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HONG KONG
CHINA RUGBY

Celebrating Women in Sport: Creating the Next Generation of Female Leaders





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Kicking off

Sport is more than just a hobby or profession; it transforms lives, shapes character and creates future leaders.

Recognising the power of sport, Hong Kong China Rugby (HKCR) kick-started its Launching and Inspiring Female Talent (LIFT) Programme in 2023 to overcome the obstacles preventing women from taking on senior leadership roles in grassroots, community, corporate, and professional sporting organisations. LIFT aims to improve the visibility of leadership pathways, inspire confidence and create opportunities across Hong Kong.

The inaugural LIFT Lunch: Celebrating Women in Sport, co-organised by FTSE 100 wealth management firm St. James's Place and global law firm DLA Piper, took LIFT's mission one step further and featured voices from across elite sport reflecting on the vital role of sport in leadership development.

In her opening remarks, Hong Kong China Rugby Independent Director Gill Meller said the industry still had some way to go to increase representation, a motivating factor in establishing the LIFT programme. While women accounted for 30% of HKCR's players in the 2024/25 season, only two senior clubs had female chairs, highlighting the stark gap between female participation and leadership.

Keeping young girls in sport was a key target for the organisation on the road to increasing representation, she added: "In rugby, we lose around 25% of female players in the under-17 to under-18 age group."

LIFT's programme helps female athletes translate the determination, discipline and competitive edge developed through sport into successful careers beyond the field.

Meller said raising awareness about careers in sport – and the link between sporting participation and high-performance careers – was essential: "Parents worry about the lack of a career pathway in sport, despite data showing that 94% of female C-suite executives have played sports."

"A recent World Rugby report, **Where We Belong**, found that just under half of women say they would apply for a role in sport, compared to over 70% of men," Meller added, noting that showcasing sport administration and coaching as viable career options would be a key priority in the years ahead as LIFT looks to support more women into leadership positions.



Executive summary

LIFT's flagship event in Hong Kong on 14 April brought together global sporting figures, coaches, and business leaders at a moment of growing momentum for women's sport. Hosted at the Hong Kong Football Club ahead of the Hong Kong Sevens 2026, the event convened a panel spanning elite performance, coaching and administration, exploring three key themes:

- **Why sport matters for women:** the lasting value it creates in education, leadership, and lifelong skills. How to use these values to encourage more girls to play sport and more parents to support grassroots participation
- **Life after competition:** how the business community can better support athletes' transition to a career after sport. Are current initiatives hitting the mark, and what more can be done?
- **Building pathways:** how to encourage and support women to pursue careers in sport, whether as athletes, coaches, or leaders. How do we encourage more women to realise that a career in sport is for them, and how do we move the needle in Hong Kong, as sporting events become an economic driver?

Drawing on a wealth of international experience across elite sport and leadership, the panel explored the positive role of sport in female leadership development, structural barriers to greater female participation at all levels, and opportunities to increase representation in sports leadership and administration. The panellists were:

- Camille Cheng, Hong Kong Olympic swimmer and Asian Games medallist
- Sarah Hooper, Chief Operating Officer, Hong Kong China Rugby
- Bella Milo, Women's Club Coaching Officer at Valley RFC and Samoa rugby union international player

- Portia Woodman-Wickliffe, Former New Zealand international rugby union player and 2x Olympic gold medallist

They also discussed the challenges they experienced as elite sportswomen in transitioning from high-level sport, the societal pressures affecting female participation in grassroots sport, and the actions needed to level the playing field and develop the pipeline of future female leaders.

The panel took three key conclusions from the discussion:

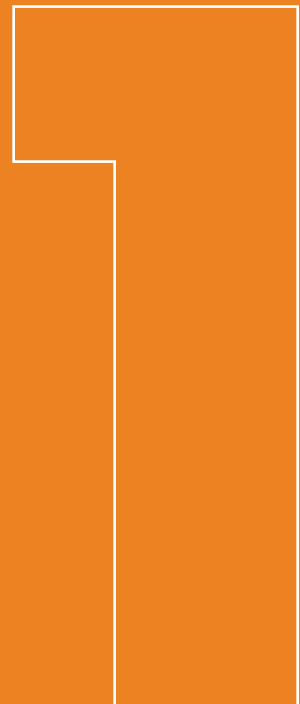
1. Sport develops leadership skills and builds resilience and confidence
2. Career transitions after professional sport remain under-supported
3. Many women do not pursue careers in sport due to a lack of clear, visible pathways

The key takeaways were clear: that there are significant opportunities for women to build careers in sport at all levels, from coaching to board or committee membership.

