (Athlete 2)

Following this were the usual assumptions that all females who play rugby challenge dominant gender ideology:

A dominant perception is that some of the things associated with the women's game are that it's inferior and questions the athlete's sexuality. (Local 4)

Because of society, you [as a female athlete] are challenged by so many stereotypes like all [women] rugby players are butch or lesbians. (Athlete 3)

The stereotype is that we are all just a bunch of lesbians. ... A women's place is not on the rugby field. ... They should go and play netball<sup>19</sup>. (Athlete 4)

These comments reflect the continued struggle for women to gain legitimacy in rugby and the difficulty of rugby as an historical all-boys network (McKay, 1997), especially in the rural backblocks of New Zealand, despite the IRB releasing a *Women's Rugby Declaration Statement*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Netball is a sport traditionally designed for and predominantly played by women (Tagg, 2008), and has long served as a popular sport for women and girls in New Zealand (Nauright & Broomhall, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Similar to FIFA's own declaration for women in soccer, this statement helps drive the commitment to women in rugby (IRB, 2012a).

Another gendered factor identified was the nature of working in the elite sport environment. In the IRB's *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, the organisation recognised that perceptions about the demands of the game were the same regardless of which gender plays it. However, a number of differences such as physiological, cognitive, and psychological should be taken into account (IRB, 2012a). One local participant, who is highly experienced in coaching both men's and women's rugby, made a distinction about working in these different environments:

With women they have a different mind-set. You need to connect to these girls emotionally before you can get to them physically, whereas with guys you can be a little bit withdrawn on the emotional side of things and you can be real technical and tactical, ... [It's] because they've grown up with the game and they understand the game a bit more, whereas the girls haven't. You've got to get into their mind, to a belief, and structure before you can get them to do what you want rugby-wise. (Local 2)

As this would suggest, there is not only a difference in the approach to working with elite female athletes but also perceptions about the level of rugby mentality New Zealand female rugby athletes possess, compared to males. This leads to the assumption that a male's knowledge and understanding of rugby is innate and instinctive, where a female's is not as natural or evolved, therefore requiring additional time, resources, and support.

In addition, while the inclusion of rugby into the Olympics has provided opportunities for investment into the women's game, as previously discussed, viewpoints on resource allocation at the local level indicated that these were gender-skewed in favour of the men's team. In referencing the disparity of the players' contracts between male and female rugby sevens players, one athlete highlighted that the women's contracts are insufficient, wherein athletes are often required to find alternate means of economic support, "females don't get paid anywhere near the same amount as the males. Often females are forced to balance a job and playing sevens or study at the same time" (Athlete

1). Another athlete elaborated on this issue, making a distinction between the remuneration packages and that there are more opportunities for males to embark on the New Zealand sevens system, and noted:

Funding has been a major issue. For example, [in 2014] 40 men were contracted in the sevens scheme by the NZR, whereas there were only 21 women contracted. Keeping in mind that of that 21, 18 of the girls were contracted for two years. ... So at one point there was 26 of us after nationals which means out of the eight of us we were effectively competing for three positions. ... One thing that needs to change is that there needs to be more funding. ... The top tier in the women's [rugby] sevens is \$30,000 and the bottom tier is the training contracts which are worth \$4,500 as opposed to the men the minimum is \$30,000. ... The career pathways need to have equal status in terms of funding, the resources, the programme and the scouting opportunities. (Athlete 3)

The difference in support between the men's and women's teams was echoed when participants discussed travelling for tournaments, even when both New Zealand teams travel and play at the same event:

It's not as glamorous as you would think. The guys will stay in pretty flash hotels whereas [the women] stay in hotels that are in the middle of nowhere. ... Again that comes down to dollars. (Local 2)

We stay in totally different accommodation. Theirs' [the men's team] is a lot more upper class than ours. ... Their tournament has been established a lot longer and they've got a lot more sponsors. The profile of their game is huge which is why they are able to get bigger sponsors whereas ours, we're still new, so the sponsors at our level are quite minimal. (Athlete 5)

Indicating some of the inequalities, Athlete 5 rationalises the difference due to a well-developed men's sevens programme as opposed to the developing women's programme. Therefore, one might argue that support linked to status, establishment and, ultimately, legitimacy necessitates time to raise the global profile of the women's game.

This leads to another gender-related obstacle, which is the level of awareness in the global game. Recognising that women's rugby is financially disadvantaged and the difficulty

in gaining commercial and media recognition for women's team sports (IRB, 2012a), the IRB signals that the sport is undergoing a testing period in a new Olympic era. According to the IRB's *Rugby Sevens Plan 2011-2016*, the WSWS is one of the three stages to set the international competition model, which will drive and determine the level of performance. Along with the IRB's assertion of the challenges facing women's rugby, several participants within New Zealand organisations cited crowd support and sponsorship as challenges in the current World Series, as measured relative to the men's tournament series:

The guys play 10 tournaments and on average get between 15-30,000 people turning up per day, whereas we'll go to a tournament and we'll be lucky to get a crowd of 1000 people. (Local 2)

It's difficult with sponsorship because the game doesn't get a lot of profile. ... So exposure-wise it's not great. Therefore, the value for sponsors is difficult for them to justify and invest in. (Local 6)

Consequently, this draws attention back to the disproportionate level between genders in regards to exposure in the game. Therefore, the concern moving forward will be how to overcome this gender gap and increase the game's social acceptance with a global audience. One overwhelming method in changing these testing perceptions has been through raising the level of professional expectations.

### ***Professional Expectations***

During the early stages of the planning process it was stated in IRB reports that women's rugby lacked a specific pathway for athletes thus preventing the quality and the standard of the game reaching its potential (IRB, 2012a). Political and economic support by international federations, national governments and sporting organisations alike has

allowed the extent and amount of resources afforded to women's rugby to increase.<sup>21</sup> However, with this investment comes a greater demand of accountability, on the athletes' behalf, to perform well. This has, in turn, raised the level of professional expectations. Therefore, as women's rugby sevens continues to develop, globally and locally, with a major focus on the Olympics, it is understood that these expectations are very complex. According to a number of participants, they acknowledged the level of expectations, the level of professionalism and the effect these have on an athlete's life as major obstacles.

