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Mega-sport events, gender equity, and sport legacy planning: mobilizing performativity for deeper insights

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ABSTRACT

Mega-sporting event legacies have attracted academic interest and examination over the last two decades. The development of legacy plans has become central to sport event bidding, acting as a means of prioritizing outcomes by governing bodies and host governments. Through legacy plans, mega-sport events 'perform' as catalysts for change throughout various phases. Drawing on an appraisal of the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games official legacy documents and selected interviews, we consider the performative role of legacy in what counts as data, whose voices are included and how they are represented in official narratives. Using feminist theory, we analyse what is (un)stated and how discourses come to matter in legacy narratives. Our analysis found that legacy plans reinforced persistent issues of gender inequity through broad statements with few details. By mobilizing a feminist notion of performativity we identify important insights that can support a more sustainable, equitable and gender-responsive approach.

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Introduction

Mega-sport events including the Olympic and Paralympic Games are increasingly justified and predicated on their enduring positive legacies (Scheu, Preuss, and Könecke 2021). While the origins of the legacy concept generate intense debate in the academy, the idea gained credence in the Olympic Movement through the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the term being formally adopted in 'IOC self-framing documents' from 2002 (Tomlinson 2014, 139). Cities vying to host the 2012 Summer Olympic Games were the first to 'place legacy concerns at the heart of their bid' (Tomlinson 2014, 139), underscoring how recently 'legacy talk' (MacAloon 2008, 2069) was introduced and how rapidly it took hold in Olympic and Paralympic Games narratives. The International Olympic

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Committee (IOC) (2017) conceptualizes Olympic legacy as 'the result of a vision' which encompasses 'all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated' by Games hosting (2). Scholarship on mega-sport event legacies has adopted a more nuanced approach to understanding the concept, recognizing that the long-term impact of Games hosting may be positive *and/or* negative across environmental, social and economic domains (Preuss 2019; Scheu, Preuss, and Könecke 2021). Amongst the potential legacies 'on offer', the IOC (2017), host nation politicians, and scholars (i.e. Thomson, Toohey, and Darcy 2021) alike have focused on the production of legacies for sport, particularly the potential to increase sport participation within the host community (which we hereafter refer to as 'sport legacies').

However, the (beneficial) legacies of mega-sport events are not experienced evenly (i.e. Chen et al. 2024; Liang et al. 2024), with powerful stakeholders (i.e. political elites, the IOC, and economically significant players in the host community) tending to 'dominate [legacy] discourses and actions' which in turn serve to suppress traditionally silenced/ignored voices (Byers, Hayday, and Pappous 2020, 179). Chen et al. (2024) argued that events which fail to deliver legacy initiatives for communities and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds represent 'a missed opportunity' to catalyse meaningful social change (1244). However, ensuring an equitable distribution of mega-sport event benefits represents an 'intricate challenge' (Liang et al. 2024, 17), given the complex and at times 'problematic' processes (and power imbalances) underpinning legacy planning and delivery (Byers, Hayday, and Pappous 2020, 179). While legacy scholarship continues to grow (Thomson et al. 2019), there is a need for different theorisations on how to overcome persistent inequities in legacy distribution, with Byers, Hayday, and Pappous (2020) arguing that 'diverse perspectives give rise to larger knowledge pools' which can in turn inform planners on 'how to construct legacies that a wider range of stakeholders can identify with' (179).

In this article, our main purpose is to examine the question of gender equity in legacy planning processes. In doing so, we move away from a liberal feminist approach that emphasizes women and girls' access to and inclusion in the planning process, and towards a post-structural approach that understands gender as performative and that can account for intersectionality (Dashper and Finkel 2021). As Berbary (2018) writes, post-structural feminism 'departs from Humanism to engage in constant questioning of its tenants specifically in relation to the notions of and functions of gender/gender identities' (13). This article emerges from considerable frustration about the limited ways in which the 2032 Games host government consulted those it was purporting to be targeting and the limiting ways in which gender was understood in legacy planning.

Questions as to what legacy is (or can be), who creates it (and who is not involved), and how legacy is created have been explored from numerous perspectives (Byers, Hayday, and Pappous 2020; Thomson, Toohey, and Darcy 2021; Wasser et al. 2022). Recently the question of gender in regard to mega-sport events is being asked more frequently. Dashper's (2021) work, in particular, interrogates the persistent gender inequalities in mega-sport events, drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender. In this article, we extend this approach to explore sport legacy *planning* and how, where, why and when gender matters. We mobilize the feminist notion of performativity (Butler 1990) to explore how women and girls are represented and written into sport participation legacy plans for the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games (hereafter the 2032 Games).

Legacy and legitimacy

In recent years there has been an effort to 'overhaul' Games bidding and hosting processes (IOC n.d.). Following recommendations set out in Olympic Agenda 2020 (IOC 2015; Thorpe and Wheaton 2019), the IOC (2018) produced the 'New Norm', which it described as a series of reforms that reimagine how the Olympic Games are delivered. These efforts were spurred by decreasing interest in Games hosting and feature 'intensified use of legacy' to fortify and legitimize the social and commercial case for the Games (VanWynsberghe, Derom, and Pentifallo Gadd 2021, 444).

