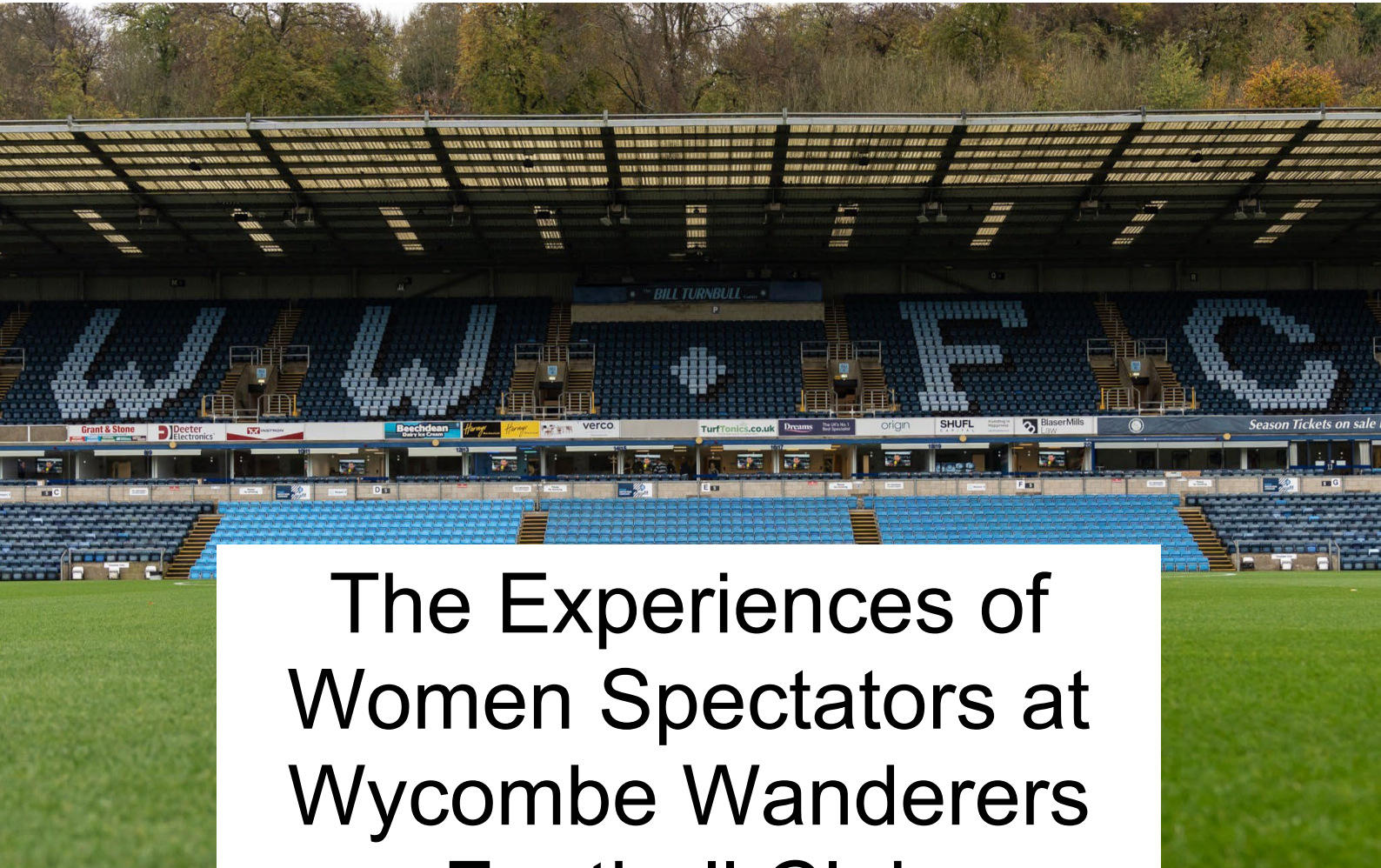




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The Experiences of Women Spectators at Wycombe Wanderers Football Club

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Introduction

While there have been a few studies about the highs and lows of women and girls' experiences of football fandom and stadium attendance, the majority have originated outside the UK (e.g. Chiweshe, 2014; Lenneis & Pfister, 2015). However, in 2021 the Football Supporters Association (FSA) conducted its second comprehensive survey to document the attitudes and experiences of UK women football spectators, building on an initial study in 2014. The research revealed a number of challenges for British football clubs, including issues of sexism and misogyny and inadequate facilities, although the findings were arguably overly-generalised and did not necessarily provide clear goals for individual clubs and stadium teams. As part of Wycombe Wanderers Football Club's (WWFC) commitment to positive spectator experiences for everyone, and as part of the All Quarters Inclusion Project, the club are keen to better understand the experiences of female spectators at Adams Park. The club aims to identify ways that they can act to improve this experience.

