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**‘Women can’t referee’: exploring the experiences of female football officials within UK  
football culture**

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# **‘Women can’t referee’: exploring the experiences of female football officials within UK football culture**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female (association) football officials who officiate in amateur men’s and boys’ football matches in two UK counties (Warwickshire and Somerset). The research presents a view of men’s football from a position that has hitherto been overlooked in the social exploration of football culture. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork collected between September and December 2012, the findings provide insight into some women’s experiences of sexism and marginalization in predominantly male football contexts. Participant observations, formal semi-structured interviews and a range of informal conversations with four female match officials demonstrated a wide range of abuse that could generally be construed as sexist. The women used various strategies to overcome the hostile attitudes that often greeted their presence on the football pitch. Moreover, they continuously negotiated their identities as females and football officials in a space where men and masculinity are prevalent.

## **Introduction**

‘If women want f\*\*\*ing equal rights then they need to learn how to referee!’

(Observed 13.10.12)

This comment, directed at Rosie (a pseudonym) after taking charge of an amateur men’s league game, epitomizes the sort of remarks with which women officiating in men’s football have to contend. The comment above, made by an amateur male player, reaffirmed the argument that women’s participation in the male-dominated arena of football culture often triggers harassment, discrimination and abuse.<sup>1</sup>

Although significant positive changes have occurred within the game, with women currently being employed as officials, pundits and physiotherapists within elite men’s football, women’s participation is still marginalized and professional football remains a predominantly male preserve.<sup>2</sup> Women’s involvement in male football culture continues to be greeted with an attitude of hostility from high-profile members of the practice community.<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2006 the then Luton Town manager Mike Newell publicly criticized both Amy Rayner (a female assistant referee) and the Football Association (FA) for selecting Rayner to officiate in a professional football league match. Newell opined:

She should not be here. I know that sounds sexist but I am sexist... We have a problem in this country with political correctness, and bringing women into the game is not the

way to improve refereeing and officialdom... It is bad enough with the incapable referees and linesman we have, but if you start bringing in women, you have big problems.<sup>4</sup>

In response to public criticism, the FA investigated the incident and defended female officials in general and Rayner in particular. Consequently, Newell was charged with improper conduct and fined a derisory £6,500. Despite the FA's continued support of anti-discrimination campaigns within football culture (such as the FA's anti-racism campaign, *Kick it Out*), sexist attitudes continue to be accepted by many as a fundamental part of the game.<sup>5</sup>

The attitude of hostility demonstrated by Newell, resurfaced in 2011 when Sky Sports presenters Andy Gray and Richard Keys were at the centre of a media furore, following the publication and broadcast of an off-air conversation. Both presenters were heard making disparaging comments about the FA's decision to employ a female football official for a high-profile match in the Barclays Premiership – the highest level of men's domestic football in England and Wales. Their conversation was as follows:

RK: Somebody better get down there and explain offside to her....

AG: Yeah I know can you believe that, a female linesman... Women don't know the offside rule!

RK: I can guarantee you there will be a big one today [controversial decision]. Kenny [Dalglish] will go potty. This is not the first time is it? Didn't we have one before? Wendy Toms. The games gone mad. Did you see the charming Karen Brady this morning complaining about sexism? Do me a favour love.<sup>6</sup>

Both Andy Gray and Richard Keys expressed concern that an incorrect decision by Sian Massey (the female official in question) would overshadow the game. Gray and Keys dismissed the comments as 'banter' – in other words, ostensibly playful or good humored remarks. But, the content and tone of the conversation exposed sexist ideologies about the presence of women in an arena which serves to maintain masculine hegemony. That is to say, sports, particularly masculine sports such as football, help to define and reinforce dominant ways of being male which, in turn, help to legitimise the superordination of men over women.<sup>7</sup>

For a long time, women's football in the UK received very little academic attention and sociological literature on football remains dominated by work on the men's game.<sup>8</sup> Over the last decade however, as more women and girls take up football, feminist sport sociologists have

begun to look more critically at the women's game. Building upon theoretical debates within women's sport more broadly, feminist scholars have explored topics primarily focusing on the intersections of gender, sexuality and identity within women's football.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the growing popularity of women's football, and a steady increase of qualified female coaches and officials, the experiences of females involved in the non-playing roles within football culture have hitherto been overlooked. Caudwell highlights the importance of continuing a gendered analysis of football culture to extend research on critical football studies.<sup>10</sup> She argues that sexism, in social and football contexts, is a reminder of the influence of gendered social relations between men and women.

Several studies have focused on women's experiences as players and fans within football culture in the UK.<sup>11</sup> The experiences of female football officials, however, have not been examined. Given this gap in knowledge, the present study addresses three aims: i) to explore the experiences of female football officials within male football culture; ii) to analyse techniques employed by female officials to overcome hostile attitudes towards their involvement; and iii) to explore the tension between participants' gendered and refereeing identities.

In this study we therefore explore the experiences of women who officiate men's and boys' football within the UK. The process of qualifying as a match official is identical for men and women. Officials must complete nine classroom sessions and two examinations (one written and one oral) to qualify and officiate at level eight (for under 16's) and level seven (for over 16's) - the lowest amateur level. To make progress through the levels (there are nine in total) officials must pass rigorous assessment criteria that increase in difficulty with each level.<sup>12</sup> For context (and discussed in more detail in the methodology) the officials in this study have passed extensive tests and assessments to enable them to officiate at various levels on the pyramid. We begin with a brief overview of existing literature pertaining to sexism and identity construction within football in the UK. Later, informed by ethnographic empirical data, we provide an analysis of four women's experiences of officiating men's and boys' football matches. Finally, we offer a succinct summary of key findings and their implications.