The New Norm included a redesign of the Games candidature (bid) process, which now features a 'non-committal' and exploratory Dialogue stage between a prospective host city and the IOC, followed by a more targeted Candidature phase (IOC 2018, 4). A core objective of the IOC's (2017) legacy strategy is to encourage legacy to be embedded through the whole of the Games lifecycle, with legacy planning ideally commencing 'as early as the Dialogue Stage' (11). Discussions around legacy objectives, governance plans and funding commitments are encouraged from the outset; well before the rights to hold the Games are awarded (IOC 2017). The IOC (2017) offers to 'help cities to develop a legacy vision that will enhance the value proposition of the Olympic Games' and recognizes that these early Dialogue/Candidature stages are 'the key moment' for cities to 'engage with stakeholders and define clear priorities' related to legacy (22).

While stakeholder engagement is promoted, the IOC (2017) does not prescribe how it should take place in context of bidding cities. Questions therefore emerge about who is (and should be) involved in the process of legacy planning (and who is not), how legacy ambitions are identified and how decisions about resourcing and delivery are made. Further, while the concept of legacy is now central to Olympic and Paralympic Games bidding processes, the delivery of legacy promises is handled predominately by a collection of stakeholders in the hosting nation and/or city. In the work of these Games stakeholders, platitudes about the size, scale and boldness of legacy plans prevail, often accompanied by claims to be 'for everyone' and with ambitions to 'transform' or 'change' all areas of society, particularly sport participation and wellbeing (for example, State of Queensland 2023). There is a gap between the rhetoric and reality of mega-sport event legacies and an enduring relationship between these events and social exclusion (Horne 2016). Anticipated legacies are often articulated in political narratives, but how these legacies are to be achieved and funded is left largely unspecified. With these tensions in mind, this article asks how feminist knowledges and approaches can inform the ways legacy planning is conducted to achieve better sport participation outcomes for women, girls, and non-binary people. We include non-binary people in order to stretch beyond the binary (man-woman) and begin to bring attention to gender diversity in sport participation legacy planning.

Theoretical approach

As bell hooks (2000) writes, feminism 'is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression' (viii). In sport, feminist work has paved the way for increased participation and dramatic changes to the status of women and girls, and more recently, gender diverse people. Yet, despite much success and progress, 'sport remains an institution

dominated by men and rife with discriminatory practices' (Adams 2016, 115). In the context of mega-sport event legacies, this is a 'known unknown' (Horne 2007, 86–91). It is known that mega-sport events prioritize consumption-based development as opposed to social redistribution, and that poor and less powerful communities are often displaced (Horne 2007). It is known that men dominate sport institutions, particularly those at national and global levels (Burton 2015). However, we know less about *how* the gendered nature of sports translates into mega-sport event planning processes, including how the process might privilege particular voices and perspectives and exclude others. Judith Butler's post-structural feminist theory of performativity is a useful framing device to help explore how progressive rhetoric in this space is rarely translated into material realities, especially for women and girls.

The concept of performativity was introduced in the 1990s with Austin's (2013) extrapolation of performativity utterances. Performative utterances are when we *do* things with words: we make pronouncements that reverberate and produce meaning, rather than simply reflect some kind of unmediated world (Austin 2013). With the emergence of post-structuralist theory, both Butler and Derrida further reconceptualized performativity as a constitutive process through which the self, others, objects and experiences become intelligible through sociohistorical discourse (Hall 1999; Jackson 2004). Butler's feminist approach has significantly influenced how gender norms and identities have been understood in academic scholarship and public life, as 'an *expectation* that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipated' (Butler 1999, xiv, italics added). Gender expectations repeated and repeated, eventually 'congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990, 33). For example, common insults to which cis gender women are subjected in sport – 'she throws like a girl', 'get back in the kitchen' or 'women's sport is boring to watch' – repeat an expectation about feminized bodies as inferior to masculine bodies, which are deemed to be 'naturally' better in terms of biology and sport skill. For gender-diverse athletes (trans, nonbinary, intersex) who disrupt the gender binary and heterosexual matrix that underpins sport, biological essentialism is weaponized through public attacks and institutional exclusion by sport governing bodies (Butler 2024).

Butler (1990) writes: 'Within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance … gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be' (24). Performativity does not assume that language simply 'represents' gendered ways of being (such as debates over 'political correctness'); rather, all gendered phenomenon (identities, moving bodies, hormones, brains, emotions, relations, etc.) come to be known through discourse. This does not mean the experience of gendered embodiment in sport is constituted *only* through discourse; rather, the conceptual point is that gendered statements profoundly shape cultural and individual assumptions about what sporting bodies can(not) do and how they are (de)valued, as well as how agency is configured within the inequitable power relations of patriarchal societies. Importantly for this article, mega-sport event legacy documents and accompanying utterances may enact gendered assumptions that make women's sporting capacities intelligible in particular ways. That is, who and what it is possible to be for girls, women and non-binary people in sport. This may be articulated in terms of the (in)visibility of issues, as well as individual, organizational and societal explanations of power and systemic change (what institutions are implicated, how transparent the processes are and the accountability for action).