Methodology

The research was designed to generate a local data set which could be compared to the national data from the FSA, but also aimed to develop understanding of the barriers to women at WWFC. To achieve this the research uses mixed methods and was conducted in two stages:

Stage 1 – Survey of Women and Girls Spectators

An anonymous online questionnaire based in the FSA survey was distributed through email and club communications/media to people who attend a football match at Adams Park in March 2023. This was scheduled to coincide with International Women's Day and BNU sponsored Family Day with the expectation that this may increase the response rate. The responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and compared to the earlier FSA survey.



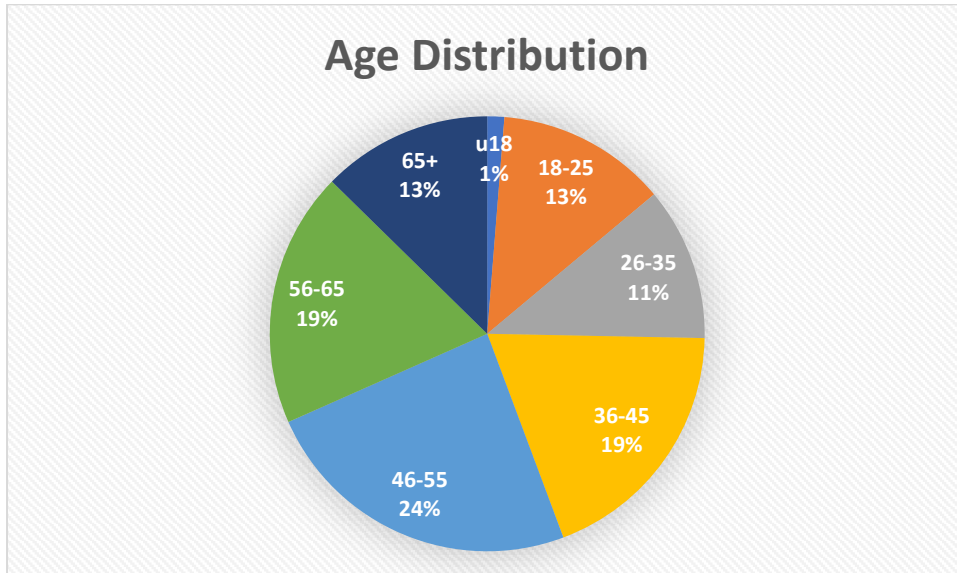
Stage 2 – Focus Group

A focus group was conducted with volunteers (from stage 1) to explore their experiences in more detail and gain qualitative data to support the development of proposals to improve their experience. The focus group consisted of five women (over 16 years) and was face to face at a matchday in Adams Park. The participants took part in a one-hour focus group and were invited to stay for hospitality during the game. The group discussion was recorded using video and transcribed in full using anonymised pseudonyms. The results were analysed thematically.

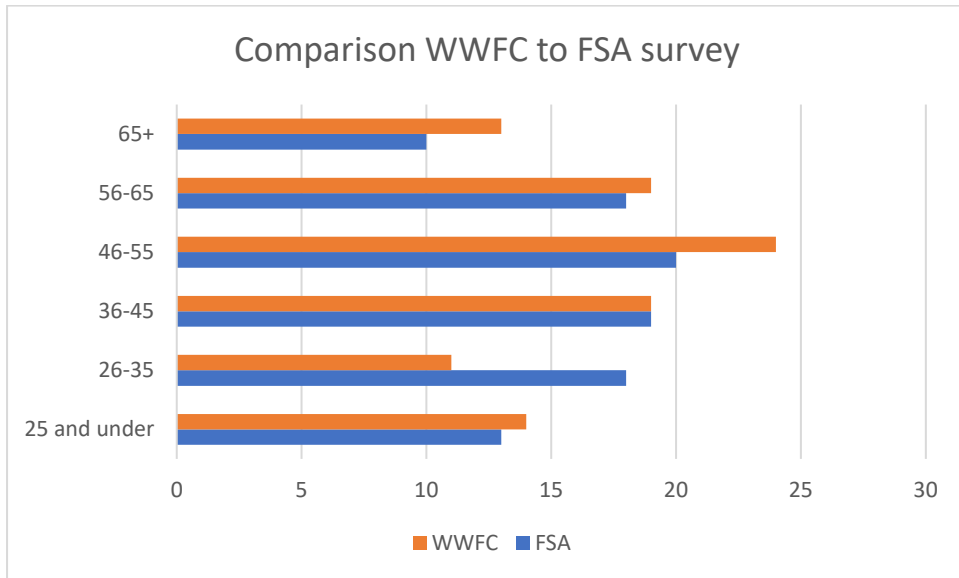
The Participants

As identified above this study was restricted to women who identified as supporters of WWFC.