The IRB has added an extra event to the WSWS every year since its inception to date. Therefore, the onus for athletes to prepare, in terms of their training, time away travelling, and negotiating responsibilities for university studies and family commitments, becomes a challenge. Additionally, HPSNZ's emphasis on "winning on the world stage" (HPSNZ, n.d.-a), which is associated with financial support, has placed further emphasis on athletes to aspire towards winning gold at the 2016 Olympics. Several athletes commented on how this expectation is internally perceived in the New Zealand women's rugby sevens training environment, and noted:

With the 'high performance' label there's always going to be the expectation of our performance, the intensity that we train at and that we have to maintain that. (Athlete 1)

Females are expected to train like they're fulltime athletes. ... There are so many inequalities yet there's still that same expectation [for the women] to win. ... What comes with elite athletes is that you are expected to be the best. That's a challenge. (Athlete 3)

If we win then we'll be expected to do it again and again. The demand from everyone is that they're expecting gold. Nothing less. ... There is also a demand from ourselves and our coaches that we have to win gold if we want to carry on...which means we have to work ten times as hard. (Athlete 5)

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<sup>21</sup> Both Adidas and the American International Group (AIG) are the official sponsors of New Zealand's top rugby teams, including the All Blacks, the Black Ferns, and the men's and women's national rugby sevens teams ("New global sponsor...", 2012).

Along with the goal to “win a gold medal” (NZR, n.d.-b), these expectations point towards an intense pressure to not only perform but also tests the athlete’s mental and physical character, especially to adjust to a transforming professional environment.

Many of the athletes viewed this new Olympic-era for rugby sevens as an opportunity to make a career from the sport, yet the responsibility to attain and maintain a certain level of professionalism adds complexity to their life. One concern is how the New Zealand team environment is being governed. Due to the nature and significance of women’s rugby sevens becoming recognised as a developing professional sport in New Zealand, arguably linked to its inclusion in the Olympics, all of the women sevens athletes sign a collective agreement. According to one participant, athletes are required to fulfil certain obligations that:

come under the whole *Players Association Agreement* which is a contracted model that tells them how many days they’re allowed to work, how many assemble days...it’s like an employment contract....or collective agreement they [the athletes] will abide by. That’s all bound down and that’s what all the players are mindful of. (Local 2)

Whilst this agreement provides a sense of professionalism, with regards to team and athlete management, it also indicates the NZR’s level of control over their athletes. Considering this level of professionalism is still in its infancy within the New Zealand context, for female rugby players, this may take some athletes time to become accustomed to.

In addition, one notable concern raised by athletes was the issue surrounding the change that has occurred in their lives. A local participant mentioned that part of instilling a professional approach to the sport requires a change in mind-set especially in this environment:

Knowing we play a tournament on the Saturday-Sunday, you recover, you’re on a big flight home, you have two or three days off which is low key and then you’re back into it. And then you’ve got four or five weeks to start ramping up for the next tour.

It's just trying to change that mind-set that there are no days off. ... It's about trying to convert the girls' mind-set that they're Olympians not rugby players. (Local 2)

Yet despite the enhanced level of 'expected' professionalism, two athletes also expressed what this change actually meant for them, their time management, and what it means to be a professional rugby athlete:

The way that the sevens competition runs at an international level it's a huge sacrifice as far as your time commitment and that obviously plays a part in the rest of your life. ... The time away that affects relationships, work, study, and everything else. (Athlete 2)

It's kind of a lifestyle change. You're always constantly thinking about what you're eating, how you maintain your body [through injuries], and about how well you're training. It creates a different perspective on the way you live your life. (Athlete 5)

From these responses, it is clear that athletes have had to choose the life of a professional athlete, and make sacrifices, in order for them to progress their rugby career. The pressure to maintain such a lifestyle is constant and a psychological mind-set. Ultimately, this proffers how elite women's rugby sevens in New Zealand has now transformed into a business.

Whilst women's rugby sevens has experienced rapid growth and expansion from this Olympic association, the sport has encountered two distinct challenges. One historical barrier that still remains highly evident is the struggle for women and girls to gain equality in a male-dominant sport. Several participants noted the comparative differences between the men's and women's version of the game. In particular, these disparities were linked with the difficulty of working with females versus males, the allocation of resources and revenue, and the global (un)awareness of the women's game. The other challenging issue is dealing with the attitude and level of professional expectations that now accompanies the sport and how this has affected the athlete's life. Arguably, one goal for women's rugby sevens moving forward for both the IRB and NZR is minimising these barriers in the future. Understandably amongst the opportunities and challenges, there were numerous trade-

offs, dilemmas and future areas of concern also identified by participants, which are discussed further in the following section.

### ***Trade-offs and Dilemmas***

While the Olympic decision affords rugby sevens a guarantee to showcase the sport in 2016 and 2020, the certainty of the sport's inclusion in the Olympic programme beyond 2020 is yet to be decided. According to one global participant, "the decision would be made on the future for rugby sevens in the Olympic Games, in 2017" (Global 1). This participant elaborated that in order for the sport to prolong its future in the Olympics, the impetus for the IRB will be determined on the continuation of creating "a quality product" (Global 1). Likewise, from a local perspective, one participant claimed that the longevity of rugby sevens in the Olympics would be based on "how successful it is in Rio" (Athlete 3), and indicated that performance measures at the 2016 Olympics would benchmark the future of the sport in the Olympic Games. Yet, participants in the New Zealand context offered their reservations:

My concern would be if the IOC decides to drop sevens after the Olympics in 2020. Let's hope that in the next six or eight years that the game grows. And it's growing in leaps and bounds at the moment. ... If it only goes two cycles, will they [the NZR] continue to run a programme or will the IRB still want a women's [rugby] sevens tournament. Who knows? ... Let's hope the circuit will continue to grow. ... In the end it will come back to the dreaded dollar again. There will be girls that can no longer sacrifice their job, their life for an Olympic career. (Local 2)

Whether or not the IOC decides to keep sevens in the Olympics, ...if it doesn't what's the bet the game won't have that same exposure...the same funding? (Athlete 3)

What is interesting is the first comment that reflects the power relations of sport development and elite sport strategy at the global-local nexus. Here, the participant questioned the local rugby union's continued efforts to operate, administer and manage a women's programme in light of any decisions made at the global level by the IOC. The

second point made is in regards to sustained funding for women's rugby sevens; decisions, again, made at the global level affecting local level financial delegations. Overall, these responses show there remains a degree of uncertainty involving the permanence of rugby sevens in the Olympics within the rugby community. Whilst there is a short-term future, the determinacy of the sport to be decided in 2017 raises concerns as to how this will impact on other formats and strategic initiatives of the women's game.