### **Sexism in football**

The issue of sexism continues to be a subject of frequent debate within the sporting arena. On the whole, research on (or with) women in sport suggests that marginalization and sexualization are consistent features of women's experiences in sport.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, girls and women in football consistently struggle against sexism and gendered stereotypes to be recognized as

legitimate participants and members of the football community.<sup>14</sup> The intersections of identity, gender and sexuality remain a significant feature of feminist literature documenting women's experiences of football both in the UK<sup>15</sup> and further afield.<sup>16</sup> More recently, there have been explorations of female footballers' experiences of the interconnections of gender, race and ethnicity, and how they impact on participation.<sup>17</sup> Yet in spite of these, relatively little attention has been paid to women's experiences of sexism within football culture more broadly (though see Graham, McKenna and Fleming; Jones; and Pope as notable exceptions<sup>18</sup>).

The increase in female football participation is considered by some to challenge the complex gender constraints that have traditionally restricted women's sport participation.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the possibilities to contest traditional gender norms through football participation are somewhat restricted.<sup>20</sup> McGinnis *et al.* argue that female athletes 'experience daunting challenges both on and off the playing field, including a sense of extra scrutiny of their abilities and worthiness' in male dominated sports.<sup>21</sup> Rubin<sup>22</sup> argues that the presence of women in football contexts challenges the assumption that football is a male preserve. Arguably, the more women engage in male dominated spaces the more men marginalize, sexualize and discriminate against women in order to protect the gender order.<sup>23</sup> The opposition to female football officials cited above is indicative of the sorts of sexist responses that help to confirm the practice of masculine hegemony in football culture.

Male opposition to women's participation in football is well established in the game's history. Despite the increasing popularity of women's football in the early 1900s, in 1921 the FA banned women's teams from competing on football league grounds.<sup>24</sup> The FA announced that football was considered unsuitable, and potentially dangerous for women. However, according to Williams, the ban was as a result of the rising profile of women's football, which was considered a 'threat to the idea of football as a man's game'.<sup>25</sup> Football authorities, such as the FA, have come a long way in terms of their support for women's football. Nonetheless, women who participate in football continue to have to negotiate the 'contentious connection between women and football'.<sup>26</sup>

### **Negotiating legitimate identities**

Women must reconcile football participation with an acceptable feminine identity, which Jeanes describes as a 'complex and abstract' area of identity construction.<sup>27</sup> Failure to negotiate successfully the complex web of restrictions and contradictions to develop an appropriate

identity has, broadly speaking, two consequences.<sup>28</sup> First, and at the risk of oversimplification, women who adopt characteristics more associated with a masculine identity gain acceptance within the male football domain, but risk condemnation and harassment from female peers.<sup>29</sup> Second, women who adopt feminine identity characteristics are not accepted as legitimate members of the football community.<sup>30</sup>

Bruce's study on female sports journalists reflects how women negotiate their identity across different sporting contexts. For example, as a female journalist in the male dominated sporting arena of men's basketball, Bruce was advised by a female colleague to not 'wear anything remotely sexy'.<sup>31</sup> This was a conscious attempt to avoid drawing any unwanted attention to her femininity. She wanted her position as a sports reporter to be taken seriously and thus purposely placed more prominence on her journalist identity. Jones<sup>32</sup> describes this as an example of women distancing themselves from emphasized femininity, a strategy used to overcome sexism which is prominent for women in male dominated spaces. However, this devaluation of feminine characteristics, as Reay<sup>33</sup> argues, simply reproduces the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities within a patriarchal gender hierarchy.

The work of Jones<sup>34</sup> is one of relatively few attempts to examine women's experiences of sexism within male football culture.<sup>35</sup> The results of her study with female football fans yield important and interesting results and are therefore worth examining in more detail. Congruent with findings from Bruce,<sup>36</sup> research on female football fans suggests that women downplay their gender identities in order to be considered legitimate members of the football community, and in so doing, find themselves in a contradictory position. Studies of women in other male dominated sporting occupations, such as female sports journalists,<sup>37</sup> shed light on the contradictions of forming an appropriate identity. As Bruce's study confirmed, in these situations, women in such occupations are devalued, considered as a threat to men and subjected to hostility and sexual harassment.<sup>38</sup> As a result women employ various strategies to overcome their minority status in male arenas. However, strategies used to overcome harassment and abuse at football matches, such as complying with men's sexist assumptions to 'fit in with the lads', only results in the reproduction of a patriarchal hierarchy. By accepting male definitions of legitimate behaviour at football matches the ideology of male dominance and female subordination is maintained. Although the mere presence of women is a challenge to the idea of football as an exclusively male space, the gender order remains largely intact. Women displaying a feminine identity are subjected to hostility or sexualisation, whilst women who reject femininity may well serve to legitimise the supposed superiority of masculine values.

This idea is not restricted to female fans. Many other scholars have also identified the tenuous position for women who play or follow football.<sup>39</sup> Traditionally regarded as a quintessentially male arena, women who attempt to carve out a space within football culture struggle to be recognized as legitimate members of the football community.<sup>40</sup> Instead, they are viewed as aggressive and unfeminine with their presence provoking sexist criticism and reference to dominant gender stereotypes. Some women completely reject femininity, adopting characteristics more associated with a masculine identity, which Davis describes as ‘becoming honorary men’.<sup>41</sup> In Jones’s study some female fans openly criticized women who ‘practiced emphasized femininity’, arguing that displays of conventional femininity were incompatible with authentic fandom.<sup>42</sup> Similar findings emerged in Pope’s recent account of female fans of men’s football and rugby union in England. She found that some female fans rejected women who performed conventional femininity on the grounds that they did not “do fandom properly”.<sup>43</sup> Women and girls who participate in football also comply with dominant notions of femininity to construct a legitimate female identity.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, there are also studies that illustrate women rejecting a feminine identity in favour of an athletic identity. The constant negotiation between woman and fan or woman and football confirms the multiplicity of trying to construct a legitimate identity in a male dominated arena.