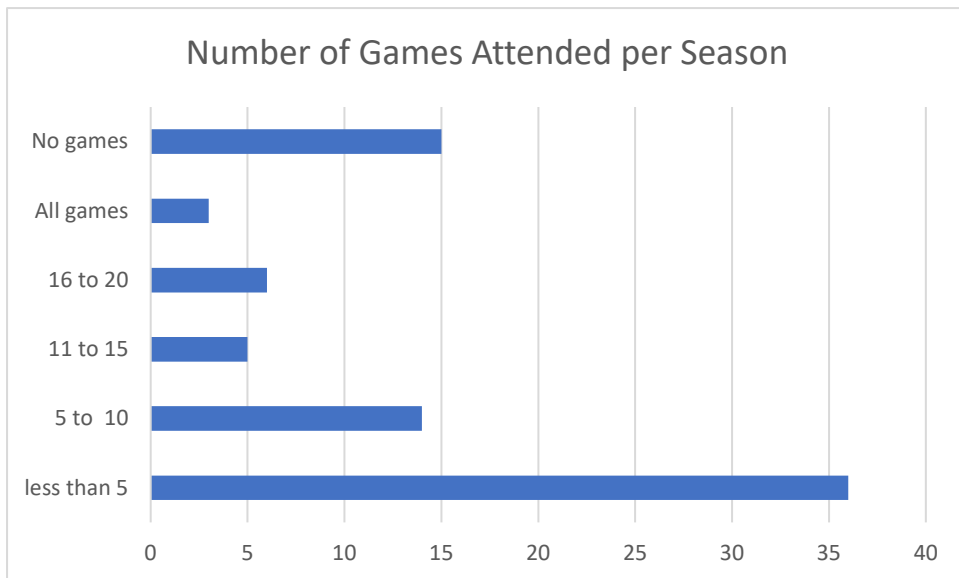
Approximately three quarters of the respondents to the questionnaire were over 35 years and only one focus group participant was under 35 years.



This profile was similar to that of the FSA 2021 study as shown below:



However the participation at matchday was different from the FSA, where of those who said they followed a club in the men’s game, 61% were season ticket holders, and 81% attended at least five games a season. In the WWFC sample most respondents (63%) attended less than 5 games each year.



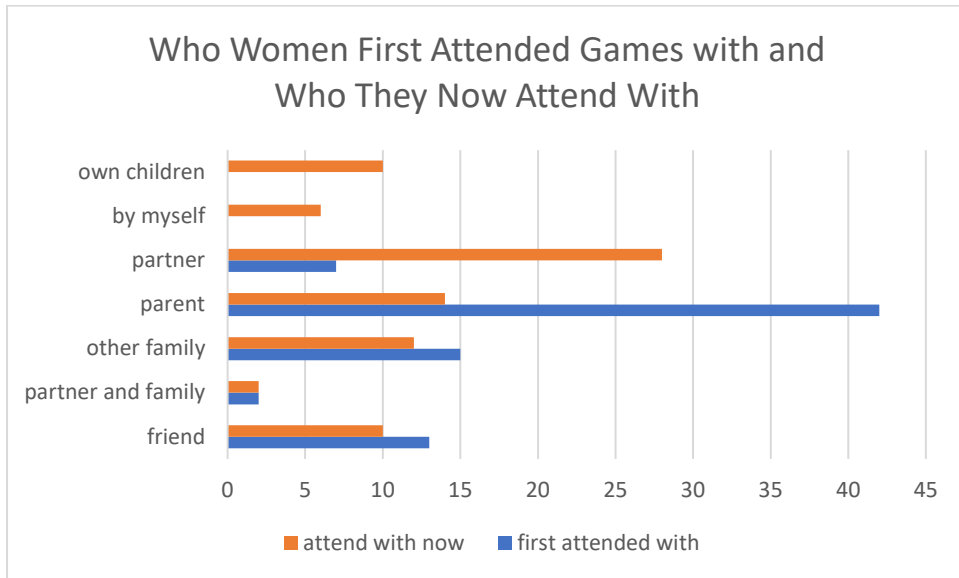
However, the fact that these women completed the survey may suggest that they retain an active interest in WWFC, and therefore, if some barriers could be addressed, more may attend regularly.



