



WomenSport International (WSI) Re: Leadership Changes in the Japan .WE League

WomenSport International (WSI) is an evidence-based advocacy organization with a mission to enhance opportunities for girls and women at all levels of involvement in sports and physical activity. We are one of two women and sport organizations with consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council and have been advising organizations such as UNESCO, the International Olympic Committee and other major sport organizations on policies and practices to ensure girls and women have an equitable space within the sport sector.

Japanese sport is a significant leader in Asian sport, and therefore WSI found it disturbing to hear of the recent decision to replace three female executives with three male counterparts in Japan's Women's Empowerment (WE) Professional Soccer/Football League. We believe this action represents a significant step backward for gender equality in sports leadership and contradicts the principles of empowerment upon which the WE League was founded.

The WE League's decision is concerning on several fronts. According to the Japanese Sports Agency, domestic sports organizations are required to have at least 40% female board members. The current WE League change falls short of this requirement, offering only 36% female board representation. There are also the principles of the WE League to consider, as the WE League requires all its member clubs to have at least 50% female board members as a condition for entry to the League. The WE League, will have less than 50% female representation on its board with these new changes. We believe this will undermine the league's credibility and commitment to its principles of empowering women in leadership roles.

We are aware of some of the rationale for this change in governance. We do not want to interfere with the decision to make change, but as stated above our concern is the choice of action that leaves the WE League with a less influential role for women. There is no evidence to suggest that replacing female board members with male counterparts will improve the financial situation of the WE League. The assumption that male board members will be more successful in generating funding lacks data and historical support.

Research on business and sports management reveals that drawing interest in women's sports has been a persistent challenge, regardless of the gender of the leadership. In fact, men have not proven more effective in overcoming this challenge. The situation in countries like the USA, Australia, and New Zealand, where there has been an increase in interest and funding for women's sports, offers hope, but these developments are not conclusive. Importantly, there is no data to indicate that the addition of three male board members will significantly change the league's financial outlook. Conversely, there is ample evidence that underrepresentation of women in sports leadership has negative repercussions for all involved. Diminishing female voices in decision-making positions threatens to reverse progress toward gender equality, especially in a league that was founded to promote women in leadership.

We urge the WE League to reconsider this decision, which contradicts its own principles, and to continue to lead through fair and equal decision making within the leadership of the WE League.

Sincerely,

President, WomenSport International