Women’s non-playing involvement in men’s professional football faces strong opposition. Managers and broadcasters have, in the past, made sexist remarks and questioned the competence and suitability of female football officials in a professional men’s league, triggering widespread debate within both the football community and the general public. The recruitment and selection of female officials, particularly in relation to elite men’s games, remains a controversial and contested subject. Gendered expectations and hegemonic masculinity frame football, and football officiating, as a masculine activity. However, Jones and Edwards argue that women’s presence in non-playing roles challenges the conventional modes of hegemonic masculinity that ‘continue to blight the entire spectrum of football’s practice community’.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the plethora of sociological literature on football, the experiences of football officials, both male and female, have gone largely unnoticed. Moreover, women’s experiences within male football culture are underrepresented in sociological literature.

### **Methodological approach**

The methodological approach utilized in this article is inspired by feminist literature that, as Kitzinger explains, involves reclaiming and validating women’s experience in order to



‘challenge the male monopoly on truth’.<sup>46</sup> One of the key strengths of using an ethnographic approach is the in-depth nature of the data that are able to be collected. Participant observations and in-depth interviews are the core data-collection methods. Many other qualitative studies exploring women’s experiences in football have utilized a similar approach.<sup>47</sup> The four women in the study were aged between 16 and 33 and their refereeing experience ranged between two and seven years. They all described themselves as White-British and middle class, three were students. All had started out as players; two of the women continue to play and officiate whilst the other two women no longer play football. Pseudonyms have been adopted to protect their anonymity.

The first phase of the research was conducted between September and December 2012 and involved one of us [removed for blind review] undertaking participant observation with the women officiating amateur male football matches in two UK counties (Warwickshire and Somerset). The researchers interest of the experiences of women in football developed from an early involvement in the game – first as a fan, and then as a participant. This background enabled research to be conducted ethnographically, having spent over ten years playing football in various women’s teams. An insider status encouraged women to discuss their experiences because we shared similar values and experiences as participants in a game traditionally regarded as a quintessentially male space. Consequently, the feminist theoretical perspective used within this paper has developed from a background as an active football player with an academic interest in the critical analysis of women’s sporting experiences.

The Women in this study officiated at various levels of the refereeing pathway. The levels ranged from level 4 (county level referee and semi-professional assistant referee) to level 7 (local amateur level referee). Traveling to and from the games with the officials provided some insight into their preparation strategies, their engagement on arrival at the ground with managers, coaches and players, as well as the interactions with assistant referees on those occasions when they were appointed. Conducting observations in participants’ natural settings is another key feature of ethnographic work.<sup>48</sup> Informal discussions with the officials also facilitated an exploration of the requirements of their roles beyond just the game itself.

The second phase of the research entailed follow-up, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the officials. The interviews were informed by the review of literature and the observations and informal conversations that had taken place. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and covered a range of topics. The primary purpose of the interviews was to facilitate a more formal and nuanced discussion of the women’s experiences as football

officials. It was also important that the officials had the chance to describe, in their own words, the experiences that they had been through.

Time spent 'in the field' enabled rapport with the participants to be developed and ensured that the research findings were grounded in the experiences of the women concerned.<sup>49</sup> Although the interviews marked the end of the formal data collection, contact with the officials was maintained and, as a result, further follow up questions were asked and clarification sought on issues that became significant – an illustration of what Hammersley and Atkinson<sup>50</sup> identify as one of the strengths of ethnographic research. That is to say, the ability to move back and forth between data collection and analysis facilitated a more rounded approach to data collection.

The sampling approach used was a mixture of convenience and purposive sampling. Initial contact was made with two female football officials (Kate and Emma) who were known through informal social networks and agreed to take part. When discussing the project Emma suggested accessing the social networking site *Pink Whistle*. Created for female football officials, it is common for members to post photos, advertisements, stories and advice on the site<sup>51</sup>. The main criterion for inclusion in the study was that participants needed to have officiated men's or boys' football matches. An advertisement was posted to recruit participants and seven women responded. Owing to location and time constraints, it was impossible to include all of those who had responded; hence the most geographically accessible women were selected to take part.

As a result of the small sample size used, it is important to address questions regarding generalizations. Williams<sup>52</sup> argues that generalizations in interpretative research ought to be made cautiously. He posits that generalizing claims are both necessary and inevitable, but they must be made explicitly and acknowledged accordingly. In qualitative sociological research it seems acceptable (due to the focus on small sample size and in-depth studies) that 'moderatum generalizations' are made.<sup>53</sup> We are not claiming that female football officials are a homogenous group with shared experiences. However, as this study shows, female football officials do share some similar experiences and in order to 'make sense' of such experiences we rely on placing particular incidents into a wider social context. Williams<sup>54</sup> provides a lucid argument in support of making certain generalizing claims without claiming cultural homogeneity. He contends that micro-detail features must be understood in such a way as to explain how they do, or do not, create, reproduce or destroy wider social structures. Therefore, the existence of some shared norms can allow at least some reciprocity of perspective and viable comparisons to be made. Thus, although the observations and interviews conducted in

this study occurred within a specific cultural context, the discussion will rely on placing incidents within a wider context.

The process of data analysis in ethnographic projects is not a distinct phase, but an ongoing one.<sup>55</sup> Once the interviews had been recorded and transcribed, and the observations documented, the formal stage of interpretation and analysis began. The raw data were coded, and key themes were identified. These were then condensed, and the experiences of the four football officials were analysed with reference to the literature review that illustrated other underrepresented women's experiences in football.