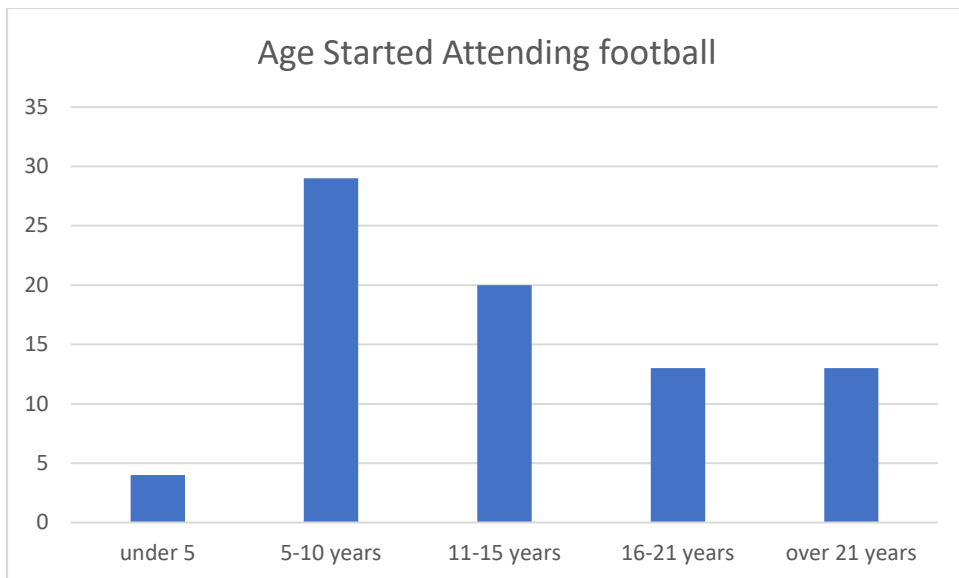
The Spectating Background of Participants

Like the FSA study, the majority of participants were introduced to football by the age of 15 years. The original 2014 FSA survey was interested in finding out how women got involved in following football - who they attended with, and how old they were when they became supporters. This study backs up the findings of the 2021 report conclusions that the biggest motivation for attendance at football is family - parents and other family members accounted for more than 70% of women's first match going experiences nationally and at WWFC. The idea that women are all being 'dragged along' by their partners is rejected by both studies. Less than one in 10 reported both nationally and at WWFC that they attended with their partners initially. However, having a shared interest is clearly an important factor in sustained participation, as 37% of WWFC women reported that they attend with their partners today. Therefore, at WWFC family remains a key factor to sustain participation with family group participation dominant, four out of the five focus group participants were attending as part of a family group. In contrast, six respondents including one focus group members reported attending alone. This indicates a positive outcome for WWFC that the environment feels safe for single women. Not surprisingly not all participants felt confident to attend alone:

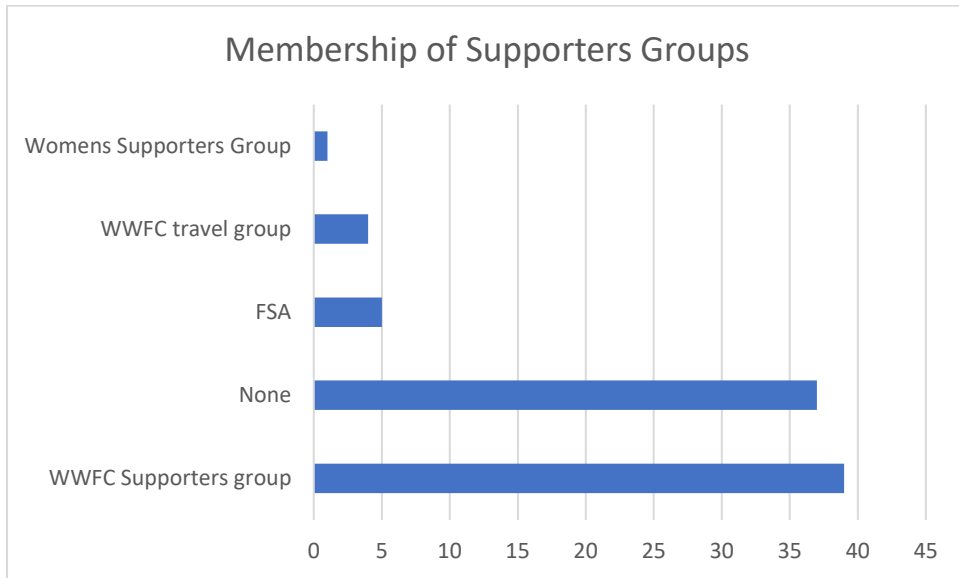
I started going to Wycombe with my dad over 40 years ago, I then didn't go for many years, now my son and grandsons have season tickets and I go as often as I can with them I love it, but I'm not sure that I would feel confident to go on my own



The early experiences of football spectating are essential to building long term women spectators, 67% had attended their first games by the age of 15. However, WWFC does continue to attract new women spectators after the age of 21 years (16%) unlike the national picture where only one in 10 coming to the game for the first time over the age of 21.