In Butler's conceptualization of performativity, a distinction is made between illocutionary and perlocutionary performativities, and how what is intended and communicated does not fit or resonate with how these pronouncements are received or interpreted. Illocutionary performativities, or acts, Butler (1997) argues, demonstrate how language has agency through the repetition of speech that produced effects in the moment and over time: 'We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also a thing that we do' (8).

Applying performativity to the context of mega-sport event legacy planning brings to the fore temporal dimensions (Dickson and Darcy 2021). In Australia, the official pronouncement of a 'Green and Gold horizon' projects the timeline between the present and the 2032 Games, where key actors (legacy committee, state, local and federal governments, and lobbying organizations) deploy future oriented language to conjure up powerful and transformative effects – anticipating the arrival and impact of the mega-sport spectacle. This imagined, nationalistic sporting future builds upon perlocutionary acts, or the use of language throughout the pre-bid, dialogue and post-award periods that initiates a set of consequences where a range of actors are brought together, ready to 'pull the trigger', to say 'go'. We see this in the IOC's articulation that builds on the work of Preuss (2019): 'Olympic legacy is the result of a vision. It encompasses all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated by the hosting of the Olympic Games/sport events for people, cities/territories and the Olympic Movement' (IOC 2017, 2). However, there is also the risk of performative failure, which occurs when performatives (what is spoken, communicated, embodied) are not received in the expected way – when discourse fails to shape or determine reality. As Butler (2010, 147–148) suggests:

> A politician may claim that a 'new day has arrived' but that new day only has a chance of arriving if people take up the utterance and endeavour to make it happen. The utterance alone does not bring about the day.

Performativity is useful for understanding how power relations play out through language in mega-sport event legacy planning, and the power of language to shape futures and produce potentially harmful effects (often unintentionally and paradoxically given the empowering claims about sport) (Butler 1997). By privileging certain 'voices' over others in claims and universalizing statements, as well as silences, that shape decision-making, ways of organizing, forms of capital and sources of authority, legacy planning produces effects with far-reaching consequences. In the name of leaving a useful legacy, there is significant evidence across many mega-sport events of deleterious outcomes for the vulnerable and marginalized including displacement, unaffordable housing and inequitable public spending on health, all of which disproportionally impact women (Prado 2023). Drawing on the theory of performativity helps focus attention on the assumptions and organizing principles that underpin mega-sport events, opening up more critical conversations involving different 'voices'.

Feminist thought on performativity has enabled activists, scholars, advocates and reformers for women's rights and LGBTQIA+ rights to interrogate what can create meaningful change and difference for those on the outside. Rather than simply focus on who is left out or marginalized, a performative lens also helps understand what is possible in the mega-sport event space and how legacy planning processes might enable and prioritize

gender equity. For example, Richards (2018) draws on performativity to examine the 'This Girl Can' campaign delivered by Sport England as a way of increasing sport participation for girls and women. The campaign, featuring powerful imagery and sound garnered the attention of a global audience. However, as Richards (2018) demonstrates, despite significant online engagement, this did not result in significant shifts in physical activity or engagement levels. Caudwell (2003), one of the first to bring a performative lens to sport and gender, notes the possibilities for resistance to feminist norms through the concept.

A feminist lens enables us to understand the ways in which performativity operates through the 'optimisation' of existing structures of power through organized social norms. Hence, in this article, our focus is on documents and perspectives generated by government bodies (at various levels). As Butler (2010) notes, 'performativity starts to describe a set of processes that produce ontological effects, that is, that work to bring into being certain kinds of realities or … that lead to certain kinds of *socially binding consequences*' (147, italics added). For our study, we explore how the 2032 Games legacy vision and planning processes operate to either reinforce or challenge gender inequities. A cursory review of mega-sport event board, organizing committee and senior management roles exposes the gender imbalance that exists in favour of senior males (Henry and White 2004; Matthews and Piggott 2021).

This section has outlined the feminist theory of performativity and argued for its utility for understanding sport legacy planning processes. Although feminist theories (including performativity) have been increasingly deployed within sport participation, and even within sport mega-event literature, to date they have not been incorporated into analyses of the legacy planning process. In the following section we outline the research context that this article is written within, and the methods and analysis employed. We then present our analysis over three phases in the development of sport legacies for the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games: the pre-bid phase, the dialogue phase, and the post-bid/post-announcement phase.

Methodology

Research context

In this article, we draw on the example of the upcoming 2032 Games which will be held in Queensland, Australia. A local organizing committee (or 'OCOG') will plan the 2032 Games, while an independent statutory body (the Games Venue and Legacy Delivery Authority) was formed by the Queensland Government to oversee (investment in) both the promised Games infrastructure and the legacy programme (Grace 2024) (since renamed Games Independent Infrastructure and Coordination Authority). In addition, a state government appointed Legacy Committee will provide expertise and advice on legacy planning and implementation (Palaszczuk and Hinchliffe 2022). The 2032 Games is the focus of a larger three-year project aimed at increasing sport and physical activity for girls, women and non-binary people with an explicit focus on two issues: those who are disengaged from sport; and how the upcoming 2032 Games support participation as a core legacy.