### ***Rugby sevens versus rugby fifteens***

Given the "Women's Rugby World Cup [has traditionally been] the pinnacle of the Women's Game" (IRB, 2012a, p.12), rugby fifteens is still highly regarded by the IRB as important to the women's game. Even though rugby fifteens remains a high priority, a forecast presented in the *Rugby Sevens Plan* (IRB, 2010) has highlighted "fears that the Fifteens Game could be marginalised and diminished in value and importance" (p.12). In order to minimise this from occurring, the IRB have outlined one strategic goal in the *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016* that emphasises the need to "deliver an excellent Women's Rugby World Cup" in 2014 and to continually develop global competition models by ensuring regular competitions are scheduled after the World Cup (IRB, 2012a). Despite the impact of Olympic inclusion, this illustrates the IRB's intentions to not ignore the version of the sport that has long served the development of women's rugby.

Arguably, the promotion of rugby sevens with Olympic prestige has naturally prompted competition between the two rugby codes. One global participant noted that during the planning process, "one concern was that would this [Olympic inclusion] impact on the fifteen's game and whether this would kill the fifteen's game" (Global 2). A very real concern, this participant further remarked about the financial dividends of rugby fifteens and indicated that initially, "there's no money set aside for the Olympics. The [fifteens]

Rugby World Cup is how the IRB makes their money. So if the Olympics became the pinnacle event that would diminish the value of the fifteens” (Global 2). Similar concerns resonated with participants at the local level highlighting a difference in the allocation of financial resources and claimed that “women’s [rugby] sevens is getting an increase and fifteens isn’t” (Athlete 3). Therefore, this raises genuine dilemmas related to the global direction for rugby fifteens, the effect on the direction of the game in New Zealand, and the appeal of the fifteens format for athletes amidst the allure of an Olympic medal.

Whilst rugby sevens is working towards mandated pathways into elite sport and the Olympics, one dilemma the game is faced with is athlete eligibility and the degree of flexibility by national unions to restrict athletes to one code or enable them to play both.

Several participants stated:

That was the sole concern we had with sevens – was that it was going to create this ‘either or’ for players. ... You are going to have people deciding between sevens and fifteens to specialise. That’s the thing when it becomes more serious, is it going to create a huge divide between the two versions of the game. (Global 2)

The difficulty will be in trying to manage the players around playing sevens and fifteens. (Local 3)

The other issue is that our fifteens competition can be affected when the sevens players are taken out to go to a national sevens camp. So the question becomes are the two mutually exclusive? (Local 4)

Potentially this could set precedence towards national unions, provincial unions and athletes being forced to decide between which version of the game to devote their resources, support and focus. Ultimately, any decision of this magnitude has repercussions for the game that reverberate globally.

### ***The IRB, their investment, and the WSWS***

Unlike the men’s World Series, which is sponsored by HSBC, one future constraint that has emerged through this study is how the women’s competition has struggled to gain

an official sponsor to enhance the game's global exposure. That is, despite the extent of the continued investment and financial responsibility that comes with organising a series like the WSWS, the IRB have projected that the sport will not encounter economic benefits until after the 2016 Olympics. In large part the organisation asserts this will depend on the future of the extent of the IOC broadcast and any pending commercial programmes (IRB, 2012a). In addition, according to one participant "getting a sponsor tagged to our competition would help a lot of things...there is an opportunity for someone but whether they want to put the money into it is quite difficult" (Athlete 5). As the participant suggests, attracting an official sponsor would help to financially stabilise the women's international competition.

Ultimately, one of the key considerations evident from interviews with global, local and athlete participants was to incorporate both the men and women into the same World Series competition. Whilst the WSWS has begun to offer women an international competition pathway at the elite level to progress the women's game and gain more global exposure, however, as some participants noted the WSWS, arguably in its infancy, still has some shortcomings compared to the men's HSBC World Rugby Sevens Series. A range of participants offered the following suggestions:

we're not attracting the same audiences to the sevens' tournaments as the men do. ... I think the only way they can do that is to play at the same venue as the men's and tag along with the men's tournaments. Like they played together in Hong Kong, they played together in Dubai. ... They [the women] just haven't got enough of a following to go and do their own tournaments. (Global 2)

As long as they are treated equally in many respects and they have the same amount of television coverage and they're able to be showcased similarly with the way they're presented in the Games and when they're staged. (Local 5)

We [the athletes] feel that we should be playing alongside the men. We do in Dubai and we get a massive crowd were we play in front of heaps of people. Whereas when play in the likes of China, we probably have more at our [local] club games than what you would at an international tournament. (Athlete 5)

By replicating an identical playing environment similar to what would be expected at the Olympics, and as these responses would suggest, by combining both the men and the women together in the same international series it would enable an opportunity for the women's game to continually grow in the lead up to the 2016 Olympic Games.

### ***Go 4 Gold***

Without a doubt, the Go 4 Gold programme benefitted from the excitement of rugby sevens becoming an Olympic sport and the allure of a gold medal. The programme was developed by the NZR to attract athletes from other sports, identify a talent pool of over 1000 female athletes and select a national squad (Local 2). Yet, this also resulted in an issue concerning athlete participation. Circumstantially, many of the athletes who went through the Go 4 Gold programme but who were not selected for the national squad returned to their sport without further incentives to continue their participation in rugby sevens. One local participant argued that some of these athletes have "been involved in one manner or another. Others have given it a go and didn't continue on and they didn't make it. Some have, no doubt, kicked onto playing some fifteens rugby" (Local 6).

