Gender politics in British university sport: exploring contemporary perceptions of femininity and masculinity

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Abstract
This chapter aims to discover the impact of contemporary perceptions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' on the experiences, beliefs and actions of female university athletes. In doing so, this chapter discusses the experiences of 12 university female athletes to explore gender hegemony and gender politics in British university sport. Structures that influence people's beliefs and perceptions are explored, specifically looking at the notions of hegemony, hegemonic masculinity, and how political and civil society spread ideas to make them the norm. These concepts are used to critically reflect upon the emergent themes from semi-structured interviews held with female athletes. In particular, consideration is given to: 1) what the words 'feminine' and 'masculine' mean to them, 2) how they believe their peers perceive female athletes, 3) their experiences in sport as a female throughout their life and at university. These themes allow scope to critically reflect upon gender roles and relations in university sport whilst creating opportunities to consider how university sport cultures can be enhanced to ensure equality between females and males within this domain.

Introduction

To say women and sport have had a tumultuous history would be an understatement; however, opportunities for women have significantly increased, with women now able to play and compete in most sports (Reeser, 2005; Senne, 2016). Nonetheless, women still have significantly lower participation rates, there is pay disparity amongst most sports, and women's sport is largely underrepresented in the media (Connell, 2002, 2012; Trolan, 2013; Fink, 2015; Mullins, 2015). It is necessary to understand what obstacles remain in place, whether this is institutional sexism or lingering attitudes regarding an aversion to women in sport (Messner, 1992; Senne, 2016).

This chapter explores these factors within a British university setting, as universities and education systems can be viewed as gendered institutions (Connell, 2008). Drawing upon original empirical research, the chapter aims to discover what the impact of contemporary perceptions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' currently hold for female athletes in British

university sport, exploring the experiences of female athletes in relation to how gender roles and relations are negotiated in university sport.

In contrast to the comparatively well-resourced nature of university sport in the North American context, where the impact of Title IX legislation has partially redressed the relative underfunding of female sport (Brake, 2010; Yiamouyiannis and Osborne, 2012; Belanger, 2017), British university sport is significantly less professionalised, is predominantly focused on sub-elite participation, and therefore possesses a relatively lower relative status (Brunton and Mackintosh, 2017; Phipps, 2020, 2021). Nonetheless, as Phipps (2021, p.82) argues "sport is often perceived as an integral and significant part of student life in the UK, with universities a space where students often try new sports for the first time, playing an important role in making students feel part of their new environment". As gendered inequalities in terms of status, funding and provision for female university sport in Britain remain evident (Brunton and St Quinton, 2020; Ogilvie and McCormack, 2020), the gendered politics of this important facet of the British sporting system deserves attention. To this end, we will scrutinise the discourse of traditional gender roles in sport (Markula, 2001; Connell, 2008), and the historical context of women in sport that shows how women have been seen as the 'other' (Messner, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994; Connell, 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Structures that influence these beliefs and perceptions are explored, specifically looking at the notions of 'hegemony' and 'hegemonic masculinity' derived from the work of Antonio Gramsci and R.W. Connell (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1998; Connell, 2002; Carrington and McDonald, 2009; Connell, 2012).

Hegemony, gender politics, and sport
Gramsci and Connell - 'hegemony' and the subordination of femininity
Antonio Gramsci explains the structures within society and how they can be countered using the concepts of 'hegemony'. Hegemony is what Gramsci uses to describe the system of alliance and power relations of society's ruling groups and the ways in which this position of power is sustained. For the chapter, the development and adaptation of this theory to the way males exercise authority over women will be considered; this is called hegemonic masculinity (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1998; Connell, 2005). The concept of hegemony is used to describe the cultural dynamic by which a leading position in society is asserted and maintained by a group (Connell, 2005).

Derived from this border conceptualisation of hegemony, hegemonic masculinity refers to the pattern of gender relations that enables men to gain dominance over women, and the continuation of dominance (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is not

necessarily a specific set of characteristics; but the form of masculinity that inhabits the hegemonic position (Connell, 2005). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is differentiated from other forms of masculinity, specifically subordinated forms, such as those from working classes and homosexual men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The dominant form of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, is constructed as not working class, gay, black, and importantly, not feminine (Kimmel, Hearn and Connell, 2005). However, those who hold institutional power or wealth might be in their personal lives, far from the hegemonic pattern, and those who most visibly display hegemonic masculinity may just be exemplars, such as sports stars (Connell, 2005, 2011).