## **Results and discussion**

The results of the present study demonstrate a wide range of abuse directed at female football officials that could generally be construed as sexist. Similar to findings by Jones,<sup>56</sup> the data suggest that female football officials adopt strategies akin to those used by female football fans to overcome sexist attitudes in an arena where women's football knowledge is often questioned. Moreover, female football officials also downplay or ignore sexist abuse by accepting gender stereotypes as a fundamental part of the game.

### **'Females can't referee': perceptions of a female football official**

Sport, and in particular football, is a highly potent site for the construction of a masculine identity and as a result, the presence of female football officials creates a significant site of gender conflict.<sup>57</sup> All of the women in this study were conscious that officiating in men's or boys' football matches would draw significant attention to their sex. Consequently, and reflecting findings from Bruce's<sup>58</sup> study on women sportswriters locker room interactions, the women's decisions were subject to extra scrutiny.

Kate: When you make a mistake, or someone perceives your decision as a mistake the first thing you hear is related to your gender. It's always, every decision you make you've made it because you're female, not because you're a referee. You hear everyone going 'oh females can't ref'.

The stereotypical view that female football officials are incompetent referees, because of assumed biological gender differences, puts added pressure on the women. Jones and Edwards argue that 'reference to such purported differences to justify the exclusion of women from... officiating is unfounded and sexist'.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that officiating

men's football matches proves to be a complex terrain for female officials, who must negotiate how much emphasis to place on their sex. When officiating, the women felt that they were representing all female officials and therefore wanted to conquer negative stereotypes that surrounded their participation. Kate's response when asked about being the only female on her refereeing course illustrates the responsibility she felt to improve the image of female officials:

I was obviously aware that I was the only girl, the only thing that I thought about was if I failed, I kind of felt like I was representing the females so had more pressure to pass... I care about the image of females within sport so I like to be seen to be helping that image progress and grow.

Kate described the added pressure she felt when qualifying as a referee. Similar to the comments from Sky Sports presenters Andy Gray and Richard Keys, the observations illustrated that some members of the football community automatically assumed that women do not have the required knowledge to be competent football officials. Although the women in this study felt unfairly stereotyped, it was clear that they were used to hearing these kinds of attitudes from players, managers and fans. As a result, they accepted a certain amount of responsibility to try and overturn such negative stereotypes. In this respect, the findings are similar to research by McGinnis *et al.*<sup>60</sup> on female golfers, who found that women in male dominated sports felt highly visible, unfairly stereotyped and under increased performance pressure.

A controversial example of the unfair stereotype occurred when Rosie officiated an under 18s game. Having allowed a goal to stand, after the assistant referee waved his flag to get Rosie's attention (which the male supporters interpreted as a signal for offside), the spectators were 'disgusted' by Rosie's lack of knowledge. One spectator continued to comment on the incident: 'Why has she overruled it? He's [the assistant referee] flagged for offside and she's overruled it.' Interestingly it was the male spectator that was illustrating a lack of knowledge, as Rosie explains:

I went over to him [the assistant referee] and basically it was because we both looked at each other... there was nothing in it he just shook the flag and because there is no actual signal for a goal he just sort of stood there. So I thought I'd better go over to him because I wasn't sure if he'd seen a foul or something. But it wasn't offside because that signal is different from the one he did.

Although Rosie had made the correct decision, the stereotype of women not knowing the offside rule seemed to override the fact that the decision she had made was correct. As a result one spectator concluded that ‘women refs are f\*\*\*ing s\*\*t’. This provides another example of an individual female official’s actions within football being representative of the whole category, whereby female football officials are regarded as a homogenous group.

Rosie implied that abuse started to become personal when they made reference to her sex. Although comments about female football officials at first seemed positive, abuse soon started to become personal and sexist. Rosie discussed a particular incident after a men’s game:

At half time before that happened the coach was saying ‘you’re doing really well you should have sent him off’ and then after the game he stormed into my changing room he was like ‘you’re the worst referee I’ve seen in 15 years... women should not be allowed to officiate men’s games’... and so yeah there was like this change. At first they were all positive but as soon as they started to disagree with me it was all my fault because I’m female.

While Rosie recognized that the comments made were sexist, she also argued that age was a factor in why she was the target of such abuse. She made reference to being recognized as ‘fresh meat’ by the players and spectators and suggested that abuse could have been a result of trying to push her and see how far they could go. When Rosie sent a player off for the use of foul and abusive language the spectators blamed the decision on her gender: ‘maybe she had to do that because she is a woman’ and implied that had Rosie been a male official the players ‘might have got away with a bit more’.

Although the women have experienced hostile sexist attitudes it is also common for them to receive more subtle forms of sexism. Aicher and Sagas<sup>61</sup> argue that pressures of society are suppressing traditional sexist forms and gender stereotypes, and as a result more subtle forms of sexism, that Glick and Fiske coined benevolent sexism,<sup>62</sup> are being used. There were three different examples:

Jess: I was reffing a game last week and somebody turned round and said ‘just get off her back and get in her bed instead’ and I just thought oh shut up.

Emma: There’s a space on my cards that say captains number and so I’d say ‘captain what’s your number’ and you’d quite often get 07941... and that’s something that they

wouldn't say to a male referee but it's just them trying to be funny. But it reminds you that they've got in their head that you're a female referee not just a referee.

Rosie: There's a joke about me being a woman, sort of horrible chatting up lines and things. And then you get the abusive ones that are just wow. You're not gonna get a man chatting up a male referee as much as you?