What must also be noted is that the Go 4 Gold programme has ceased to exist since its inception in 2012. In support of previous statements highlighted throughout this chapter, many local participants noted the effectiveness of the Go 4 Gold initiative in generating immediate hype and popularity in women's rugby sevens (e.g., attracting 1000 aspiring athletes, including those from a range of other sports, tried out with the hope of going to the Olympics). However, it appears that in relation recruitment post-2012 has been left up to provincial unions and their staff to identify the talent. According to one local participant, who asked about whether the go 4 Gold programme was still active, stated:

I know the guy [the Development officer] for Bay of Plenty went around the different regions and had some sessions with girls who wanted to give it a crack, and as a result he picked up a couple of players from that. (Local 3)

Clearly, the purpose of the Go 4 Gold was to only attract athletes and develop them before the WSWS. Indeed, questions need to be raised about the NZR's view of the effectiveness of the programme in an evaluative context. For example, what happened to the rest of the participants during the early stages of development? Where did they go? Did these athletes continue to play rugby sevens? How many athletes that participated in the Go 4 Gold programme have since competed at the National Rugby Sevens tournament? How many athletes from alternate (non-rugby playing) sports converted over to women's rugby?

### ***Summary***

This chapter has outlined numerous perspectives that give insight into the changing nature and profile of women's rugby sevens that has been prompted by the decision to include rugby sevens in the Olympic programme for 2016 and 2020. Much of the impending success or failure of rugby sevens in the future hinges on how it performs and is accepted at the 2016 Rio Olympics. While the opportunities may appear to outweigh the challenges, there are also trade-offs and dilemmas to consider at both the global and local level. From an IRB viewpoint, the success of the sport at the Olympics will have a ripple effect on other socio-cultural factors such as true globalisation of the women's version of a male-dominant sport; political-economic structures such as the legacy of new strategies and local programme reforms as well as sport promotion, sponsorship and economic returns; and organisational considerations of governance, leadership and relationships between organisations. As for the NZR perspective, team success is undoubtedly linked to future investment and resources, national participation rates, and whether rugby sevens is a sustainable commodity as the predominant version of the women's game. Finally, for an

athlete, transitioning from amateur to professional status is met with approval and dismay, and negotiating the elite sport environment is more complex than purely signing a contract.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

Following the Olympic decision in 2009, international and national rugby organisations have enhanced the global and local awareness of women's rugby. Appealing to new and wider audiences, the sport has experienced increased levels of organisational change and venture capital, as well as elements of gender balance that did not exist prior to Olympic inclusion. Through global and local processes there is a growing sense of professionalism in women's rugby sevens, especially in the New Zealand team, which relates to the culture of an economic investment into an elite sport environment. Such processes include strategic directives (e.g., the *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016* and *Women's Rugby: Strengthening the women's game to 2013*), the collaboration of various organisations (e.g., inter-organisational relationships), the (re)emergence of competition pathways (e.g., the WSWS and the National Sevens tournament), and specific initiatives designed for female sporting talent identification (e.g., Go 4 Gold). Whilst participants noted these processes have undoubtedly elevated and introduced the sport to new opportunities, this research has also highlighted the simultaneous existence of several challenges. Admittedly, many of the athlete participants in this study voiced concerns over the struggles to gain legitimacy and the demands and expectations bestowed on them as future Olympic athletes. Moreover, this thesis drew attention to various trade-offs linked to the expectations of the sport over the next five years, the impact rugby sevens has had on other versions of the game, and the dilemmas associated to the WSWS and the Go 4 Gold programme. Therefore, given the heightened interest in the sport and the enticement of Olympic success, both internationally and in New Zealand, this study offers a contextually robust investigation into

the changing nature and profile of women's rugby sevens at the global-local nexus in a new Olympic-era.

The aim of this final chapter is to discuss how key findings relate to existing and relevant literature. The discussion explores how Olympism and the Olympic inclusion has contributed to the development of the women's game. The ensuing discussion also highlights how the New Zealand and female kiwi rugby athletes ascribe to this elite professional environment. Subsequently, the chapter then acknowledges several limitations that were encountered during the early stages of data collection. Following this, the chapter offers alternate considerations for future research, which could extend different aspects of this study. Finally, the chapter offers some concluding remarks about the future of women's rugby sevens as the 2016 Rio Olympics are fast approaching.

Interviews with participants in this study revealed that one broad concept to emerge is the IRB's implicit intentions to embrace women's rugby sevens into their global rugby community, channelled by Olympism and the sport's inclusion in the Olympic programme. Also evident is the degree to which generating momentum for this rugby sevens-specific global community has influenced the New Zealand elite rugby context for female athletes. Aligning with globalisation, and thus the notion of one (rugby) social space (McGrew, 1992), a global rugby society is one "that has a global level of organisation but also regional, national and sub-national levels of organisation too" (Fulcher, 2000, p.541). Understandably, the IRB, which establishes a global agenda for rugby, but also its member unions are crucial organisations central to the process of localising global strategies for women's sevens (e.g., resources and investment directed towards women's sevens high performance), with their registered female participants and elite athletes ultimately becoming citizens of this global rugby society. In this regard, Roche's (2002) notion of universal citizenship is key. Roche

defines universal citizenship as “membership in the implicit and ideal global community” (p.168), and in this case it is highlighted by the IRB’s goals to develop female-specific opportunities beyond traditional rugby playing nations to extend its membership.

Heightened by the need to be perceived as a truly global sport and part of the Olympic programme, the idea of women’s rugby sevens, with its new links to the Olympic Movement and Olympism, as part of a global rugby society has strong parallels with McGrew’s (1992) characterisation of a global community. As McGrew claims, “a global community [is one] in which transnational social bonds and universally held notions of peace, justice, equality and freedom would define the conditions of human existence” (p.480). Indeed, the principles of universalism and the coexistence of human dignity, peace, morality and justice are at the root of Olympism and, therefore, “citizenship” of a global rugby community necessitates the adoption and demonstration of Olympism.