With our broader focus on sport participation for disengaged women, girls and non-binary people, our team consists of a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary expertise

and lived experiences. Collectively, we have shared experiences of violence, disability, chronic ill health, mental health challenges, sexism, homophobia, and racism. As we have written elsewhere, 'we have formed, to use the words of Barad (in Juelskjær and Schwennesen 2012, 16, when describing the research community they have helped to flourish), "a collaborative alliance with traction"' (Pavlidis, Fullagar, and O'Brien 2025). This collaborative alliance is needed to do the hard work of critique, and the imaginative, creative work of envisioning better ways forward.

Methods

The data-collection and analysis processes were guided by our theoretical approach, employing a feminist conception of performativity to mega-sport event legacy planning processes. Drawing on Butler's theory of performativity, we were guided by Baxter's (2008) Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA). As a framework, FPDA brings together two forms of analysis, simultaneously. Firstly, a micro-analytical denotative analysis and, secondly, a diachronic connotative analysis (Baxter 2008). The denotative analysis 'aims to describe the verbal and non-verbal interactions of a social group in close, but basically non-evaluative detail', while the connotative analysis, 'aims to interpret the data according to the ways in which speakers are constantly jockeying for positions of power according to competing and intertextualised discourses' (Baxter 2008, 249). That is, in our research we looked at *what* was written (including what was omitted) and *where*, *why and when* it was written (or spoken) to focus on the wider power relations at play. We translated this approach into two main methods: document analysis and interviews.

For document analysis, using Google™, we searched for documents focused on the legacy of the 2032 Games across three crucial time periods: pre-bid vision formation stage; dialogue and candidature stage; and post-award stage. The search strategy involved visiting 'known' sources – that is, the Council of Mayors SEQ [South East Queensland] website, the Queensland Cabinet and Ministerial Directory (Media Releases) and IOC 'Brisbane 2032'. In addition, we conducted a general Google™ search which generated additional documentation in the form of media coverage, grey literature, official reports, ministerial statements or announcements and official news/promotional releases. The research team met to discuss the 89 documents collected and to determine relevance to the research aims. In total, 71 documents were analysed and are available to review.[1] All documents used were publicly available and did not require ethical approval for collection.

In addition to the collation and analysis of documents, we conducted a small number of interviews in the post-award phase, which were approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were conducted via email by the first author. A call for participants was put out on LinkedIn for anyone who had attended a Brisbane 2032 legacy forum hosted by the Queensland Government in Brisbane in 2023. This legacy forum was promoted as a gathering of '500 of Australia's best, brightest and boldest minds' and represented a key event for shaping the later released legacy plan. It was also a politically charged and highly mediated event. Four participants came forward to be interviewed and their contributions are central to the connotative analysis. That is, without this research providing a time and space (where and when)

for these participants to speak, they would not have been able to publicly (but anonymously) express their views in relation to the legacy planning process (why). Interview questions asked about their experience of attending the forum, how well they felt they could contribute to discussions and other insights they would like to share. None of the interviewees worked for government, and they represented specific South-East Queensland community and sport interests. These were independent people who were attending not as employees of organizations, but rather as invited individuals with an interest in the Games. While only a small number, these four interviews provided in-depth insight into experiences of the forum from the perspective of those who worked *outside* of government and the highly restricted ability of public servants to provide feedback on the processes undertaken. A small number of participants is not unusual considering the high profile of many people who were attending the event and the inability of many of those people to speak about or against the event (for example if they are employed by Government). Hence, these four interviews, when combined with document analysis, provided access to unique perspectives and voices that were not reported on in any of the official celebratory narratives of the legacy forum. It should also be noted that several people spoke to us 'off the record' about their experiences of the event but did not agree to participate in the research regardless of our commitment to anonymity and privacy. To protect the anonymity of the four interviewees who did volunteer in this politically charged environment, we have provided them with a pseudonym.

Initial data analysis was conducted by Authors 1, 2 and 3. Each author focused on one temporal dimension (pre-bid, during dialogue, and post-award) and sent this initial written work to the others for consideration. This process was repeated several times after feedback and comments from other team members. The findings presented in the next section are structured temporarily, from pre-bid vision formation stage; to dialogue and candidature stage; and post-award stage.

Findings: the pre-bid, dialogue, and post-award stage

The pre-bid: performativity in motion

The pre-bid analysis includes data drawn from three key documents, all published by the Council of Mayors SEQ. This is an authoritative source which has connotations of truth and knowledge of what is best for the region. These documents were produced over a period of four years, from 2016 to 2019. Considering temporality is crucial from a performativity perspective as ideas can become fixed at an early stage. The first document was published in 2016 (Council of Mayors SEQ 2016) and was the pre-feasibility analysis of a potential bid for the *2028* Games. It started by expressing a concern for the growing population of the region and the need to keep up with housing and transport infrastructure. In this document, hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games is presented as a solution to this population problem, while also presenting it as a problem to be solved. Importantly, sport was nowhere to be found in this pre-feasibility study.

Three years later, the 2019 feasibility study published by the Council of Mayors is the first substantial document that begins to discuss the legacy of the Games. The document begins with the infrastructure and service challenges facing South-East Queensland due to its rapid growth. Primarily (and firstly), the feasibility of hosting the Games is related

to its potential to be 'a catalyst to expedite infrastructure delivery, boost the economy and significantly raise the region's profile on the international stage' (Council of Mayors SEQ 2019). This quote is telling, given that the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games had just ended and had faced criticisms about lost legacy opportunities (e.g. Carlini et al. 2020).