Acknowledging this diversity in masculinity is not adequate; therefore, hegemonic masculinity sought to recognise the relations between various masculinities - dominance, alliance and subordination (Connell, 2005). Connell (2009) states that gender is not a fixed system but instead always open to change due to its complex structure that is full of tension and historically changing. Within masculinity, gender politics is present, and through practices of exclusion, exploitation and intimidation, these relations are constructed (Connell, 2005). Connell (2008) reiterates that the various patterns of masculinity are not equally available or respected. Most present in American and European societies is the dominance of heterosexual men, with oppression positioning homosexual men at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among masculinities (Connell, 2005). This is a result of 'gayness', from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity, being easily associated with femininity which may explain the ferocity of homophobic attacks (Connell, 2005).

Similarly to normative definitions of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity faces the same problem that not a great deal of men actually meet hegemonic standards of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, hegemonic masculinity can also be seen as normative in the sense that it embodies what is the most esteemed way of being a man, and all other men must position themselves around it (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity "ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.832). Men in general gain from the subordination of women; therefore, another key relation among masculinity is that of complicit hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Connell (2005) suggests that masculinities that are constructed so that they can receive the benefits of the patriarchy, without running the risks of being viewed as on the front lines of the patriarchy, are complicit.

As demonstrated above, hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities, but also to what Connell (1987) describes as 'emphasised femininity'.

Emphasised femininity is grounded in heterosexuality and associated with white, middle class, traditionally feminine women (Mattsson, 2015; Domeneghetti, 2019). Cockburn and Clarke (2002) suggest that to show emphasised femininity is to appear conventionally pretty and fashionable, paying a significant amount of attention to one's appearance. Connell (1987) suggests that emphasised femininity is constructed as a subordinated counterpart to hegemonic masculinity and is often performed specifically to men. Although it is based on subordination, emphasised femininity represents a femininity that is very strong and, therefore, Connell (1987) states that it can cultivate legitimacy and acceptance for women.

Women who represent a femininity close to emphasised femininity do so based on heterosexuality, which in turn creates specific ideas about how women should present themselves (Mattsson, 2015). Connell (1987) argues that emphasised femininity is not a position that has the potential to challenge gender structures as it is still based on their subordination and a response to men's preferences. Women may be able to gain a small amount of power through occupying this position, but it will never be enough to oppose male dominance (Mattsson, 2015). For example, those who fit the pattern of emphasised femininity could be less marginalised than other femininities such as lesbianism, but are still subordinated by men as they are obliging to the desires of masculinity (Connell, 1987; Domeneghetti, 2019). Therefore, the term 'emphasised' was specifically used instead of 'hegemonic' as this form of femininity is grounded in current gender relations, existing in a patriarchal society where all femininities must be constructed in the context of female subordination (Connell, 1987; Domeneghetti, 2019).

As illustrated above, the work of Connell is heavily influenced by Gramsci's concept of hegemony and the relations of dominance and subordination between groups. Gramsci explains in more detail the dynamics of these relations and, thus, how power is gained and maintained. Gramsci states that, instead of coercion, hegemony is obtained through consent by the ruled groups positively receiving the values and attitudes disseminated by the ruling class (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1998). Traditional social relations are often supported in these attitudes and values, therefore making the ruling class ideologies become common sense. Gramsci outlines the different structures in society within which these ideologies and values are disseminated, naming them 'civil society' (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith,1998). Examples of civil society include religion, education, and the media - and, in the current day, social media and sport (Carrington and McDonald, 2009).

The above theories are relevant to the current discussion of gender politics as they offer an insight into the wider workings of power relations between the ruling and subordinated groups

in society. As universities are an important aspect of the education system, they constitute part of the structures which Gramsci refers to as 'civil society' (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith,1998; Carrington and McDonald, 2009). These concepts can therefore be used to examine how universities perpetuate hegemonic norms regarding femininity and masculinity, and are therefore highly relevant when examining gender politics in university sport.