Ignoring sexism is a strategy used by the women to downplay sex differences. Whilst the participants often found the comments light-hearted and funny, they realized that they were sexist nonetheless. As Rosie correctly highlighted 'they wouldn't be saying those things to a male referee would they?' Despite the light-hearted nature of most of the comments, they undermined the women's authority. For Emma, hearing benevolent comments 'reminded [her] that she was a female referee, and not just a referee'. Downplaying sexism has significant consequences. The findings in Bruce's study highlight the contradictions of forming a legitimate identity within a male dominated sports arena. Women that are considered a threat to the male dominance of sporting spaces (such as female football officials) are subjected to hostility, sexual harassment and different types of sexism.<sup>63</sup> Downplaying sexist remarks is a strategy used by women in hostile arenas in an attempt to overcome their minority status (or at best draw as little attention to their sex as possible). However, accepting male definitions of legitimate behaviour and not challenging sexist remarks maintain the ideology of sport as a male preserve. As a result, if women want to be accepted then they have to conform to male standards of behaviour - such as accepting forms of sexism and instead classifying it as light hearted humour. Consequently, the gender order remains unchallenged. As Weaving points out, 'genuine female empowerment is perhaps not the pseudo empowerment of beating men at their own game', but is instead the rejection of damaging masculine values.

Studies of the responses of female football fans to benevolent forms of sexism show a link. Although some of the women found comments funny, they also, in some cases, challenged sexist abuse. However, subtle forms of sexism, often disguised as humour, highlight the dangers for women who challenge 'football's transgressive atmosphere'.<sup>64</sup> For instance, women who did not find comments funny are labeled as either part of the joke or part of the problem, and thus humour is described as a 'potent way of silencing women'.<sup>65</sup>

**'There's only so much abuse someone can take': strategies to distance oneself from criticism**

The women in this study were often confronted with abuse from players, managers and spectators. Echoing the strategies used by female football fans to overcome such abuse, the women in this study often downplayed or ignored sexist comments. Rosie described hearing the abuse as ‘quite shocking’ but most of the time tried to ‘block it out and not listen’. Kate, Emma and Jess also ignored sexist comments, preferring to ‘get on with the game’. Kate suggested that taking comments to heart would result in officials ‘losing concentration’ during games, which would be problematic.

During the interview Emma also downplayed the sexist nature of the comments directed at female officials. She argued that sexist insults were analogous to the insults directed at male football officials; something she saw as part of the game. She explained that male football officials are also abused because of various characteristics that differ from the idealized ‘norm’ (for example, baldness, glasses, hair colour, weight, and so on):

I just think it’s an excuse to be able to say something. If I was a male they’d still have a go for that decision but they just pick something else about you. They might shout ‘where are your glasses?’ The fact that I am a female referee just fits with their sentence. They just add onto the end of it ‘oh, it’s [be]cause you’re a woman’... They’re not being nasty or anything [a female referee] is just something different so they’re commenting on it... the same as racism... Actually they’re not shouting at you because you’re a woman. They’re shouting at you because the decision you’ve made is not the decision they were hoping for... [They’re] not actually being sexist or racist it’s just an excuse to be able to shout at someone.

Emma did not think that insults were meant to be sexist. She categorized sexism and racism under the same umbrella and argued that these comments should not be taken personally, also reflecting findings in Jones’s<sup>66</sup> study. Rosie also downplayed sexism. She suggested that abuse towards football officials was ‘more of an innate thing’ and not necessarily underpinned by hostility towards women. Like Emma, Rosie argued that male officials also received abuse. However, Rosie recognized that abuse directed towards women often highlights gender difference. She noted that male footballers wouldn’t point out the gender of a male referee because that would not be offensive: ‘He wouldn’t have said “f\*\*\*ing male referee” would he?’ The use of gendered or sexist language reinforces assumed male superiority, especially on the football pitch. Rosie explained how reference to her gender when she was officiating a men’s game made her feel ‘excluded’ and ‘different’. She believes that men ‘know [being

female] is our weak point' and that is why gender is so often used against female football officials.

Emma argued that the abuse directed towards football officials wasn't 'actually sexist or racist' but gender and race were being used as distinguishing features.<sup>67</sup> By arguing that 'football' sexism and racism ought not to be taken as seriously as more overt forms of sexism or racism, a distinction is drawn between casual sexism and overt or premeditated sexism.<sup>68</sup>

Although downplaying or ignoring sexism often seems the most appropriate way to overcome it, ignoring sexism can also have significant negative consequences. Emma and Rosie recognized the implications that this could have on other female football officials, particularly younger women who were not as experienced and therefore able to deal with sexist comments. Both women highlighted that although they attempted to ignore comments directed at them, it was not always that straightforward:

Emma: I try and ignore it but that's not always the case. You shouldn't have to put up with someone saying that to you... Although I don't care what people say to me I would deal with it in quite a serious way though so that everyone else knew that [sexism] is not acceptable. It actually wouldn't bother me at all but I think in my head what if a 16-year-old reffed their next game and they thought that it was acceptable to say the same things. A 16 year old might not take it the same way. I think that's where consistency has to come in with what's acceptable and what's not. In refereeing generally that's one of the hardest things.

Rosie: You're meant to ignore comments but there are some cases when pride doesn't let you. If you continue to ignore [sexism] then [men] think it's acceptable to say those things.

Emma and Rosie also recognised that although they tried to ignore sexist comments, being silent had negative implications. While women remain a minority within men's football culture, if female officials do not complain about or confront abusers, there is little incentive to rid the sport of sexism. As some of the participants in Jones's<sup>69</sup> study argued, not confronting sexist behaviour makes it acceptable; failing to challenge sexism is tacit acceptance of it. The introduction of anti-discrimination campaigns has reduced racist and, to a certain extent, homophobic abuse at football matches.<sup>70</sup> However, the lack of an explicit anti-sexist policy has resulted in sexist comments not being contested or taken as seriously as other forms of abuse. Emma reflected on possible reasons for this:



Racism occurs more frequently in football because there are more ethnic minorities visible than there are women. As more females come into the men's game, either as officials or coaches there will probably be a greater amount of sexism because there will be more women to be the target of such abuse and consequently national governing bodies such as the FA will become more aware of sexism which should result in tougher sanctions for sexist abuse directed at women.