In the 2019 document, the feasibility of the 2032 Games is also justified by the IOC's New Norm reforms, which provide increased flexibility in how hosts design their Games with a focus on sustainability. It is argued that the New Norm reforms allow bidding countries to better utilize existing venues or build venues that can be used by the community afterwards.

The third (and largest) document analysed for the pre-bid stage (also produced by the Council of Mayors SEQ 2019) was over 250 pages. The opening page stated:

> The report considers two essential questions in determining feasibility. The first is 'can' the Games be staged in SEQ? The second, and perhaps more important question is 'should' CoMSEQ propose the hosting of an Olympic Games? (2019, 1)

The word 'legacy' is mentioned 303 times in the document – a significantly higher number than in the previous documents – and primarily tied directly to sustainability, highlighting the known importance of that critical emphasis in IOC and wider global debates. This repetitive citational practice is performative in terms of its intention to produce the appearance 'of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990, 33).

The 2019 document also represents a shift from an emphasis on infrastructure and transport towards sport and wellbeing in terms of how the host is articulating a vision for the 2032 Games. The document comments on the opportunities for increased facility access and programs to promote sport participation and a 'healthy lifestyle' (Council of Mayors SEQ 2019, 126), and states that by hosting the Games in Australia on 'home turf', this will 'reinforce effective role models and Australian Sporting Heritage' (2019, 126). Indoor sport facilities were specifically mentioned as an area of deficit, meaning that the feasibility of the Games would rely on more facilities being built. This was framed as 'an opportunity to enhance the availability of recreational space for youth and grass roots level sport, as well as developing venues capable of hosting more significant sporting events' (2019, 122), citing a Commonwealth Games indoor facility as an example of the benefits possible.

While discussion of sporting facility developments was evident, the section on benefits in relation to sport participation was quite short and drew on data from the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Games (2019, 256) to evidence the case for Games-related participation legacies. The document quoted data from London 2012 on increases in adults participating in at least one 30-minute session of moderate intensity 'sport' (which included walking), during the Games year (2012) and increases in participation across various demographic groups, including lower socio-economic groups, people who were not working, Black and minority ethnic groups, and those with disability. Finally, in this document increases in children's participation were also noted as a benefit of the 2012 London Games.

However, while sport participation legacies were mentioned, at the pre-bid stage a clear, dominant economic logic prevailed in discussions of legacy:

> there is a strong case to leverage the Games to accelerate and catalyse investment in long-term development to meet regional growth requirements … However, none of these options are feasible without essential transport infrastructure investment (legacy driven) or legacy

> accommodation investment (for initial short-term use as Olympic Village and Media Village(s)). These require specifically legacy developments and are not considered as Games investments although timing effects may be attributable to the Games. (2019, 232)

At this stage, Games capital (dollars) and legacy developments are positioned as separate investments. This is despite it also being acknowledged that legacies will be attributable to the Games. Already, at this feasibility stage, certain kinds of imagined realities are being articulated, leading to certain kinds of socially binding outcomes (Butler 2010) which are primarily economic. This envisioned future reality is not so much focused on sport as it is on economic development through transport infrastructure, construction and housing – sectors that have significantly higher male workforces.

Performativity in dialogue

After the Council of Mayors SEQ secured support for a 2032 bid from the Queensland government, Australian federal government and Australian Olympic Committee, the next task was to seek hosting rights from the IOC. Hence, the IOC and its core stakeholders were the target audience of many of the documents published during Brisbane's dialogue stage. In particular, the Brisbane 2032 bid team prepared and submitted a response to the IOC's 'Future Host Questionnaire' (AOC 2021; Council of Mayors SEQ 2023). In this document, legacy was central to the official discourse, but statements were largely grand and vague. Aspirational proposals for increased physical activity participation, improved community health and wellbeing, and gender-related outcomes were noted, but at this time they were not substantiated by firm plans. The Brisbane bid team (AOC 2021) envisioned that the Games would leave a legacy of a 'more active society, enhancing health and wellbeing and reducing health care burden', as well as supporting 'the evolution of a diverse yet integrated society with opportunity for all' through sport (2021, 6). The legacy programme would 'promote diversity, gender equality and human rights', and would work to 'mitigate potential marginalization of socially excluded groups' (2021, 6). Overall, the Games were set to operate as a 'galvanizing force to achieve an integrated national health and wellbeing programme' (2021, 7).