Gramsci, Connell, and gender in sport and university sport
Sport is a critical location for patriarchal values and structures, masculine hegemony, to be constructed and reconstructed; it is seen as a significant part of the exclusivist self-sustaining male culture (Connell, 2012). In a sporting context, the limitations of male and female bodies are put on display and their capacities debated (Messner, 2002). Women's sporting performances are pitted against men's with their times, distances, and skills compared and discussed. Connell (2012) states that sport has become a key apparatus of gender hegemony in wealthy countries and a crucial feature of masculine imagery.

Within society and sport, hegemonic masculinity endorses an idealised version of masculinity that focuses on competitiveness, aggression and force, marginalising women and men that do not adhere to this form of masculinity (McKay, 1997; Connell, 2012). Consequently, an idealised form of femininity, being delicate and fragile, is also encouraged through hegemonic masculinity, and, as Messner (1992) suggests, the aggressive characteristics of sport have sought to counter feminisation. Consequently, the arguably sexist, aggressive, and violent culture that sport historically possessed, meant that the introduction of women was not widely accepted (Senne, 2016).

Hegemonic masculinity works to maintain these ideologies of femininity and masculinity most effectively through civil society, particularly the media and sporting governing bodies where females are largely underrepresented and male interest dominates (Connell, 2002; Trolan, 2013; Fink, 2015; Mullins, 2015). It is men who own teams, earn significantly higher salaries, and in both women's and men's sports, dominate coaching positions (Connell, 2012). The amount of coverage of women's sport in traditional media outlets is also significantly lower than that of their male counterparts (Cooky, Messner and Hextrum, 2013). In addition to this, sport remains male dominated through pitting women's performance against a hegemonic masculine standard (Connell, 2012). Furthermore, and pertinently for the current analysis, gendered inequalities such as this are evident in the gender politics of sport in the domain of educational institutions.

Connell (2008) shows how gender and masculinity is constructed in physical education and sport in schools. These areas of the curricula have a large capacity to promote hegemonic forms of masculinity and therefore can be viewed as 'masculine vortices' (Connell, 2008; Mooney and Hickey, 2012). Connell (2008) states that due to the strongly-ingrained histories and working patterns of the education system, these organisations are gendered. It has long been acknowledged that there is a connection between the construction of masculinity and sports in childhood, and schools provide the foundations for this process (Messner, 1990; Connell, 2008). Physical education and sport are prone to benefit those who most embody, and comply with, hegemonic masculinity (Pringle, 2008; Mooney and Hickey, 2012). Certain sports which involve violence and physical confrontation are seen as a test of manhood; they therefore become intertwined with the definition of hegemonic masculinity in schools (Connell, 2008).

This chapter explores whether universities continue to promote hegemonic masculinity through sport in this same fashion in the British context. In contrast to the abundance of literature on the North American context, to date there has been a relative lack of consideration of the British context (Brunton and Mackintosh, 2017). For example, Phipps' recent (2020, 2021) work has scrutinised the extent to which British universities have successfully tackled gendered and homophobic discrimination in university sport, emphasising the ongoing challenges faced in achieving such goals. Furthermore, Ogilvie and McCormack's (2020) study of the impact of 'gender-collaborative' training opportunities in British university sport highlighted similarly entrenched gender hierarchies and segregation, whilst illustrating the potential for challenging gender dichotomies through mixed-gender sports participation. However, notwithstanding these recent contributions, the gendered nature of British university sport, and the extent to which gender politics continues to blight the experiences of female participants, remains under-explored.

Methods

This chapter aims to discover barriers preventing women having positive experiences in sport and exercise at university, with a specific focus on gender politics within the university sport context. The current research employed a feminist methodology and collected all the data from women's perspectives. As Walters (2005) states, the most trustworthy information about these topics is women's lived experiences. This challenges traditional gendered science which has previously cast women in passive roles and prohibited them from scientific practices due to being 'emotional' and 'incapable of reason' (Somekh and Lewin, 2006). Weiner (2004) gives three main principles as a guide to feminist research, with the first stating that it should include a critique of the assumptions about women and the unexamined forms of knowledge that are

dominant. The other principles state that feminist research should be committed to improving opportunities for females, and that research should develop professional and personal practices that are fair for women (Weiner, 2004). In this light, feminist research should have a feminist perspective, not just methodology, and should include an ongoing criticism of non-feminist scholarship to bring about social change; this is called emancipatory feminist work (Somekh and Lewin, 2006). This is in keeping with the aim of this chapter, so that interventions can be put in place to allow women a more positive experience in university sport.