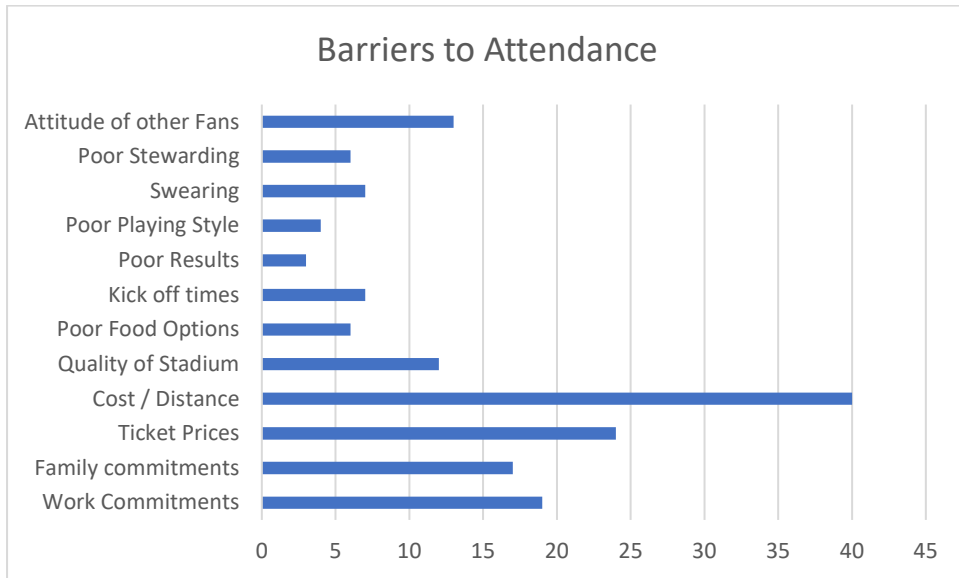
The survey also explored the involvement of women spectators in the club or national supporters' groups:



Half of the respondent were active members of the Club supporters' group, but less were involved in travel clubs or national organisations such as the FSA. This could be an opportunity for WWFC to explore and extend.

The Barriers to Spectating for Women

Both surveys explored barriers to participation. Nationally the biggest barriers to continued attendance at football matches were high ticket prices and the cost and distance of travel. This was similar at WWFC with approximately 80% mentioning cost as a key deterrent. However, while nationally the atmosphere and fan behaviour were a second factor with one in four cited abusive chants as most likely to discourage them from attending (FSA 2021), the result from women at WWFC indicated that other factors such as work, and family commitments was the second greatest barrier.



A further analysis of the expressed barriers for women at WWFC can be grouped thematically as follows:

External	Financial	Infrastructure / Venue	Football	Fans behaviour /atmosphere
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Work commitments•Family commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Ticket Prices•Cost / Distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Quality of the Stadium•Food Options•Poor stewarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Kick off times•Poor results•Poor playing style	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Swearing•attitude of fans

Financial Barriers

While WWFC works hard to keep the cost of attending games lower than big clubs', women reported ticket prices as a barrier. Indeed, one season ticket holder felt that a deduction could be made when she was unable to attend due to maternity:

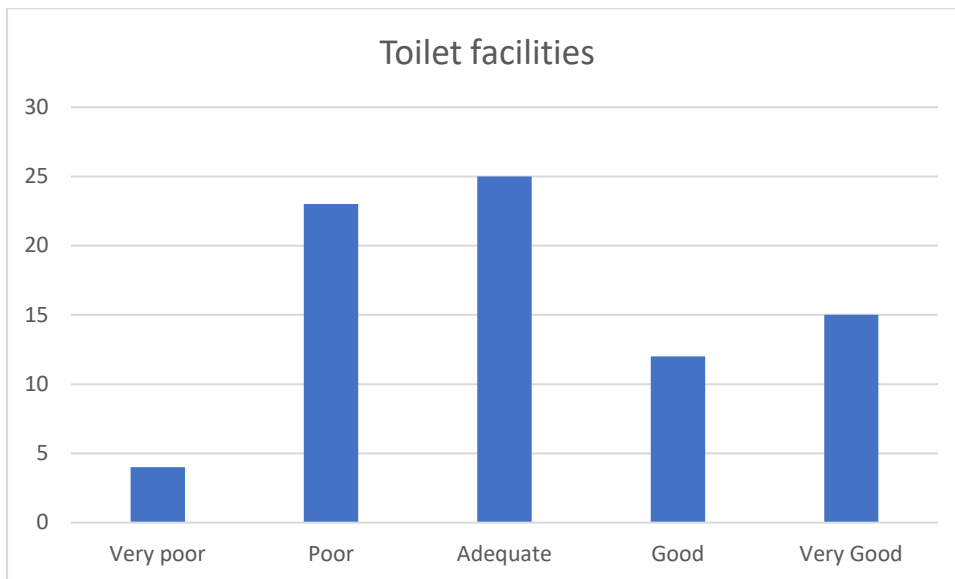


I am a season ticket holder but haven't attended a game since my son was born a year ago. Going through this process has made me realise that there is no support/ facilities or monetary suspension package available to new parents.

Concessions for these life events may encourage continued subscription in future years.