There were particular incidents which could not be easily forgotten or ignored. At one particular match Rosie experienced a lot of sexist abuse off players, management and supporters. It made her seriously question whether to continue officiating men's football matches. She explained how she felt after the game:

I was really shaken and I think it just completely knocked my confidence for my other matches because I'd never had that much abuse at me in one match. There's only so much abuse someone can take. Because I'm inexperienced I always take everything personally. I try not to take it personally but the next men's match I did after that I just wasn't the same as I usually am. I was just not in the right frame of mind because I was still dwelling over a match that I shouldn't have been.

As with female fans, female football officials have to constantly negotiate sexist abuse. Rosie discussed how she considered quitting officiating altogether after that game but after taking a few weeks break she decided she wanted to overcome the abuse that she received and continue officiating men's games.

### **'I don't make decisions based on my gender': reconciling a legitimate gendered and refereeing identity**

Some studies have found that, similar to female golfers, female footballers resist dominant image stereotypes of masculine sports by embracing emphasized femininity.<sup>71</sup> However, in contrast to these findings, the participants in this study tend to emphasize the importance of proving their knowledge to gain acceptance and overcome the stereotypes of female referees. Rather than conforming to gender stereotypes, Kate explained why she preferred people 'focus on [her] performance as a referee as opposed to [her] appearance'. She added:

I am one hundred percent a referee before I am a female! I don't make decisions based on my gender I base my decisions on my ability as an official.

Like Rosie, Kate felt under more pressure as a female referee because she 'needs to do a better job [than a male referee]' so that her gender isn't questioned. Kate felt the need to deflect attention from her gender, but her frustration was also very explicit:

Pretty much every game... it's always, every decision you make you've made it because you're a female... not because you're a referee. The ball will go out of play and you'll put your arm up to say it was say a blue ball and you'll here everyone going 'oh females can't ref' but that decision was me just establishing which colour had kicked the ball out... it has nothing to do with whether I was male or female. It's irrelevant. It doesn't matter.

Similarly, Rosie believed that female football officials' decisions received more scrutiny than those made by male officials because: 'to be an average [female] referee [women] have to be better than average; better than every man.' As McGinnis *et al.*<sup>72</sup> found, women in male dominated sports are under increased scrutiny and performance pressure.

Although what is recognized as acceptable feminine behaviour has shifted from the mistaken traditional view of women as weak and submissive, Jeanes<sup>73</sup> suggests that restrictive norms surrounding the female body have been maintained. The idealized woman continues to be underpinned by traditional feminine discourses concerning appearance and presentation.<sup>74</sup> Similar themes have been identified by existing research on women's football. Although some female football players are challenging dominant masculine values by participating in football they still feel compelled to legitimize their participation by constructing an idealized feminine appearance both on and off the pitch.<sup>75</sup>

The female football official's identity construction in this study both supported and contested the idea of a legitimate female identity. Kate showed some resistance by consciously wearing clothes that did not emphasize her femininity when officiating. When officiating older boys 'who are more likely to have an opinion' Kate opts to wear a bigger kit to ensure that she does not draw more unwanted attention to herself as a female. Conversely, Rosie is conscious of her image as a female when refereeing in a different way:

[removed for blind review]: Do you feel conscious that you're a female refereeing a men's game?

Rosie: Yeah I do. [When] I'm getting changed for a match I'm thinking [about my appearance]... Everyone mocks you because you put make up on... and I'm not doing it for any other reason than my own self-confidence.

For these female football officials, reconciling a gendered identity with a legitimate football refereeing identity highlighted the complex and abstract area of identity construction. Kate made a conscious effort to devalue her feminine identity when officiating, as she wanted to appear 'authoritative'.

There was a mixed response about the importance of drawing attention to being a female referee. Although Kate didn't try to draw attention to her sex instead preferring to 'let [her] officiating do the talking', she was very aware of her femaleness and other people's perceptions of her:

[removed for blind review]: Do you draw attention to the fact that you are a female referee?

Kate: No I just arrive and do my job, I never really elaborate on questions surrounding the fact I am a female official, like sometimes I've had managers say they've had females before and they haven't been very good, and my response is something along the lines of 'well you haven't had me yet' this normally does the job.

Although Kate consciously avoided drawing attention to her sex, it is common for this to be discussed by others.

[removed for blind review]: Do other people draw attention to your gender?

Kate: Yeah. I've never ever reffed a game where it hasn't been pointed out!

[removed for blind review]: Why do you think they do that?

Kate: Because they haven't adapted to the idea that football is no longer a man's game, and there is a place for females as officials, players and coaches.

The contradictions that female football officials have to negotiate to be considered legitimate members of the football community were apparent throughout the observations and interviews. In constructing a legitimate identity women often found themselves in a precarious position. However, research on women in other traditionally male arenas, such as male dominated

occupations, can help comprehend such ambiguities. Like the female football fans in Jones's<sup>76</sup> study, female officials, and females in male dominated occupations are considered a threat to the masculine image and domination of these spaces. Being subjected to hostility and sexual harassment is a way for men to reassert their dominance over women, thus reconfirming the gender order.<sup>77</sup> As a result, and as the findings of this study have confirmed, women have to consistently negotiate this complex contradiction in an effort to be accepted as legitimate members of the football community.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences of women referees are clearly not all bad; it is unlikely that they would continue to referee if all their experiences were negative. However, the purpose of this research was to identify those aspects of football culture that impact negatively on these match officials. It is important to note that the women in this study chose to follow the male referee pathway (for more information on the two pathways visit the Football Association website). This does not restrict them to only officiating men's football matches; however it prohibits them from passing assessments on the female pathway to gain promotion on the male pathway. Bearing this in mind, the women do an exceptional job of supporting men's and boy's football participation, especially considering the hostile and sexist reactions that their presence entails. The research findings suggest that attitudes towards female football officials are embedded within a wider culture of abuse directed at referees in general. Not only do women have to negotiate such abuse, the findings of the present research illustrate that female football officials also have to contend with sexist abuse.