As these quotes suggest, during the dialogue stage there was a noticeable shift in legacy discourse: initial narratives about transport and infrastructure benefits broadened to incorporate a raft of statements about the transformational potential of the Games from a social perspective, including advancing gender equity in sport. Technical information (related to feasibility) was supplemented with commentary on the Games vision and preliminary legacy plans, for the primary target audience of IOC decision-makers. The questionnaire pronounced:

> Our vision is shaped by people, places, connectivity and sustainability and informed by our long-term development plans with the compelling opportunities created by hosting the world's most important event. We have prioritised the most pressing needs of our community and defined how the Games can increase the impact of delivery programmes in these areas. The alignment of the Games with national, state and regional plans is foundational. (AOC 2021, 4)

The Questionnaire response emphasized Brisbane's 'legacy-led approach' and the city's intention to harness the Games as 'agents for positive change' over 20 years (10 years prior to and 10 years post the Games) (AOC 2021, 5). In a small way, gender equity

became visible through statements contained in the Questionnaire response (Council of Mayors SEQ 2023), which noted ambitions to 'promote diversity, gender equality, and human rights' and to 'increase social cohesion through sport' (2021, 6). In response, the IOC (2021a) celebrated the Brisbane bid as 'a passion-driven offer from a sports-loving nation'. IOC President Thomas Bach (in IOC 2021a) opined: 'The Brisbane 2032 Olympic project shows how forward-thinking leaders recognize the power of sport as a way to achieve lasting legacies for their communities'. Here, the 2032 Games is envisaged through nationalistic language that positions legacy as a public benefit created by political sport representatives (Australian Olympic Committee) who pursue an imagined future that is naturally positive and transformative. The bidding prospectus unfolds through a familiar advanced liberal promise of potential benefits, realized investment and generation of national pride, shifting attention from the problems of ongoing colonization, racism, wealth disparity, gender inequity, ableism and heteronormativity, with one of the ongoing challenges being much lower levels of physical activity and sport participation of 'outsiders'.

At the bid stage, statements about the transformational potential of hosting the 2032 Games in Brisbane seek to convince the IOC of Brisbane's suitability as a host, as well as persuading citizens, whose support (or absence of opposition, given that they have no say) is instrumental in the bidding process (Matheson and Zimbalist 2021). During this dialogue stage, notions of gender equity included gender diversity, gender-based violence prevention, and human rights (AOC 2021). The transformative potential of the Games took precedence over infrastructure and facility upgrades. Regardless, Brisbane was awarded hosting rights for the 2032 Games in July 2021 (Council of Mayors SEQ 2021; IOC 2021b).

Post-award stage: accelerated performativity

In contrast to the documents presented at pre-bid stage and during dialogue, the post-bid communication flow comprises a much longer period (from July 2021 to the time of writing). The focus of our analysis here is on the development of the legacy strategy – Elevate 2042 (State of Queensland 2023) – and specifically the legacy forum held in Brisbane in 2023 that was one of the most public and publicized consultation processes during this stage. The legacy forum was proposed as an opportunity to hear from 'everyone' (although only 500 people were invited), with then Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk stating that, 'The Legacy process is one way we are ensuring as many people as possible can share their ideas and share the pride of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity' (Queensland Government 2023). The consultations were facilitated by the Urbis consulting firm for the Queensland State Government.

The development of the legacy plan was facilitated by two consultation strategies: a large-scale survey; and the legacy forum. Enacting a politics of 'social good' through the creation of staged public dialogue, the survey and legacy forum invited new ideas that would inform the legacy plan for the 2032 Games. Yet, these same tools also anticipated the outcomes of the consultation process: 'a more physically active and healthy community'; 'enhanced pathways for elite athletes, including First Nations and people with disability'; 'improved equity within and between our regions'; 'increased inclusion and accessibility for vulnerable and marginalized communities'; and '*stronger gender*

equity, increasing the attraction, enablement and retention of women in sport' (State of Queensland 2023, 8, italics added). As has been written about extensively, the nature of participation in these sorts of processes is often tokenistic, working from a restricted set of options that reduce complexity and encourage 'support' without the accompanying complex process of deliberation so crucial to meaningful ownership of decisions (McGillivray and Turner 2017).

Butler has examined the performativity of how 'the economy' is deployed in public discourse, 'which only becomes singular and monolithic by virtue of the convergence of certain kinds of processes and practices that produce the *effect* of the knowable and unified economy' (Butler 2010, 147). In a similar way, in the context of the 2032 Games, the complexity of community ideas and diverse voices asked to participate is concentrated into a legacy plan that creates 'knowable effects' through converging processes and practices that are prefigured (Gond et al. 2016, 12). While the consultation process emphasized progressive rhetorical ambitions, the experience of participants at the legacy forum told a different story. One legacy forum participant, Ruth (pseudonym), commented on her experience:

> There was not enough time, nor a good enough open-ended process to provide feedback. I felt we were all there as window dressing to what had already been decided.
>
> We had two short opportunities to discuss and review preselected priorities. We had to choose beforehand which themed session we wanted to attend in one case and then decide on a limited number [of] priorities for our group. This session had facilitators at each table recording things.
>
> The last opportunity was at our table and again we had to choose a limited number of priorities. From memory, we did this via a menti survey [an online tool to collect responses from a live audience reliant on smart phones, tablets or laptops that raises questions of the digital divide with marginalized and unable to afford such technology].
>
> There were too many speakers in the first half of the day with no opportunities for discussion or feedback.
>
> We were steered to provide feedback on preselected priorities.

Mega-sporting events often provide civic bodies and governments with an opportunity to catalyse a symbolic politics of engagement (Black 2007). These 'knowable effects' are often produced through the creation of a tension that arises from the invitation to citizens to contribute to a democratic community engagement process that is highly regulated by its form and the questions posed in consultations and surveys. Yet, the outcomes of these invitations to consult and contribute are configured by the parameters of the dominant agenda of the state actors.