Interviews were used to obtain an in-depth understanding of not just what can be inferred from the experiences these women talk about, but also their own point of view and the impact of these experiences on their behaviour. Participants were recruited through promotional material at a university in England. The sample size was 12, allowing for interviews of an in-depth nature for each participant (ranging from 19 to 57 minutes in length). The age range of the participants was 19-23 years. All participants were current students who were or had been a member of a sports team at the university. The interviews consisted of questions centring on: a) what the words 'feminine' and 'masculine' mean to them; b) how they believe their peers perceive female athletes; c) their experiences in sport as a female throughout their life and at university; and d) how these experiences have influenced how they act now. Pseudonyms were used in the discussion for the participants' names for anonymity.

The interview-data was analysed through coding and thematic analysis, with themes being determined in a cyclical process between data and theory, i.e., the work of Gramsci and Connell. The thematic analysis approach followed a process of open and axial coding, with the themes subsequently allocated to subcategories aligned with the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, thus allowing for an abductive process which oscillated between inductive analysis and theoretical categorisation (Macdonald and Armour, 2012; Atkinson, 2017; Veal, 2018)

Discussion

Hegemonic masculinity, male superiority and female inferiority in university sport

One of the principal themes that emerged from the interviews regarding gender politics was that of the double standards the university's female athletes face. Simone (cheerleader) explains how some of the university staff judge female and male athletes differently:

> ...they [staff] literally just focus on what they're wearing all the time... 'they're [cheerleaders] not wearing anything'... like, 'they're showing too much skin, they

look like baby prostitutes'. … they don't focus on that when rowers are walking around with… no shirts on.

Similar criticisms are not offered up for the same actions of men, suggesting how hegemonic masculinity operates within sport to legitimate the subordination of women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The problem for those who criticise is not with the actions, but with the women. The examples Simone gives shows how athletes are sexualised and infantilised, by comparing them to 'baby prostitutes'. This is another tactic used by male members of the university staff to undermine and marginalise their athletic ability, thus maintaining male superiority. A similar experience was shared by Nina (gymnast):

...spectators would be like 'why do they wear stuff like that?'... 'why do they dress like little prostitutes?'... actually, it's not us that chooses to look like that - that's actually the sport that puts us on it.

The hegemony of gymnastics and various other sports set these uniforms that are revealing and draw sexualised attention to the female athletes' appearance; they are then used against the athletes to criticise them and diminish their athletic ability (Connell, 2002; Trolan, 2013; Mullins, 2015).

It is not only uniforms that female athletes are subject to criticism for, but also their athletic physiques due to looking too 'manly'. Most participants have received criticism for looking 'too muscular', or are at least aware of other female athletes having or fearing this criticism:

...'no one wants an athletic body' and 'it takes away their femininity', and stuff like that… everyone goes 'but don't do that because then you'll get bulky and then you'll look like a man'. (Katherine, rower)

Instead of being accepted as a by-product of their sport and celebrated for their athletic achievement, women's muscular bodies are attacked. This is a result of a strong muscular body being counter to hegemonic ideas of femininity, being delicate (Messner, 1992). As Connell (1987) states, those who represent femininities contrasting to emphasised femininity are marginalised to an even greater extent; in the British university sport context, such marginalisation has also led to homophobic labelling of female participants (Phipps, 2020). Women who are not conventionally pretty or who have an image that is assumed to be associated with masculinity do not align with emphasised femininity and therefore are lower in the gender hierarchy (Cockburn and Clarke, 2002). This is due to emphasised femininity

being based on heterosexuality and men's desires, therefore anything outside of this is further subordinated by masculinities (Connell, 1987).