What is clear from interviews with participants is that the broadening or development of the IRB’s global community to embrace sevens and the wish to regard female rugby athletes as “citizens” is undoubtedly attributed to the sport gaining Olympic status. Supported by previous literature (Berry, 2007; Theberge, 1995, 2002; Villamon et al., 2004; Wieting & Lamoureux, 2001), this study indicates the popular perception that the global exposure of women’s rugby has been enhanced and afforded new opportunities due to its inclusion into the Olympic programme. Advancements in the number of females on the IRB council and committees, establishment of new organisational roles and inter-organisational relationships have enabled member unions, and affiliated unions who offer playing opportunities for females, and the female athletes themselves, a growing sense of acceptance and belonging to this global rugby village. However, almost paradoxical in nature, participants with organisational roles highlighted that demonstrating gender

equality to the IOC was essential to the IRB's bid for inclusion into the Olympics, yet athlete participants in this study testified that disparities between the men's and women's teams still existed. In the New Zealand context, participants claimed that female athletes do not receive equal pay or resources, more men are contracted to the national rugby sevens system than women, and the standard of travel and accommodation for the women's national rugby sevens team was of poorer quality than that of the men's, reinforcing the patriarchal nature of sport (e.g., Dunning, 1994; Sabo, 1985).

Another factor contributing to the notion of adopting women's rugby sevens into a global rugby community, as recognised by the participants, is the need to professionalise the sport across member unions (e.g., establish high performance plans and athlete pathways) and the level of professionalism expected from elite female athletes. In New Zealand, high performance sports receive (more and continued) support and resources when they win on the world stage (Sam, 2012), and participants in this study highlighted that they felt the pressure of playing to win. Donnelly (1996a) argues that in the past professionalism and Olympism have often been represented as two different sporting ideologies. However, he suggests that the two "have merged into a single dominant sport ideology" (p.27), and labels the articulation between professionalism and corporatised Olympic sport as prolympsim. Paraphrasing Donnelly, Kohe (2010) states, "prolympism captures the quest for high performance that seems to have become a global norm", and indicates that Donnelly envisioned it "as a professional model of sport driven by success and performance" (p.491). Complimentary to this, one distinct characteristic noted by many participants in the current study was the way in which the women's game was beginning to develop more of a professional approach, something that was unfamiliar to the sport prior to the decision to include rugby sevens in the Olympics. In particular, one participant

suggested a change in attitude where the emphasis was to raise the standards which would be worthy of the Olympics (Global 1); whereas, from a local perspective one participant highlighted the transition from rugby player to athlete was needed to play in the current New Zealand environment (Athlete 5). From these insights, it is evident that in New Zealand there has been a shift of women's rugby sevens from amateurism to professionalism, and is largely due to a variation in the meaning of excellence associated with high performance Olympic sport (Chatziefstathiou, 2011; Donnelly, 1996a, 1996b; Kidd, 1989; Toohey & Veal, 2007). In this prolympism model, excellence in sport no longer encourages mass participation and "being the best you can be" (Donnelly, 1996a, p.26), but rather "excellence is restricted to being better than everyone else" (Donnelly, 1996a, p.26), and showcased through the Olympics.

Participants in this study also raised issues regarding the lack of corporate sponsorship and broadcast time, which Donnelly (1996a) identifies as both consequences and determinants of prolympism and an emerging global sport monoculture. Donnelly (1996b) discusses the effect of globalisation on the appearance, or preference, of particular forms of sport that assimilate with a global sport monoculture that is characterised as an

Americanised style of sport [that] has become the international benchmark for corporate sport – "show-biz", spectacular, high-scoring, or record-setting superstar athletes; the ability to attract sponsors by providing desired audiences; and having the characteristics necessary for good television coverage. (p.246)

Part of what makes rugby sevens popular is its fast-paced nature and being a spectator friendly sport. Arguably, the men's game has had a longer time to develop into this global sport monoculture, with success in attracting sponsors, audiences, and television coverage. On the other hand, participants in this study admitted that the women's game currently lacks global exposure, an official sponsor for the WWSWS tournament and large crowds at

their competitions, and indicates some of the struggles affiliated with becoming a successful corporatised Olympic sport and underscores the general disregard towards female athletes playing a masculine sport.

As Donnelly (1996a) contends, the notion of a professional global sport monoculture and the prolympic model can result in “crisis”, which is “the promotion of an extremely limited definition of excellence and a single way of participating in sport based on the notion of beating an opponent rather than on the ideas of playing as well as one is able” (p.36), and “opportunity”, where “a great deal of ideological and cultural space for the development of alternative forms of sport” (p.37) is possible. Findings from this study suggest that both crisis and opportunity are evident. These elements in relation to female rugby sevens as citizens of a global rugby society warrant further discussion.

One crisis moment noted by participants is the uncertain future of the sport in the Olympic Games beyond 2020. The long-term fate of rugby sevens in the Olympics poses pressure on the IRB and member unions to continue their commitment to foster participation in women’s rugby sevens and the need to progress and develop talented athletes in national and international elite sport environments. Herein lies the crisis, as rugby sevens is now associated with the Olympics and a predefined version of sporting excellence epitomised by obtaining an Olympic gold medal, which remains a key goal for the NZR in 2015 (NRZ, 2015a). Undoubtedly, part of the scepticism behind the permanence of rugby sevens in the Olympic programme is the need for it to be considered a success in Rio 2016. In this regard, it is pivotal to acknowledge the criticism received by the IOC and the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) after the inclusion of women’s ice hockey in Nagano in 1998 (Theberge, 2002). As Theberge (2002) argued, the lopsided scores and the domination of the Canadian and American women’s teams in Nagano were detriments to

the way the media and spectators received the sport. A balanced competition is imperative for the success of and buy-in to a sporting contest (Smith & Stewart, 2010), and the IRB would be wise to ensure that the rugby sevens competition in Rio, particularly in the women's game given the struggles over the gendered nature of the sport (e.g., Clearly, 2000; Ezzell, 2009), represents parity and does not come under scrutiny for "the lack of support the sport receives and the need to improve conditions" (Theberge, 2002, p.297). One of the IRB's initiatives to create a viable rugby sevens product includes the establishment of the WSWS to provide an international competition structure and ensure "a highly competitive Olympic Games programme in Rio 2016" (IRB, 2012b), which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Another crisis moment acknowledged by participants is that Olympic status has attributed women's rugby sevens with a more desirable substance of sporting excellence (e.g., gold medal) over other versions of women's rugby (e.g., women's rugby fifteens). Whilst the IRB have recognised rugby fifteens as an integral part of women's rugby in their strategic plan (IRB, 2012a), many participants (global and local) admitted concerns they had on the promotion and prominence given to women's rugby sevens at the expense of the fifteen-a-side version. Participants identified that the emphasis on the global growth of women's rugby sevens, including resource allocation and support, has detracted the same level of investment from women's rugby fifteens and its Rugby World Cup, indicating a sense of retraction and neglect of the fifteens version in both the global and local context. In addition, participants also expressed their unease over the shift of female athletes from fifteens to sevens, allured by chance to win an Olympic gold medal, an association with the "prestige, achievement, honour, and competitiveness" of the Olympic Games (Davis, 2008, p.52), and participate in the "World Championship of World Championships" (Donnelly,