Unanimously, the panel agreed that if sport is to fulfil its promise as a launchpad for female leadership, more must be done to increase the uptake of sport at a young age, support the career transitions of female athletes, and facilitate career progression within global sporting institutions and administrative bodies.

The wider business community can also play its part by hiring former athletes and creating more visible pathways for female leaders from all walks of life.

Developing female leaders of the future



Research from EY's Women Athletes Business Network titled **'Where will you find your next leader?'** has found that sport plays an integral role in women's professional development at every stage of women's lives, from rising leaders to C-suite executives.¹ From problem-solving to team-building, women who have played sport make natural leaders.

EY also found that female athletes have a unique advantage in the workplace, thriving on competition and demonstrating strong determination and work ethic – something reflected in the real experiences of these determined and powerful women.

Camille Cheng described her sporting journey as a form of "life education", having lacked confidence in her younger years. Sport gave her a platform to flourish as both a person and a professional, equipping her with valuable lifelong skills and a voice to inspire other young women.

"I had a coach in college who always talked about how swimming was just the tool to teach you how to grow up to be a strong, independent young woman," she recalled.



For me, as a very shy young girl, being good at something gave me a lot of confidence, which had this ripple effect beyond the pool.

Camille Cheng



Panellists agreed that the discipline gained from sport and positive training environments had helped their personal development, inspired confidence, and prepared them for future leadership positions.

The key benefits of taking up sport, according to the group, include learning that:

- Mistakes are immediate and instructive
- Progress is incremental and earned
- Growth is personal and measurable

Portia Woodman-Wickliffe said she had learned valuable lessons from her mistakes. Setbacks on the field were valuable moments, she added. "It sucks at the time, but what you get from it is so valuable," she said.



You learn so much, make direct reflections on your mistakes, and you grow from there.

Portia Woodman-Wickliffe



The panel agreed that early engagement in sport prepares women for high-pressure environments later in life. They said sport delivered lifelong benefits, teaching them to:

- Make decisions under pressure
- Adapt quickly in dynamic environments
- Maintain composure in uncertain situations

¹ https://www.ey.com/en_nz/athlete-programs/why-a-female-athlete-should-be-your-next-leader

Bella Milo, a graduate of the LIFT programme, shared how those skills applied to her life as a coach and sporting leader:



Decision-making under pressure on the field, the more experience you get, the better you get at decision-making in later life.

Bella Milo



"It's one of the things that has transferred for me."

Resilience built from sport is perhaps the most enduring outcome. Sarah Hooper emphasised how sport can teach women to pick themselves up during tough times and low moments.

"Confidence doesn't come from winning all the time. It comes from learning how to lose and come back stronger," Hooper added.

Despite its clear benefits, the uptake of sport can be affected by structural and cultural barriers. This is particularly evident in Hong Kong,



In rugby, we lose around 25% of female players in the under-17 to under-18 age group.

Gill Meller





Gill Meller noted that over 40% of children led sedentary lifestyles in Hong Kong, with parents “generally prioritising academic achievement over sport, viewing exam grades as more critical to future success than physical activity”.

“We can go further in terms of getting more girls to play sport, and to keep playing,” she emphasised.

Camille Cheng agreed that parents often viewed sport as a distraction from academic studies and the pursuit of a “real job”. Intense competition for sporting pathways into schools was another factor, with many children viewing sport solely through a performance-and-scholarship lens, losing the enjoyment factor.

“I hear from some young girls who leave sports because they are not number one or two. That makes me sad because there’s so much more to sport than the performance piece. If I had done that, I would never have kept going.”

Sarah Hooper said parents had a responsibility to encourage their girls to continue playing sport, while sporting bodies had a key role to play to highlight the lifelong benefits of active engagement in sport.

“It’s that challenge of the parent stereotype [that] we need to break down,” Hooper added. “We can do that by going into school communities and having incredible ambassadors share their stories.”