Another participant, Jenny, confirmed the restricted parameters of consultation and their effects. Jenny was heavily involved in a Queensland sport that, like many, was hoping for investment for infrastructure to grow their sport. She was invited to the legacy forum by the Queensland government – she describes her experience as horrendous and says she felt 'gaslit'. The invitees were divided into four groups, and she was put in the 'infrastructure' group. Apart from her and another coach in this team, the others were members of parliament and their 'sidekicks' (Jenny's words), who she said were scrolling their phones the whole meeting. Jenny's indignation was felt in relation to lack of transparency in the process. People were invited to share 'hopes and dreams' via the survey, but these were evidently pre-sorted, so the most palatable ideas (to

government) were presented for discussion at the forum. Jenny wanted to be part of a constructive process, yet there were no meaningful opportunities for her to express her ideas and experiences.

James, whose background was in strategic communications, was also invited to the legacy forum. He volunteered to share his thoughts:

> My overall experience of being at the Legacy 2032 event in March 2023 was that the 'optics' were more important than bringing together a range of perspectives from stakeholders … The break-out groups were large and few people actually had their voice heard. It's no doubt a challenge facilitating a session with so many different people, but it was clear the 'loudest' voices in the room were going to win out. In that kind of environment, certain people will be heard and others won't. I query which voices we didn't hear throughout the sessions – either because they didn't have a chance to speak, or they weren't represented there among the participants.

Beyond the consultation process, we found that gender equity language was only superficially enshrined in the actual legacy plan. In the Elevate 2042 plan, gender is mentioned only four times. Two of these are simply as part of a list of the Sustainable Development Goals, which are included near the end of the document (Goal 5: Gender Equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). In the other two mentions of gender, it is deployed simply as a variable to be considered among a range of other variables. For example, in Focus Area 1: An active and healthy lifestyle, the summary includes this statement:

> As we embark on the Games legacy journey, nearly three-quarters of Australian adults do not meet the guidelines for physical activity and activity levels vary according to age, *gender*, health and levels of disadvantage. (State of Queensland 2023, 24, italics in original)

Similarly, in Focus Area 2: A high-performance sports system, under a heading stating, 'Ensuring equitable high-performance pathways', the document notes:

> We are committed to high performance environments which are safe, inclusive, enable growth and support difference, allowing athletes to thrive in sport and in life. We acknowledge the journey is harder for some athletes because of their background, location, gender, age or disability and we are committed to ensuring greater inclusivity in the high-performance system. (State of Queensland 2023, 25)

In the rest of the document, 'female' is mentioned twice – both times in Focus Area 3: Equity in sports participation, which states:

> There is also a need to set more ambitious targets and support the attraction or retention of female athletes and officials at all levels. Supporting the pipeline of female coaches, officials and volunteers will also be important to addressing the current disparities in participation rates. (State of Queensland 2023, 26)

Women are mentioned five times, twice in the end matter (definition of inclusion, and in the Sustainable Development Goals list as with the mention of gender) and three times in the document proper. This includes in a list of 'identified cohorts' that are 'equity targets' for increased sport participation (State of Queensland 2023, 23), and in a sentence in Focus Area 3: Equity in sports participation, which states:

> To achieve a culture and a reality of sport for all means we must think hard about how to build the sustained participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, seniors, women, LGBTIQA+ communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and those who are living in rural and remote areas. (State of Queensland 2023, 26)

The final mention of women is on page 47, where the increased participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, *women* and culturally and linguistically diverse communities is offered an indicator of a more inclusive and resilient future economy.

It is possible both the legacy forum (with its 500 participants) and survey (with stated 14,000 responses) in this post-award stage engaged diverse genders (we assume beyond 'male' and 'female'), however the questions asked and the ways that findings were reported make it unclear how and why gender might be important in achieving meaningful sport participation legacies. It is undisputed that there are gendered power relations in sport that curtail the full involvement of girls, women and non-binary people (including trans women and girls); things like sexism, lack of competitions and pathways, discriminatory policies and more. Yet the performativity of gender in this planning process presented a non-problematic and overly simplistic view.

While gender is only lightly touched upon in the Elevate 2042 legacy plan, this document has been called a 'living document designed to evolve as the region grows and changes' (https://q2032.au/plans/games-legacy). This quote underscores the importance of working to identify the voices and interests not reflected in legacy plans to date, with a view to finding ways to more authentically involve them as legacy plans 'evolve'. This idea is taken up again in the conclusion.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we set out to explore the performativity of legacy plans with particular focus on what they mean for gender equitable sport participation legacies. We have shown that from the pre-bid feasibility stage, the main questions were over whether the 2032 Games could be staged in South East Queensland and should the Council of Mayors SEQ propose the hosting of an Olympic and Paralympic Games. The performative language shaping how the feasibility narrative was constructed questions the level of engagement with, and commitment to, addressing gender inequity in sport participation through legacy plans for the event. We know from the growing literature on event leveraging that only with a clear strategy, dedicated resources and political commitment, will desired social outcomes associated with sport events be achievable (Misener et al. 2018). That requires clarity of vision, objectives, outputs and outcomes but that cannot be set without the involvement, throughout the process, of those actors crucial to its success.