Perceptions of female officials were widely based on gender stereotypes. The women in this study often found that their competence as football officials was questioned even before they had entered the field of play. The stereotypical image of female football officials was reinforced through language used by players, managers, coaches and spectators. If any of the men perceived an official's decision to be incorrect they quickly asserted that 'females can't ref'. This was problematic for the women in this study as they often felt that they were representative of all female football officials. As a result, the women in this study put themselves under increased pressure to get decisions right and rebut the misconception. In short, women involved in sports that were traditionally the preserve of men often feel under increased performance pressure.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, female officials had to contend with both hostile sexist abuse as well as more subtle forms of 'benevolent' sexist views of women's roles.

Congruent with findings from Jones's<sup>79</sup> study on female football fans, the female football officials in this study downplay or ignore sexist comments as a strategy to respond to sexism in football. Some of the women argued that male officials are also subject to abuse from players, managers and spectators and that such abuse was a fundamental part of football. By comparing sexist abuse with other forms of abuse, the women legitimized this type of behaviour. However, there were some cases when the women in this study challenged sexism. They believed that although they could handle being on the receiving end of such abuse, younger officials may not be 'as thick skinned' and this consequently could have a detrimental effect on recruiting future female football officials.

The women in this study both conformed to and resisted dominant notions of femininity whilst refereeing. Some of the women consciously tried to avoid being feminine and placed more emphasis on their identity as a football official. However, there were instances when the women emphasized their femininity, through language and constructing a feminine appearance. Confirmation that constructing a gender identity for women in football was a complex task full of restrictions and contradictions.<sup>80</sup> As a result, men reaffirmed their superiority over women, in particular through the use of sexist language and ideas about the place of women in football.

The findings of this project highlight the importance of studying underrepresented populations within football culture, and contribute to knowledge on women's experiences within male footballing contexts. Although the experiences of women in football have been heavily explored, there is a paucity of literature exploring the experiences of women within men's football culture. Without a specific anti-sexist policy in place within football, women will continue to be marginalized and experience sexism within football culture. Dismissing sexist abuse as 'political correctness gone mad' is reminiscent of similar arguments that were apparent before football introduced an anti-racism campaign. Anti-sexism campaigns could begin to challenge sexist ideologies about the place of women in football. Furthermore, from the observations during this study, it seems that abuse towards football officials is a central part of some football players, managers and fans identities.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Caudwell, 'Gender, Feminism and Football Studies'; Jones, 'Female Fandom'.
- <sup>2</sup> Griggs and Biscomb, 'Theresa Bennett's 42'; Jones, 'Female Fandom'; Pfister *et al.* 'Women and Football'; Scraton *et al.* 'It's Still a Man's Game'; Stirling and Schulz, 'Women's Football'.
- <sup>3</sup> Caudwell, 'Gender, Feminism and Football Studies'; Jones, 'Female Fandom'.
- <sup>4</sup> Jones and Edwards, 'The Woman in Black'.
- <sup>5</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom'.
- <sup>6</sup> Jones and Edwards, 'The Woman in Black'.
- <sup>7</sup> The concept of hegemonic masculinity has had a significant and widespread impact on the study of sex, gender and sexuality within the sport studies literature. That is not to say that the concept has been uncritically accepted among scholars. For a critical examination of the concept of masculine hegemony, and its usefulness as a means of understanding gender and gender relations, see Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and, more recently, Anderson (2011).
- <sup>8</sup> Scraton *et al.*, 'Bend it like Patel'.
- <sup>9</sup> Caudwell, 'Women's Football in the UK'; Caudwell, 'Women's Experiences of Sexuality in Football Contexts'; Caudwell, 'Sporting Gender'; Cox and Thompson, 'Facing the Bogey'; Cox and Thompson, 'Multiple bodies'; Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'; Mennesson and Clement, 'Homosociability and Homosexuality'; Scraton *et al.* 'It's Still a Man's Game'.
- <sup>10</sup> Caudwell, 'Gender, Feminism and Football Studies'.
- <sup>11</sup> Harris, 'No You can't Play You're a Girl'; Jones, 'Female Fandom'; Pope, 'The Meaning of Sport'; Scraton *et al.* 'It's Still a Man's Game'.
- <sup>12</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/get\\_involved/4660333.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/get_involved/4660333.stm)
- <sup>13</sup> Bruce, 'Never let the Bastards see you Cry'; Caudwell, 'Gender, Feminism and Football Studies'; Hargreaves, 'Sporting Females'; Jones, 'Female Fandom'; Lenskij, 'Sport and the Threat to Gender Boundaries'; Scraton *et al.* 'It's Still a Man's Game'.
- <sup>14</sup> Caudwell, 'Gender, Feminism and Football Studies'; Jones, 'Female Fandom'; Pope, "'The love of my life": The Meaning and Importance of Sport for Female Fans'.
- <sup>15</sup> Caudwell, 'Women's football in the UK'; Caudwell, 'Hackney Women's Football Club'; Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'; Magee *et al.*, 'Women, football and Europe'; Scraton *et al.* 'It's Still a Man's Game'.
- <sup>16</sup> Cox and Thompson, 'Facing the Bogey'; Cox and Thompson, 'Multiple Bodies'; Mennesson and Clement, 'Homosociability and Homosexuality'.
- <sup>17</sup> Pelak, 'Women and Gender in South Africa'; Ratna, 'A Fair Game?'; Scraton *et al.*, 'Bend it like Patel'; Watson and Scraton, 'Leisure Studies and Intersectionality'.
- <sup>18</sup> Graham, McKenna and Fleming, "'What d'you know, you're a girl!": Gendered experiences of sport coach education; Jones, 'Female Fandom'; Pope, "'The love of my life": The Meaning and Importance of Sport for Female Fans'.
- <sup>19</sup> Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'.
- <sup>20</sup> Harris, 'No You can't Play You're a Girl'; Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'.
- <sup>21</sup> McGinnis *et al.*, 'I Just Want to Play', 314.
- <sup>22</sup> Rubin, 'The Offside Rule'.
- <sup>23</sup> Lenskij, 'Sport and the Threat to Gender Boundaries'; Rubin, 'The Offside Rule'.
- <sup>24</sup> Jones and Edwards, 'The Woman in Black'.
- <sup>25</sup> J. Williams, 'The Fastest Growing Sport?', 115.
- <sup>26</sup> J. Williams, 'The Fastest Growing Sport?', 126.
- <sup>27</sup> Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'.
- <sup>28</sup> Charlton, "'Bad" Girls Versus "Good" Girls'.
- <sup>29</sup> Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'.
- <sup>30</sup> Caudwell, 'Gender, Feminism and Football Studies'; Pope, "'The love of my life'".
- <sup>31</sup> Bruce, 'Never let the Bastards see you Cry', 71.
- <sup>32</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom'.
- <sup>33</sup> Reay, 'Spice Girls'.