Infrastructure and Venue

This was a less significant aspect to women's participation. Indeed, in the focus group all participants spoke positively about the pre match 'village' and enjoyed the catering provided. However not unexpectedly there were concerns about the quality of toilet facilities at the ground. This was not evenly spread, and equal numbers also expressed good levels of satisfaction with the facilities.



Further investigation in the focus groups suggested that the satisfaction was linked to where they chose to watch the game from. For example, at the terrace end facilities were very poor:

The toilet facilities at the ground are poor, insufficient numbers, no hot water in the terrace toilets.



Women's toilets are always disgusting! There's always only 1 or 2 meaning you have to queue for ages meaning you miss some of the match! In my opinion the women's toilets is a big issue at every ground and more needs to be done to make women feel wanted there and included.

Perceptions of stewarding at the ground was mixed. One participant commented very positively about the presence of female staff and stewards at the stadium.

One thing I like about Adams Park is that you see lots of women in visible roles like stewards , volunteers etc everywhere and it always makes me feel more comfortable. I'd like to see the Chairgirls/female co-commentators on appear on Wanderers TV as often as possible!

Another reinforced the family friendly aspect of the club commending the stewards for defusing trouble quickly

I have always felt safe bringing young children to watch football matches at Adams Park. When away fans have posed potential danger, stewards and a police presence are quick to defuse the situation within the ground and surrounding areas.

From the responses both in the survey and focus group it is clear that women value the family friendly environment at WWFC. However, one suggested that space for very young children would increase her ability to see the whole match

It would be ideal if there was somewhere a child under 5 could be entertained whilst I still got to see the game as when our youngest gets bored we all have to leave

Fan Behaviour and Atmosphere

While many women appreciate the positive atmosphere at Adams Park:

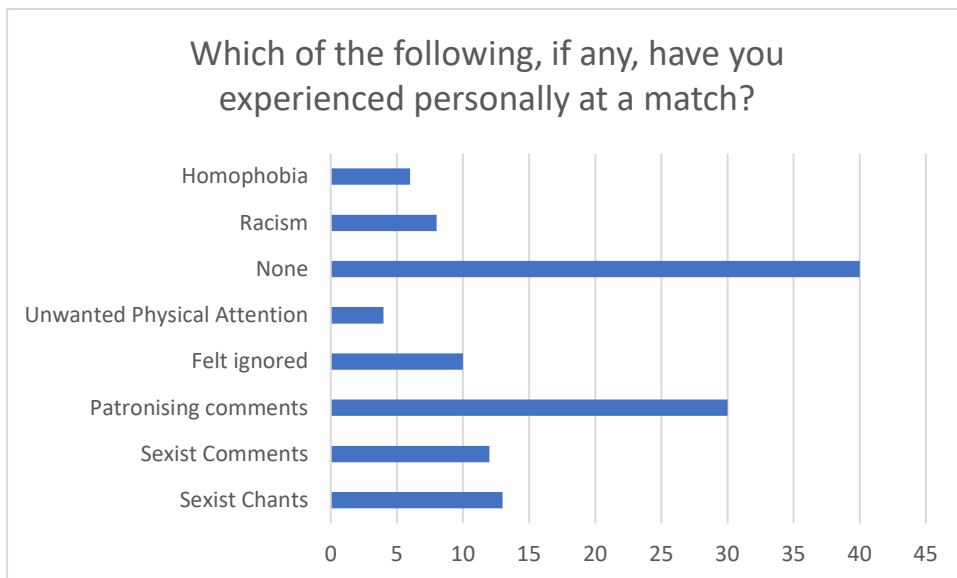
Always find the stewards and supporters friendly and accepting,

and over half of the respondents had never experienced poor behaviour and abuse, the graph below demonstrated that almost half had experienced negative behaviour. While this is significantly better



than the national situation where only a third of fans (37%) say they haven't experienced or witnessed any sexist behaviour when attending a match in the men's game, this is still a worrying factor for a local family club. Nationally there is an increase in negative experiences and to some extent this may reflect a cultural or age-related change:

As an older woman, 54, having been a wwfc supporter for 35years, I am not offended by series comments. Touching is different, obviously, but normal banter, no problem at all. I think young women are far too sensitive nowadays.



Both the FSA (2021) study and the WWFC research sought to understand the impact these experiences had on women supporters. While many older supporters were willing to shrug it off and ignore it, or claimed not to be bothered, a significant number reported that they found the experience made them either upset or angry. Some even felt that they should not attend.



It is very positive that many women felt happy to challenge negative behaviour, but it is not always easy particularly at away games:

As a female I feel undermined by some men who seem to feel it is a safe place to disrespect others around them. At an away game I challenged a fan next to me who was swearing he said it was his right and if I didn't like it not to come to football as that's what happens and I should just get on with it. He and his "friends" were aggressive and I and my family had to move away to feel safe and to watch the match. To avoid trouble my daughter didn't want me to raise this with the stewards for fear of retribution. It's an expensive day out and it was ruined by a male who felt he could threaten me with his behaviour. Would he have said that to a man in the same situation? I doubt it!