With sport being an arena where female and male bodies, and their proficiencies, are put on display, it is commonly used as an institution to affirm the male body's superiority (Messner, 2005):

> … female sports are kind of looked down as being, like, weaker… it's like Carly Lloyd... she's on a US women's team for soccer… kicked a 50-yard field goal and… everyone's like 'well, girls like still can't do that'... it's like, 'we can', even though like we're looked down on as being like less athletic... (Kerri, volleyballer)

It is widely known that females and males have biological differences, meaning that women and men compete separately in sports, as is the case for the majority of sports in the British university sport system (Ogilvie and McCormack, 2020). However, as Ayeisha (hockey player) explains, this is often used as an argument against the participation of women in sport:

> ...'oh, you know, if men and women are equal, why don't they compete against each other?' It's not that they shouldn't do it because they aren't equal - it's because their biology is completely different.

Ayeisha gives an example of how people attempt to use biological determinism to subordinate women in sport. This is extremely detrimental as it suggests that the only purpose of sport is to compete at an elite level, yet British university sport has a much more complex place in society with it also being a cultural and social activity (Brunton and Mackintosh, 2017). Echoing Phipps' (2021) arguments, this aspect of British university sport reinforces a binary view of the female and male bodies, erroneously presuming all men to have a genetic predisposition to be a good athlete and the opposite for women (Connell, 2002). Katherine (rower) informs us how these views manifest themselves across sports and at the university:

> ...I feel like it's, especially at uni it's really male orientated and people don't see like some female sports as a sport.

It is not just through structural aspects but as Katherine states, there is an attitude towards women's sports that views them as lesser and in some cases not even as 'real sports'. This supports the notion that sport is used to promote masculine imagery and cultivate gender hegemony (Connell, 2012), whilst providing further evidence of the potential benefits for

challenging this gender essentialism through the 'gender-collaborative training' opportunities recommended in Ogilvie and McCormack's (2020) recent work on the British university sport context.

As Maya (basketballer) states, the underfunding of female sports results in sport not being a viable career option for women. Therefore, there are lower participation rates at university level, with only 49% of female students taking part in physical activity once a week compared to 65% of males (Women in Sport, 2017):

> ...females have no career out of sport. Basically, they don't really get the chance…
> So, there's less opportunity and less chance for them to succeed usually in sport,
> so I think the discouragement comes from there...

Through the huge disparity between pay and funding for women's and men's sports, attitudes supporting male dominance and female subordination filter down to the amateur and novice levels (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Universities are not immune to the attitudes of wider society and many of these issues are present within British university sport as well, compounded by the lack of a legislative instrument in the British context which has yielded the same effects as Title IX has in the American system (Ogilvie and McCormack, 2020; Phipps, 2021).

Gender politics in university sport
This section further examines the gender politics within British university sport, exploring how male dominance remains and is mirrored from wider society to universities. These attitudes are made apparent in the form of microaggressions, everyday brief communications that become normalised and insult women's sporting abilities (Allen and Frisby, 2017). Allen and Frisby (2017) identify many instances of microaggressions in sports media based on female athletes' attractiveness and race, whilst sexually objectifying them. Nina (gymnast) describes an example in a university sport context:

> ...[a senior member of staff] at my university... described our female rowing team
> as 'a social rowing team'. It was in the context of why the novice rowers often train
> with the female team, and he was like 'that's because it's more of our social rowing
> team'... Both male and female are, like, international, like, elite athletes, and
> therefore to describe international GB rowers as 'social rowers' is like the most
> patronising thing I've ever heard.

Here we see how female athletes can participate in sport, reaching elite level, yet are still not taken seriously. It is to be expected that there is a culture within the university that sees female athletes as second class to men when this is the attitude held by senior staff members at the university, echoing the arguments of Yiamouyiannis and Osborne's (2012) work on the American university sport context. Many of the participants expressed the belief that the university's male sports teams were significantly prioritised in various ways:

> ...men get the training times they want for the gym… The girls, we get like 7am in the morning, and they get midday and times they'd rather, and I think that's really unfair… we're like in the same league as them [men] and doing better in the league than them… (Ellen, hockey player)

Putting more emphasis on male sports suggests that traditional 'masculine' attributes such as strength and athletic ability are only valued for the male students to possess, thus legitimising the 'lad culture' of British university sport (Phipps and Young, 2015; Phipps, 2020). This highlights how education systems are gendered organisations and construct gender through their practices (Connell, 2008). Whilst Students' Unions can go some way to challenge such practices, their diminishing political status within British university life means that power has been centralised by university staff and management (Brooks et al., 2015). This lack of interest in the female sports teams and the prioritisation of the men's teams will deter many people from taking part in sport, which again keeps sport in the male domain.