1996a, p.35). In the New Zealand context, this crisis issue of prioritising the sevens game is perhaps more noticeable in women's rugby than men's rugby. The All Blacks are New Zealand's most treasured sporting commodity (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002), and the NZR's most valuable rugby brand (Jackson et al., 2001). In the NZR's 2014 annual report, the number one strategic priority for 2015 is the All Blacks and a repeat of their 2011 Rugby World Cup success, followed by steps towards winning two Olympic gold medals in Rio for both the All Blacks sevens and women's rugby sevens teams (NZR, 2015a, p.25). Conversely, the Black Ferns' targeted goal in 2015 to win the series in Canada only features as a sub-initiative, part of the Community Rugby Strategy (NZR, 2015a, p.27). Moreover, recent initiatives related to the development of (e.g., Regional Women's Rugby Managers, Regional and National Women's Sevens Series) and recruitment for (e.g., Go 4 Gold programme) women's rugby in New Zealand serve to primarily benefit the sevens version of the game. Given the lack of interest by the NZR to develop women's rugby since the Black Ferns first of four consecutive Women's Rugby World Cup wins in 1998, one could speculate that the current initiatives have only occurred due to the sport's inclusion in the Olympics, surmising a prolympic focus for women's rugby sevens.

Returning to Donnelly's (1996a) contention of crisis and opportunity in the notion of a global sport monoculture, and as alluded to in the previous paragraph, the findings in this study revealed a range of positive opportunities created for women's rugby sevens (an alternative version of the fifteen-a-side game), such as increased funding, more specialised organisational structures and allocation of resources which hope to raise the level of play and expertise in women's rugby sevens (Carney et al., 2012). The expertise is supported by inter-organisational relationships (e.g., between the IRB and member unions such as the NZR; and between the NZR, their provincial unions, HPSNZ, NZOC, and the NZRPA). In the

New Zealand context, these partnerships have led to new developments with the employment of a full-time coach and management staff, and members of the current women's rugby sevens team offered access to strength and conditioning trainers, medical staff, and life coaches, and are contracted by the NZR. The ideology of prolympism in this sense is accentuated by a limited spatial/temporal circumstance, where the opportunity for development and growth of women's rugby sevens is culminated in the years leading up to Rio in 2016. Seizing such an opportunity together with the momentum of the Olympics to establish processes and professional positions, globally and locally, is commendable yet, as participants asserted, largely based on previous success of what has worked for the men's game as the women's game shows early signs of slowly developing into a professional sport (Donnelly, 1996; Howe, 2001; Hargreaves, 1999; Theberge, 2002).

Another moment of opportunity drawn from the results of this study was the introduction of career pathways in women's elite rugby. While other scholars have examined the New Zealand women's rugby context and the complexities of playing a non-professional sport (Chu et al., 2003), several participants indicated that the game has transitioned into a practicable profession. That is, participants suggested that the increased funding from the New Zealand government, essentially HPSNZ and the NZOC, and the sponsorship of Adidas and AIG has allowed current elite female rugby players to be paid as athletes and entice aspiring athletes to become full-time rugby sevens athletes (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013; Jackson et al., 2001; Jackson & Scherer, 2007). In their *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016*, the IRB identified that pathways and development structures are needed in order to help athletes reach their potential, which would ultimately "impact on the quality and standard of the sport at elite level" (IRB, 2012a, p.7). With this global strategic direction to progress, expand and elevate the sport, it has enabled more employment opportunities

for former athletes and female administrators to work in elite rugby organisations (e.g., as coaches and managers of women's rugby development) around the world. As Maguire (2008, p.445) suggests, "labour migration is an established feature of the sporting 'global village'", and is certainly implied as the IRB welcomes women's rugby sevens into the global rugby community.

One of the IRB's key strategic directives aims to increase their critical mass of female rugby citizens (e.g., the number of registered participants in existing and new member unions) in their global rugby community. As noted in Chapter 2, the IRB reported on its growth in women's rugby and indicated an increase of 270,000 participants between 2013 and 2014 (World Rugby, 2015). Over the same timeframe, the NZR, in its newly released *It's Our Game: Women's Rugby Strategy 2015-2021*, stated that 15,913 female rugby players were registered in 2013 which increased to 17,825 in 2014 (NZR, 2015b). This global-local expansion marks a similar transition experienced by women's elite ice hockey during the 1990's and early 2000s (Avery & Stevens, 1997; Etue & Williams, 1996; Tenebaum, 1999, 2009; Theberge, 1995, 2002). Indeed, beyond mentioning the growth in participation numbers, the findings in this thesis reinforce the notion that sports that gain Olympic inclusion serve as important sites for understanding how decisions made at the global level negotiate, even transform, local processes in the development of elite sport (Berry, 2007; Theberge, 1995, 2002; Villamon et al., 2004; Wieting & Lamoureux, 2001), and the various cultural transformations in the organisation, delivery, resourcing, and athletic experience needed to ensure success in the world's greatest sporting spectacle. One process in particular, was the continuum of sport development between global and national rugby organisations and their commitment to developing women's rugby (Eady, 1993, cited in Sotiriadou, et al., 2008). As evidenced by the participants' comments, the IRB, the NZR, and

HPSNZ channelled their ambitions for Olympic-era rugby to create competition pathways and increase participation numbers for females: features that would be perceived fundamental to the future success of rugby sevens in the Olympics (Global 1). This global-local relationship emphasises the influence of global sporting federations and their effect on the nature and the approach of national and local sporting interests (Houlihan, 2009; Manzenreiter, 2004).