I have never witnessed this at a home game where the majority of fans we sit with are not those that come to football to channel their aggression which seems to happen when they come through the turnstiles.

Even for mature supporters at home games challenging entrenched behaviour can be difficult:

I am a die hard fan so reluctantly tolerate some of the things that make the match day experience challenging at times. I am fairly accepting of bad language but find the c word offensive and will challenge people standing near me if they use it. It is sometimes/often (?) used as a chant by a large group of fans so it is then more difficult/impossible to challenge. I really dislike the chant that is used by several teams that refers to Wycombe (in this case) being full of 'tits, fanny and



Wycombe'. Challenging a large number of people that are chanting this is impossible. I have never seen stewards, or the club, deal with that. It is a while since I have heard homophobic chanting, typically this would be directed towards an opposition player. Again it is difficult to challenge chants that many people are joining in with. Much of the chanting that I find offensive I think takes place in the terrace, which is where I watch the games from. I enjoy standing and the singing/chanting in support of the team which is liveliest on the terrace but it comes with having to tolerate inappropriate chants. I guess I could choose to move to another part of the stadium but don't want to do that.

The question of lack of choice is repeated frequently – women generally feel that they need to accept behaviour at the ground as it is a predominately male environment with a longstanding male culture.

I enjoy the match day experience but, as with all male dominated areas, have found the odd silly comment from men, often sexist and generally not understood by the men themselves. This is either directed at women who are in a 'male space' or more often is directed at the players but is overheard by young fans and can be hurtful to those who hear.

Given the importance of early experience of football in developing the next generation of WWFC fans, this may be an important point to consider. While the family area should provide a swearing free space for young fans this is not always the case:

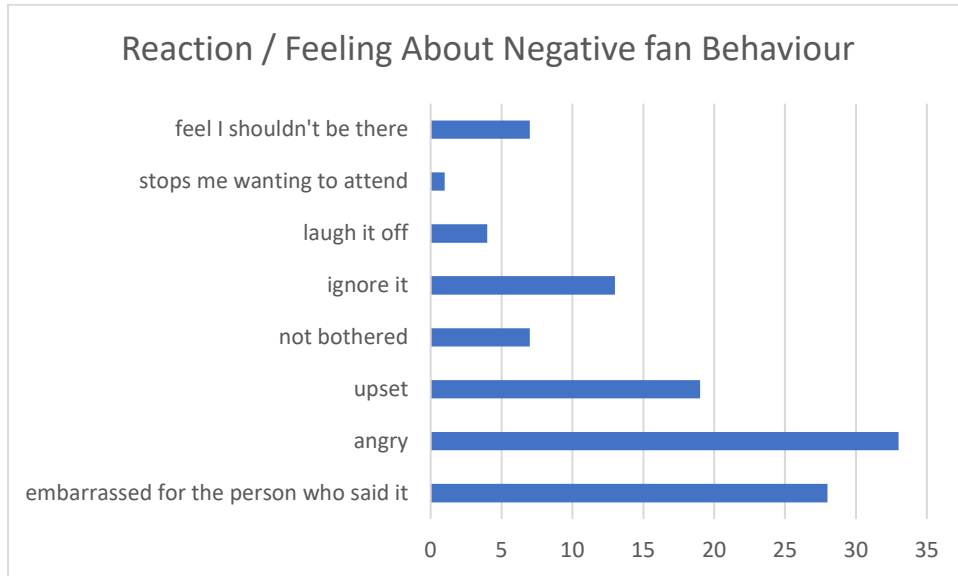
I think that it is a shame that in a family designated area there is still the odd few who feel the need to shout and swear particularly at the officials.

Another respondent pointed to the difficulty travelling with children to away games where no family provision exists.

I attend more away games now than home games due to where I live and would like there to be family areas for away fans. I'm concerned about the language and behaviour my son is exposed to sitting in a general stand and this puts me off going to more games.



Negative behaviour including swearing, sexism and physical contact reduced the enjoyment for many women:



Banter and Swearing

There was a lot of debate regarding the growth of poor behaviour and swearing in the focus group. Most women even if they ignore swearing do not enjoy it and feel that it reduces their enjoyment.

Swearing has increased massively on the terrace, in particular one word which I take great offence to. I have seen an increase in vaping too. Fans excessively celebrating goals has also meant being pushed and knocked. The above has affected my enjoyment of games and has resulted in moving from my regular spot

Women generally felt that they were not empowered to effectively change the environment, so either moved as in the case above or put up with it.

For me personally it's more the general environment of a football match that can be intimidating - lots of people in a small area, some drunk and unfortunately some under other influences all pushing and shoving during goal celebrations.