This attitude towards women's sport manifests itself structurally as well, meaning that women are not given the opportunities or resources needed to succeed. As Caitlin (netballer) explained:

> I think females across whatever level have to be pushed. They have to push themselves a bit more to be seen, to be noticed and to be recognised. I think the elite have to work a lot harder to be female elite athletes than males.

This automatic prioritisation of male athletes displays male hegemony within the university, an aspect of civil society, favouring the men's teams until the women's teams have proven themselves 'worthy' of the same treatment. This highlights sports' tendency to advantage those who most embody hegemonic masculinity, and marginalise femininity (Mooney and Hickey, 2012).

As well as stereotypes surrounding the more masculine sports, female dominated sports and those perceived as more feminine are also subject to stigmatisation:

> as in cheerleaders, they're all like really pretty, and skinny, and airheads, is probably like a stereotype. (Ellen, hockey player)

> netball for sure is known as... you're like blonde, like tanned, quite tall girls, quite bitchy... cheerleaders have a different kind of stereotype as well just 'cause you're... like, I don't know... like quite, I don't know if it's bad to say, like more like catty, like quite glammed-up girls. (Caitlin, netballer)

It is not just women who perform masculinity that are the subject of negative stereotypes; even those who perform femininity or 'emphasised femininity', what society expects and wants from women, cannot escape them. Due to the gender hierarchy and hegemony, femininity is subordinated through these stereotypes and language (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic power is at play here through the women adhering more closely to traditional ideologies of femininity. Some of these stereotypes are maintained by women to allow them to be viewed as more feminine and therefore more acceptable to others in society, showing how consent for these ideologies has been ascertained.

Emphasised femininity is grounded in the acceptance of existing gender relations (Mattson, 2015); females may therefore try to gain some form of power through embracing what are seen as more feminine activities. However, as Connell (1987) states, all forms of femininity are constructed in the context of male domination and therefore cannot challenge the current gender relations. Instead, those at the university who participate in sports more closely aligned with emphasised femininity, may be slightly higher up in the gender hierarchy than other forms of femininity, but are branded with these stereotypes to ensure their subordination under masculinity. It is ironic that women are so heavily judged by their appearance and there is so much pressure for them to focus on the way they look, yet when they do, especially in the field of sport, they are condemned for it. Many people wish to uphold sport with hegemonic ideologies of masculinity pivotal to its character, and consequently anything that threatens this is fought against through criticism and tactics of ostracisation (Messner, 1992; Connell, 2012).

Conclusions

To conclude, many of the participants expressed how women are objectified and judged on their appearance above all else both in wider society and university sport. The current research confirmed that criticisms of female athletes that are particularly pertinent are those

relating to their muscularity. Comments are made about female athletes looking 'like a man' and losing their femininity as a result of hegemonic ideologies, and the performances of femininity and masculinity, society has become accustomed to (Messner, 1992; Connell, 2002).

Some of the participants also identified stereotypes of 'bitchy' and 'airheads' relating to those in sports such as netball and cheerleading, the more 'feminine' sports within the university. These sports were found to be more rejected by males at the university and society due to hegemonic masculinity rejecting femininity, and sport being founded on ideologies of masculinity that celebrates aggression and competitiveness (Messner, 1992). Many of the participants expressed that they felt female sports were looked down on by others at the university, with them being seen as inferior to men's sport and assumed to be recreational rather than competitive and serious, providing further evidence for the gendered hierarchies found in recent analyses of this context (Ogilvie and McCormack, 2020; Phipps, 2020, 2021). Multiple participants felt that, and had evidence from their experiences, to show how male teams are prioritised by the university, even when they are the same or lower level than the female teams and athletes, perpetuating the discourse around female inferiority and maintaining their subordination (Connell, 2008).

Finally, given that these findings derived from the specific culture of gender politics at one university, it is important that future research should similarly investigate the sporting cultures found across universities in the UK given the lack of existing studies in this area. Such research will allow for further insight into the opportunities available to female athletes within a university setting, as well as the comparative degrees of funding and status available across women's and men's sports at universities. Such understandings will be crucial to ensuring a truly equitable experience for women and men in this context going forward.

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