Sport initiatives specific to the women's game have played an essential role in the elite sport development process, both globally and locally (Houlihan, 2009; Carney et al., 2012). According to participants from this study, one of the most influential initiatives to enable growth and enhance the sport's global awareness is the annual WSWS. As part of the IRB's major competition pathway for Olympic qualification, the WSWS has allowed the sport to reach new territories and capture new audiences in the lead up to 2016 (e.g., China and Brazil each host one stage of the series). Over its short history the WSWS has gradually grown in size with an additional location being included to the annual schedule (e.g., in the 2012-2013 season there were four locations, in the 2013-2014 season there were five locations, and in the 2014-2015 season there were six locations). Furthermore, the regular competition also provides various non-traditional rugby nations such as the Netherlands, Russia, Canada, and the USA, as well as top women's rugby playing nations such as Australia, England, and New Zealand with the opportunity to establish their own women's rugby sevens system in order to be competitive in the WSWS, which is consistent with previous literature (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Sam, 2012). Some of the New Zealand female rugby athletes remarked that not all rugby systems were the same, with some adopting a centralised national women's programme, where all athletes and coaches live and train in the same location, and, in the

case of the New Zealand women's rugby sevens system, establishing daily trainings with high performance experts and regular training camps. In New Zealand, the WSWS allows for the national squad and its support networks to: gauge the development of other nations; help identify and exploit strengths and weaknesses of other teams; gain familiarity with the physical and mental demands of competing; and adapt to different playing conditions, especially in Brazil where the Olympics will be held. However, these same competitive strategies are also afforded to other nations competing in the WSWS, and offer the opportunity for them to close the gap on the New Zealand team, which has asserted its early dominance with two WSWS titles.

Similar to the aims for the WSWS, the Go 4 Gold programme was a localised sport initiative to grow the women's game in New Zealand. By design, the Go 4 Gold initiative aimed to generate interest and participation to identify rugby talent and form an elite squad. In contrast to the findings from Carney et al. (2013), participants in this study valued the programme and identified that it helped to propel New Zealand's women's elite rugby development. Therefore, the Go 4 Gold programme played a role in positioning the New Zealand women's rugby sevens team and its female athletes not only as the prominent citizens in rugby's new global community, but it has also served to strengthen the provincial rugby community and leverage the sport's own national popularity. Moreover, with winning the Olympic gold medal as the primary focus, many participants alluded to the fact that the Go 4 Gold programme acted as a mechanism to introduce a high level of professional standards on and off the field to the athletes. Consistent with Donnelly (1996a) and the link to prolympism, the Go 4 Gold initiative demonstrates the NZR's encouragement of an exclusive form of excellence during the early stages of women's rugby development, and the expectation placed on the national women's team to win gold in this newly formed

Olympic sport, which is especially significant for a country that is signified by rugby prowess. As one participant noted, “the demand from everyone is that they’re expecting gold. Nothing less” (Athlete 5). Contributing to Donnelly’s (1996a) prolympic ideals, the Go 4 Gold initiative was the first local scheme to intensify the pressure on the New Zealand women’s team towards success in 2016.

The most intriguing discovery to emerge from the current study is the discussion and emphasis placed on the role of the Olympics, and its associated attributes (e.g., Olympism), as the key stimulus in the progression and development of women’s rugby sevens, globally and locally. In addition, the extent of the IRB’s efforts to embrace women’s sevens into its global rugby community, and ultimately achieve a global sport monoculture across genders, has evidenced both crises and opportunities; underscoring the significant research context for this study (predating the actual Olympic appearance of rugby sevens in 2016) in understanding and tracing the changing landscape of women’s rugby sevens in the current Olympic-era.

### ***Limitations***

This study has not been without some key limitations and constraints. In an attempt to gain perspectives from a range of key stakeholders, 13 interviews were conducted (two with a global perspective, six with a local perspective, and five female rugby athletes). From these participants, it is acknowledged that perspectives they provided in this investigation may be believed to be in favour of specific directives, however they still offer important viewpoints and reveal particular insights on the direction of women’s rugby sevens that are not available from more publicly circulated means (e.g., strategic documents or annual reports). Admittedly, gaining access to some key individuals at the local level (e.g., from the NZR) proved difficult, and an invitation to participate in the research was declined. While

these 'missing perspectives' may have provided some insights that have not necessarily been detailed here, in some respects it emphasises the clandestineness of the elite rugby environment in New Zealand. In the end, these missing perspectives were compensated for through the representation of six alternative (local) perspectives from individuals who were associated with provincial unions and were involved in certain capacities with the developmental process and initiatives (e.g., Go 4 Gold).

Another constraint to note was the method chosen to interview athletes one-on-one. Reflecting on the interview process, a different approach (e.g., a focus group) may have been more valuable in extracting conversation with the athletes about their experiences in the New Zealand elite rugby environment. As indicated by other scholars, focus groups provide various features that can benefit the data collection process. For instance, focus groups:

encourage a great variety of communication from participants - tapping into a wide range and form of understanding...and can encourage open conversation about embarrassing subjects and facilitate the expression of ideas and experiences that might be left underdeveloped in an interview. (Kitzinger, 1994, p.116)

present a more natural environment than that of the individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced others – just as they are in real life. (Kreuger & Casey, 2000, cited in Finch & Lewis, 2003, p.171)

Group participants take over some of the 'interviewing' role, and the researcher is at times more in the position of listening in. (Finch & Lewis, 2003, p.171)

In responding to each other, participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study. The language they [the participants] use, the emphasis they give and their general framework of understanding are all more clearly on display. (Finch, Lewis & Turley, 2013, p.213).

Moreover, a focus group approach may have been more beneficial for the researcher in terms of time and resource constraints and minimise any perceived gendered power relations, given that the interviewer was male.

### ***Future Research Considerations***

In light of the current momentum women's rugby sevens has encountered since its Olympic inclusion, and considering that this study presents a snapshot of the New Zealand context, further research could examine how other national rugby unions have utilised their own strategies and initiatives in preparation to the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. That is, there is potential for research to explore why Canada or the Netherlands have chosen to centralise their women's rugby programmes and how this has influenced their rankings in women's rugby sevens. Understanding how the Olympic decision has changed women's rugby in different national contexts would help to create a more global picture of how the modern Olympics (and Olympism) have influenced women's elite sport (Theberge, 1995, 2002).