Life beyond **the second half**



Sport has a positive impact on grassroots participants and professionals alike. But for elite athletes, long and successful sporting careers can complicate what comes next. The transition from elite competition remains an under-supported area for female athletes.

These challenges are compounded by the pay and opportunity gap between female and male athletes during women's careers, leaving women with fewer options when they stop playing. Panellists shared the sense of uncertainty felt by many athletes approaching the end of their careers, despite their obvious skill set, experience, leadership qualities and ability to handle high-pressure environments.

Audience members at the LIFT event noted that the business community could benefit from former athletes' skills and should do more to partner with sporting organisations to develop career pathways for former players.

Portia Woodman-Wickliffe described the challenges women face after their playing careers, including translating success on the field into the professional arena.

Despite being a household name in her native New Zealand and having reached the pinnacle of the nation's favourite sport, Woodman-Wickliffe said it had been a tougher journey than expected to move on after retirement and carve out career and commercial opportunities. The sudden uncertainty at this stage of her life, after being immersed in rugby for so long, had created a sense of anxiety, she said.

"I've lived the dream, and built an amazing life, and lived an amazing life, but where do you go from that? That's probably the hardest part," Woodman-Wickliffe added. "Heading into this next stage of life, I'm 34, and I now have to sustain myself until 65, and I have to figure that out. So at the moment I'm nervous about that."





Camille Cheng agreed, saying she had struggled to move on to the next phase of her life after being immersed in the world of top-level sport for so long.

“After my first Olympics, when I felt I would retire, I went through the whole identity crisis of, ‘Who am I, if not a swimmer? What else am I good at?’ I found my way back into sport, but I learned I needed to cultivate who I was beyond the swimmer.”

Bella Milo noted similar concerns among her peers and emphasised that the sporting community needed to do more to support athletes’ post-career transition.

Panellists agreed that transition support should be embedded earlier in athletes’ careers, enabling individuals to build networks when commercial opportunities are more immediate.

Sarah Hooper agreed that sports organisations needed to increase wraparound support for athletes, with solutions tailored for women.

“Transition is something that we’ve got to get into the system a lot earlier, when they are playing, getting exposure and career opportunities, mentoring, education, and paid opportunities.”

Hooper added: “If we want women to not just participate in sport but stay connected to it as professionals, leaders, and decision makers, then we really need to support them through this transition.”

Tackling barriers head on



Despite record levels of participation and global interest in women's sport, barriers still prevent many women from pursuing careers in the industry. *Where We Belong*, a report commissioned by Women's Rugby World Cup England 2025,² found that only 48% of women would apply for a role in sport, compared to 72% of men.

Perceptions of entry barriers are deterring women from applying for roles in sport, prompting calls for greater action to improve inclusion in the sector. The *Where We Belong* report made four recommendations to boost inclusion and diversity:

1. Structured, paid entry pathways for women
2. Transparent progression roadmaps
3. Accessible recruitment
4. Measurable diversity targets

The LIFT panel agreed that each would need to be tackled to drive female representation across sporting bodies and institutions.

Panel participants said career pathways needed to be made both visible and viable for women to remain in sport.

Sarah Hooper said career pathways needed to be “designed with real people in mind, and not just with good intentions”, in order to truly connect with women and make a tangible difference to female representation. Crucially, they also needed to be measurable.

“So many women don't opt out because they lack talent,” Hooper said. “They opt out because they cannot see what is next. If women are going to believe that sport is a viable career, they need to see women progressing, leading and staying.” Representation will play a central role. Seeing more women in leadership positions in sport can signal that long-term careers are attainable and accessible, panellists agreed.

“And that doesn't happen by accident. It happens because organisations pay attention, ask the hard questions, execute on these and then genuinely track whether opportunities are being shared,” Hooper added.



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I want girls and boys to grow up seeing women not just participating in sport, but leading in it.

Sarah Hooper

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² <https://www.rugbyworldcup.com/2025/en/news/1014454/calls-for-greater-inclusion-in-british-sports-industry>

Not winging it: LIFT's mission to drive change





The panel session reinforced that sport is a powerful platform for inspiring leadership, confidence, and long-term opportunities for women.