Sexism

The theme of sexism generated some interesting ideas related to the culture of men's football which several women expressed seems outdated in modern society:



Most of the comments are said to show off to their mates but just makes them look stupid in current world. Few years ago it was accepted but not so much now.

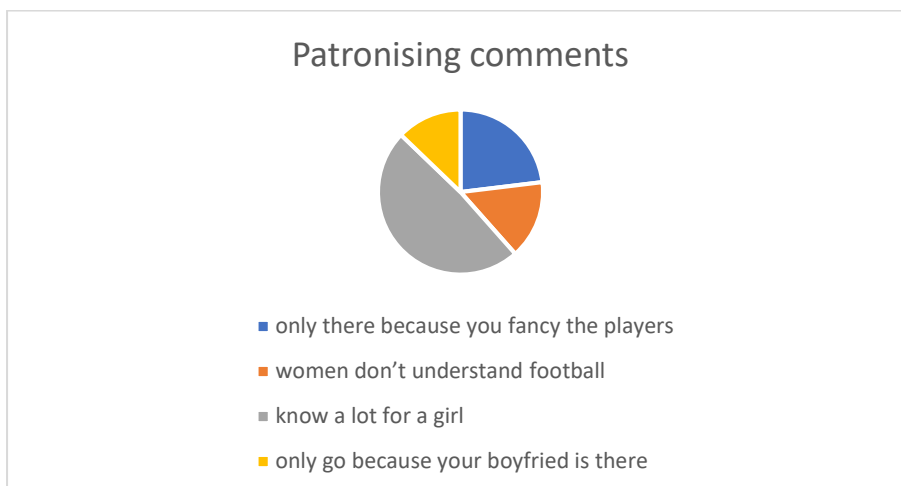
Another respondent to the survey suggested that the culture of sexism and male dominance was perpetuated at a club level. While this was not a widely expressed view, it may be worth considering how the club expresses and supports women in football

My biggest problem with my Club is that they do not support or invest in their Women's team. The Trust does, but not the Club owners. The sexism at WWFC comes from this level, not from the staff or fans. In terms of sexism, this has left a sour taste in my mouth more than anything related to matchday experience.

Another more positive response suggested that the club could go further by having female commentary and media articles.

I'd like to see the Chairgirls/female co-commentators on appear on Wanderers TV as often as possible!

This suggestion would go some way to address issues regarding the value of women's voices in football. Many respondents had negative experiences of being heard in the football fan environment with patronising assumption by other fans:





Another aspect of sexism was experienced away from the ground on social media forums. While not strictly part of the matchday experience, it does influence how confident women feel at the club generally:

I have been a supporter for 40+ years and have not come across sexism at a match, maybe because I tend to ignore a lot of what goes on around. I do not always hear things that are said but the biggest issue has been on fan forums. I have been abused and left the forum but again not really sure whether it was due to the issue I raised or the fact that as a woman I dared to go to a match and criticise people's behaviour. It is hard to sometimes decide whether someone's behaviour is sexism or ignorance.

WWFC needs to consider whether it is possible for forums to be a safe space for women supporters.

Physical Safety

Most of the respondents reporting feeling happy and safe at Adams Park , some were more unsure about safety at away grounds. Although the national survey suggested that unwanted physical contact was increasing, (20% in 2021) there was very little in the WWFC survey with only 5% of respondents having experienced this. One member of the focus group spoke with evident distress about her experience of unwanted physical contact and her lack of confidence to report this. Her concerns were relating to being believed by the stewards and an uncertainty over what would be done. Other women reported feeling somewhat intimidated by the physical environment

For me personally it's more the general environment of a football match that can be intimidating - lots of people in a small area, some drunk and unfortunately some under other influences all pushing and shoving during goal celebrations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research revealed some interesting evidence regarding women's experiences at Adams Park. Generally, WWFC has lower levels of negative behaviour and good levels of satisfaction. However,



the focus group and qualitative comments suggest that the now outdated male culture at games is no longer accepted or tolerated by women generally and in particular younger fans.

Returning to the themes related to barriers several actions can be suggested for three themes:

Financial	Infrastructure / Venue	Fans behaviour /atmosphere
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ticket Prices• Cost / Distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality of the Stadium• Food Options• Poor stewarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Swearing• attitude of fans

Financial

- Introduce family friendly concessions for season ticket holders
- Retain the discounted family day ticketing as cost is a significant barrier

Infrastructure

- Upgrade women's toilets throughout the ground to a consistent level
- Continue to employ female stewards as this build confidence
- Publish clear commitment to reported incidents

Fan Behaviour and Atmosphere

- Introduce clearer representation of women at all levels and activities in the club
- Ensure family areas are free from swearing
- Consider a strategy to make online forums equally safe
- Continue to build capacity in stewards to challenge established cultural behaviour that no longer reflect society.



References

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