Our empirical enquiries indicate that the trajectory of *what is possible* for the 2032 Games was already fixed at the pre-bid and bid stages, with a clear economic imperative at its heart. Grand statements about gender equity goals emerged in the post-bid stage but statements made reflected a fixed notion of gender, locking in place the way sports organizations might work towards increasing sport participation for women, and ignoring gender or sexual diversity. Findings from processes intended to be deliberative, including the circulation of a survey and hosting a legacy forum, reinforce rather than challenge the 'managed' or 'curated', top-down approach, under the guise of encouraging participation. Throughout the consultation process, the voices of women and non-binary people are either missing, or deemphasized.

In terms of 'citizen participation' (Arnstein 1969) and the consultation process undertaken to develop the 2032 Games legacy plan, we found that the ability to influence and

shape plans and decisions was limited, with the impression of influence being more important than the reality. The legacy committee was developed through a formal process and includes several high-profile individuals with important insights from their various communities (Queensland Government 2024). However, the scope of the committee and its capacity for *listening* to communities both remain unclear. This is particularly true as a newly elected Government later disbanded this committee. Despite interviewee's dissatisfaction with the engagement process, the consultation activities were still heralded as successes and promoted as such by the Queensland Government. Such insistence and repetition are part of the performativity of sport event legacy planning.

As Butler (2010, 150) notes, 'it is not simply that a subject performs a speech act; rather, a set of relations and practices are constantly renewed, and agency traverses human and non-human domains'. That is, power flows through human actors and the technologies and documents that constitute the processes and outcomes of mega-sport event legacy planning are an example of this. At a time when there is increased trans visibility, ever-increasing violence against women (sexual, physical and online abuse) and women's ongoing marginalization in the spheres of both work and leisure, none of these complex and urgent issues has been included in the legacy plan. The question of *how* to increase sport participation for women and girls (let alone non-binary people) is assumed to already be known – simply state it as a goal and it will happen.

Mentions of 'women' and 'females' in the legacy strategy already position them as 'outsiders' to the Games, as an 'identified target' rather than moving beyond gender as a variable and embracing meaningful dialogue and engagement about gender equity with those for whom this matters. Butler's feminist approach has significantly influenced how gender (norms, identities, etc.) has been understood in academic scholarship and public life, as 'an *expectation* that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipated' (Butler 1997, xiv, author's italics). Gender expectations in the legacy planning process have been limited, producing an idea of women that does not necessarily reflect their diverse lived experiences.

Yet, though we offer a critique of the legacy planning process as performatively problematic, as a 'living document', there remains scope over the coming years in the build up to the 2032 Games to work towards including more diverse voices, moving away from business as usual and towards new ways of supporting people who are disengaged in sport so they can participate. The sport and physical activity levels of women, girls and non-binary people (particularly those who experience intersectional inequalities) are lower than those of the general population, and for some groups (for example, women with disability, or unemployed women) are significantly lower. There is often an intention to increase sport participation when leveraging a mega-event like the Olympic and Paralympic Games, however, there needs to be intentionality and clarity on intended outcomes so that the event can help capitalize on opportunities. This takes effort and the incorporation of different strategies, including feminist approaches. For gender equity to be meaningfully foregrounded in the next phase of the 'living document', there is a need for much more intentional, informed and nuanced forms of deliberation about gender equity, informed by post-structural feminism that can account for a conceptualization of gender that stretches outside the traditional binary. This is slow and deliberate work that cannot be completed with reductive surveys or one-off events. These formats often erect barriers to involvement and participation when what is required is

taking the discussion to people (rather than expecting women, girls and other minoritized groups to come to it) and providing more considered ways of including diverse voices. This needs to include training and developing an institutional workforce that operates in ethical and gender-sensitive ways, including an openness to hear and respond to perspectives that challenge them.

To conclude, we are not in principle advocating against the potential value of large legacy programs or projects, especially when they are integrated with wider strategic ambitions and underwritten with government guarantees from the earliest stage of planning. Rather, we are arguing for a shift away from overly generalized, vague or abstract articulations of legacy which are written into plans and become reified. Like other areas of legacy plans, ambitions around more gender equal sport participation cannot be assumed as a unified whole. We need to move towards a form of listening to voices and texts decoupled from power or status or economic imperatives in the localities where people live rather than in centralized metropolitan centres. It is already well known that mega-sport events can disproportionally impact women and girls living and working in host countries (Prado 2023), despite political discourse about how such events promote equality and benefits for 'all'. Listening to the voices of those who have been excluded can provide bottom-up knowledge to inform meaningful actions and programs.

In this article our focus was on women and girls and how they are (in) visible in legacy planning processes and documents. However, there is a need to move beyond a reductionist account of 'women' as the sole beneficiary of gender equity in sport. Future studies need to stretch understandings of gender equity to include non-binary people and trans women. We acknowledge that gender equity includes many more communities, including trans men, intersex individuals and others. Further research that includes these communities would also support more equitable sport participation legacies from mega-sporting events.

Consent to participate

All participants provided written consent to participate in the project as per ethical guidelines.

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Ethical clearance was gained by Griffith University Ethnics Committee.

Note

1. https://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/2151266/Key-documents-Brisbane-2032-pre-bid-to-post-announcement.pdf.

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