However, early participation, career progress, and post-career transitions are under-supported, factors that risk limiting the broader impact of women's sport, and the influence of women in the sporting world.

The discussion highlighted three priorities for parents, sporting organisations and business networks in supporting women's participation and leadership in sport:

- **Parents:** Sustaining participation at a young age, ensuring girls remain engaged beyond school.
- **Sporting organisations:** Embedding transition support earlier, helping athletes build careers alongside sport, and forming links between business and sporting institutions.

- **Sporting organisations and business networks:** Creating visible and viable pathways, so women can progress as coaches and leaders.

Coordinated action is required across these areas, with progress dependent on accountability, sustained investment, and measurable outcomes.

Since its formation, LIFT's mission has been to harness sport as a platform for female leadership, ensuring women participate, progress and lead.

Through its training sessions, workshops, and networking events, the programme will build on insights from this year's LIFT Lunch and continue to provide leadership development opportunities for women in Hong Kong.

As LIFT continues its work to accelerate the growth of women's rugby, the programme's six-point action plan aims to strengthen the foundations of the game and amplify its reach:

- **Communication:** Enabling communications regarding the women's game to reach the right audiences and connecting leaders through the establishment of a database of female leaders
- **Representation:** Ensuring women are represented at appropriate decision-making bodies through the issue of club guidance on representation and assessment of understanding of diversity and inclusion
- **Promotion:** Promoting key women's events, tournaments, individuals, and initiatives to a wider audience through a dedicated annual marcomms plan
- **Leadership:** Continuing to build a pipeline of female talent for the future through the continuation of the LIFT Programme and participation in World Rugby initiatives such as Grassroots to Global
- **Women's health initiatives:** Developing specific women's health, strength and conditioning and nutrition programmes
- **Governance:** Empowering the Women's Committee to support the growth of the women's game through a review of its Terms of Reference and Membership

Together, these pillars form a blueprint for sustainable, long-term impact and progress.

Committed to championing visibility and actively shaping a more inclusive future for sport, LIFT invites women from all levels of the rugby community to get involved, build connections and create the next generation of female leaders.



Conclusion

The panel session reinforced that sport is a powerful platform for inspiring leadership, confidence, and long-term opportunities for women.

However, sporting institutions have not yet evolved to support women at every stage. Early participation, career progress, and post-career transitions are under-supported, factors that risk limiting the broader impact of women's sport, and the role of women in sport.

Three key priorities emerged from the panel discussion:

- Sustaining participation at a young age, ensuring girls remain engaged beyond school
- Embedding transition support earlier, helping athletes build careers alongside sport
- Creating visible and viable pathways, so women can progress as athletes, coaches and leaders

Coordinated action is required across sporting institutions and the public sector, with progress dependent on accountability, sustained investment, and measurable outcomes.

With the right support, sport can become an even more powerful platform for female leadership, ensuring women are not only participating but progressing and leading.

Reflecting on the success of the LIFT Lunch, the event's co-organisers highlighted the power of sport to develop lifelong skills and inspire the next generation of female leaders.

"St. James's Place was delighted to sponsor the LIFT Lunch, and I was thrilled to host such an inspiring gathering," said Zoe Ewen-Pearson, Head of Marketing Division Asia and the Middle East. "As a lifelong lover of sport, I believe passionately in the power of sport in building confidence, community, and opportunity. To see a women focused sporting event take centre stage during the Hong Kong Sevens is brilliant, and a reminder of how inclusion in sport can drive lasting change."

Susheela Rivers, Office Managing Partner, DLA Piper, said: "DLA Piper was proud to support the LIFT Lunch and the important conversations it sparked about the role sport plays in shaping future leaders. Rugby, in particular, has a unique ability to build confidence, resilience, teamwork and decision-making skills — qualities that are just as valuable in the corporate environment as they are on the field.

Rivers added: "Through initiatives like LIFT, we can help more women recognise the leadership potential they develop through sport and create clearer pathways into successful careers in business and beyond. Investing in women's participation and progression in sport is ultimately an investment in the next generation of leaders. This event further reinforces an important message – *that strong is the new beautiful.*"

To learn more about the LIFT Programme, visit hkrugby.com or email info@hkrugby.com

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