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- <sup>34</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom'.
- <sup>35</sup> There are, however, signs of growing interest in the experiences of women involved in the non-playing roles within football culture. See again, Graham, McKenna and Fleming, "'What d'you know, you're a girl!': Gendered experiences of sport coach education"; Pope, "'The love of my life': The Meaning and Importance of Sport for Female Fans'.
- <sup>36</sup> Bruce, 'Never let the Bastards see you Cry'.
- <sup>37</sup> Bruce, 'Supportive or Hostile?'.
- <sup>38</sup> Bruce, 'Never let the Bastards see you Cry'; Bruce, 'Supportive or Hostile?'.
- <sup>39</sup> Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'; Lenskij, 'Sport and the Threat to Gender Boundaries'; Reay, 'Spice Girls'; Rubin, 'The Offside Rule'.
- <sup>40</sup> Caudwell, 'Gender, Feminism and Football Studies'.
- <sup>41</sup> Davis, 'The Ladies of Besiktas'.
- <sup>42</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom', 528.
- <sup>44</sup> Cox and Thompson, 'Multiple Bodies'; Harris, 'The Image Problem in Women's Football'; Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'.
- <sup>45</sup> Jones and Edwards, 'The Woman in Black', 209.
- <sup>46</sup> Kitzinger, 'Is 'Woman' Always Relevantly Gendered?', 43.
- <sup>47</sup> Cox and Thompson, 'Facing the Bogey'; Cox and Thompson, 'Multiple Bodies'; Harris, 'The Image Problem in Women's Football'; Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'; Jones, 'Female Fandom'; Mennesson and Clement, 'Homosociability and Homosexuality'.
- <sup>48</sup> Biggam, *Succeeding with your Masters Dissertation*.
- <sup>49</sup> Wagg *et al.*, *Key Concepts in Sports Studies*.
- <sup>50</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*.
- <sup>51</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to the multiple meanings attached to the term 'pink' and its contentious place within feminism.
- <sup>52</sup> M. Williams, 'Generalizations in Interpretive Research'.
- <sup>53</sup> M. Williams, 'Generalizations in Interpretive Research', 136-137.
- <sup>54</sup> M. Williams, 'Generalizations in Interpretive Research'.
- <sup>55</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*.
- <sup>56</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom'.
- <sup>57</sup> Mean, 'Identity and Discursive Practice'.
- <sup>58</sup> Bruce, 'Supportive or Hostile?'.
- <sup>59</sup> Jones and Edwards, 'The Woman in Black', 202.
- <sup>60</sup> McGinnis *et al.* 'I Just Want to Play'.
- <sup>61</sup> Aicher and Sagas, 'Gender Stereotypes and the Effects of Sexism' (paper presented at the North American Society for Sport Management Conference, South Carolina, USA, May 27-30, 2009).
- <sup>62</sup> Glick and Fiske, 'Ambivalent Sexism Inventory'.
- <sup>63</sup> Bruce, 'Supportive or Hostile?'.
- <sup>64</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom', 528.
- <sup>65</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom', 528.
- <sup>66</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom'.
- <sup>67</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom', 526.
- <sup>68</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom', 526.
- <sup>69</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom', 522.
- <sup>70</sup> Bradbury *et al.*, 'Structural Discrimination in Football'.
- <sup>71</sup> Cox and Thompson, 'Multiple Bodies'; Harris, 'The Image Problem in Women's Football'; McGinnis *et al.* 'I Just Want to Play'.
- <sup>72</sup> McGinnis *et al.*, 'I Just Want to Play'.
- <sup>73</sup> Cox and Thompson, 'Multiple Bodies'; Harris, 'The Image Problem in Women's Football'; McGinnis *et al.* 'I Just Want to Play'.
- <sup>74</sup> McRobbie, *The aftermath of feminism*.
- <sup>75</sup> Cox and Thompson, 'Multiple Bodies'; Harris, 'The Image Problem in Women's Football'; Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'.
- <sup>76</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom'.

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<sup>77</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom'; Lenskij, 'Sport and the Threat to Gender Boundaries'.

<sup>78</sup> McGinnis *et al.* 'I Just Want to Play'.

<sup>79</sup> Jones, 'Female Fandom'.

<sup>80</sup> Charlton, "'Bad' Girls Versus 'Good' Girls"; Jeanes, 'I'm into High Heels and Make Up'.

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