Whilst the current study has centred its focus on the present context (e.g., from the 2009 decision until the present day), future research could consider the socio-cultural, political-economic and organisational landscape of women's rugby sevens following the 2016 Olympics in Rio. For instance, researchers could engage in a comparative analysis to investigate trends in participation, and critique how watching the sport in the Olympics may prompt more or less females to play rugby sevens in New Zealand and globally. As Aarebrot and Bakka (2003, cited in Rihoux & Ragin, 2009) noted, such a comparative technique helps to differentiate one phenomenon from others, in this case the changes pre- and post-Olympics, and whether this analysis supports previous literature that examines the aftereffects of the Olympics and the gender imbalance in elite sport (Theberge, 2002).

Finally, with the intent to remain in the current Olympic-era, researchers could additionally explore other sporting contexts that have been recently added to the Olympic programme. Considering New Zealander Lydia Ko's recent success in the Ladies Professional

Golf Association (LPGA),<sup>22</sup> together with golf's inclusion into the 2016 Rio Olympics, future research could adopt the current study's framework and explore the unique sporting context that may be apparent in New Zealand. Again, this type of examination would provide further substance to recent literature that relates to sports gaining Olympic recognition (e.g., Berry, 2007; Theberge, 1995, 2002; Villamon et al., 2004; Weiting & Lamoureux, 2001), and further our understanding of prolympism (Donnelly, 1996a, 1996b).

### ***Conclusions***

Since October 9, 2009, women's rugby sevens has experienced an extensive developmental process and appears to have made a transition from obscurity in elite sport into a global and local sporting phenomenon. Many in the global rugby community have largely credited the sport's evolution to the significance of gaining entry into the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and the magnitude that such an event represents. With the Olympics as the catalyst, the IRB have offered strategy to develop the game with its *Women's Rugby Plan 2011-2016* and the WSWS, an initiative that has been a major influence in the growth and appeal of the sport. In response, New Zealand and the NZR have clearly positioned themselves, in such a short space and time, with the emphasis to win the gold medal. Developmental programmes specific to female athletes, such as the Go 4 Gold, together with high performance resources and financial support, have enabled the NZR and their partnership with HPSNZ to prepare the women's national team for global competitions and incentivise true professional rugby Olympians. Undoubtedly, these global and local processes have contributed to raising the profile and growing women's rugby in New Zealand and worldwide.

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<sup>22</sup> At 17 years and 283 days old, Lydia Ko, a New Zealand professional golfer, became the youngest world number one in 2015 (Richens, 2015). The LPGA is the women's version of the men's Professional Golf Association (PGA) tour.

In conclusion, the unique contextual moment presented by the decision to include rugby sevens in the Olympics has contributed to our understanding of the IRB's and NZR's mandate to progress and develop women's rugby sevens. At the time of writing, the New Zealand women's rugby sevens team were crowned champions of the 2014-2015 WSWS Series. Yet, this was not without a number of intriguing results from the Amsterdam WSWS event, including: the USA's win over New Zealand (with a score of 34-5; Wise, 2015) and Canada winning their first Cup in a WSWS event. This presents several interesting questions (or areas of concern) leading into the Rio Olympics, regarding non-traditional rugby nations and New Zealand's dominance in the sport. In particular, to what extent can New Zealand continue to rest and rely on its historical rugby laurels while the rest of the world is hot on their heels in the hunt for an Olympic gold medal?

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## Appendix A

### Project Title: Going for Gold: New Zealand women's elite rugby sevens in a new Olympic-era

#### INFORMATION SHEET

##### Researcher:

Noel Tucker  
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School of Sport and Exercise  
Massey University (PN621)  
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Palmerston North 4442

##### Under the Supervision of:

Dr Sarah Gee  
School of Sport and Exercise

You have been invited to participate in a study that explores how global directives and decisions on raising the profile of women's rugby, and in particular women's sevens, have impacted on localised sport policy strategies and initiatives in the New Zealand context. Your participation in this study is voluntary; if you decide you do not wish to continue to participate in this study at any time there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind.

##### Project Background:

Given the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) announcement to include rugby sevens in the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics, this research aims to apply a conceptual framework that analyses how global directives and decisions on raising the profile of Women's Rugby Sevens have impacted on localised sport policy strategies and initiatives in the New Zealand context. Drawing from the literature on globalization and sport, sport mega events, and sport policy discourse, this research will seek to provide a contextually robust investigation that addresses the significance and the link between sport policy, elite rugby, and women at the global-local nexus.

This research utilises a qualitative approach that combines an analysis of strategic sport policy documents, and interviews with key individuals central to the development of sport policy and with the 'end users' in the sport policy initiatives. Findings from this research will reveal new and significant insights into the changing nature and profile of Women's Sevens at the global-local nexus.

##### Project Aims:

- To understand what the socio-cultural and political-economic factors that influence decision-making at the global and national level.
- To understand how sport policy initiatives are perceived by the 'end users'.

**Project Procedures:**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to volunteer your time to:

- i. Take part in a semi-structured interview (up to 1 hour). During this interview you will be asked to answer questions related to: (a) your role; (b) Olympic entry; and, (c) policy initiatives.

**Data Management:**

Interviews with participants will be recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher and participants will be sent a copy of the interview transcription for verification and approval.

The data collected (interviews) will be securely stored in such a way that only the researcher will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy.

Please note that any personal information will remain strictly anonymous and your confidentiality will be preserved at all times. Only the researcher involved in the project will have direct access to personal information. No information that can identify the participants individually will be disclosed or published.

**Participant's Rights:**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study at any time;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings, upon request, when it is concluded.

**Project Contact:**

If you have any questions concerning this study, please do not hesitate to call or email:

Noel Tucker

Dr Sarah Gee

(06) 356 9099 ext. 81568

[N.Tucker1@massey.ac.nz](mailto:N.Tucker1@massey.ac.nz)

[S.Gee@massey.ac.nz](mailto:S.Gee@massey.ac.nz)

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named above is responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research project that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher, please contact Professor John O'Neill, Director (Research Ethics), telephone 06 350 5249, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).