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## 'Not a place for women': a scoping review exploring women's experiences of sexism while working in sport

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### ABSTRACT

Stories surrounding women's experiences of sexism in sport, despite their prevalence, are often disregarded as purely anecdotal. The objective of this scoping review is to explore what is known from existing qualitative peer-reviewed literature about women's experiences of sexism while working in sport. Six databases were searched for peer-reviewed publications; 40 studies were included following screening and study identification. Descriptive results were analysed and reported. Four general dimensions were inductively developed employing qualitative content analysis, each comprised of categories and sub-categories. General dimensions included *benevolent sexism*, *hostile sexism*, *managing sexism in sport*, and *intersectional pressures*. Sexism was a significant barrier for women, and these experiences were compounded for those with intersecting marginalised identities. Hostile sexism was the most common form of sexism women reported, while benevolent sexism was more insidious and acted to reinforce patriarchal gender norms. Results reflected a dearth of research on individuals with intersecting identities and numerous additional gaps in the peer-reviewed literature. This review presents the first synthesis of qualitative research on women's experiences of sexism in sport workplaces and highlights urgent intersectional gaps.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Sexism; gender; sport; culture; gendered experiences

## Introduction

Gender-based inequity has spanned culture and history, with men possessing significantly more power, resources, and status than women (e.g. Connor et al. 2016). Sport has historically played a key role in maintaining heteronormative white patriarchy; one mechanism by which sport, and society more broadly, does this is through sexism (for a more thorough review, see McGinty-Minister et al. 2024). For the purposes of this review, we adopt the standpoint that sexism is prejudice or discrimination against individual or groups of women (e.g. cis and trans women), or those perceived to be women, based on their sex and/or gender and can include individual, interpersonal, organisational, and broader cultural levels. We conceptualise sexism as manifesting along a continuum from 'everyday' expressions (e.g. stereotyping, dismissal, exclusion), inequity and oppression, through to more overt forms (e.g. harassment, violence; e.g. Jewkes, Flood, and Lang 2015; Heise et al. 2019; McGinty-Minister et al. 2024; Taylor, Sveinson, and Burton 2024). This includes the simultaneous operation of intersecting systems of oppression such as racism, classism, and ableism, and so on, which co-construct gendered marginalisation.

As referenced above, sport has played a pivotal role in inhibiting the progression of women in society. For example, in the last 150 years alone, we see this evidenced through the weaponisation of health and beauty myths about women's capacities to prevent women from engaging in sport and exercise, which has often been used to prevent women's broader societal progression (e.g. Gregg and Taylor 2019; Stromberg 2014). One poignant instance occurred in the late nineteenth century, when strategic propaganda campaigns were run to heavily 'discourage' women from cycling, a key facilitator

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to women's mobility and the suffragette movement (see bicycle face; e.g. Stromberg, 2015). Further, the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth century consisted of banning a multitude of women's sports that encouraged women to gather in groups and speak about their experiences, especially as they began to compete with men's sport in popularity, with a resurgence of women's sports not occurring until the latter half of the twentieth century (e.g. Gregg and Taylor 2019; The Football Association). These are only brief examples of how society has so often used sport as a mechanism of oppression to maintain patriarchal norms (e.g. Anderson 2009).

While many might consider these examples relegated to the history books, women continue to point out the often-problematic manner in which sport culture interacts with women (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2024). With this in mind, it is no surprise that gendered experiences, and sexism more specifically, still impact the women who work in sport to this day. This review specifically focuses on women working in sport (e.g. coaches, practitioners, and organisational roles) in order to examine these mechanisms within sport as a workplace and professional context. Structural and interpersonal sexism normalise women's marginalisation and subsequently create environments where hostility, harassment, and even gender-based violence are more likely to occur, making addressing sexism an urgent priority, especially in hypermasculine cultures, characterised by norms such as gender hierarchy, dominance, aggression, and misogynistic practices, like sport (e.g. Jewkes, Flood, and Lang 2015).

### Sexism in sport

In line with its inception and development, sport has been recognised as a heavily patriarchal subculture dominated by men that often contributes to the backlash against women's progress in society (Anderson 2009; Bourdieu 2001; Faludi 1991; Fink 2016). Recognition of and interest in sexism in sport has grown considerably, with numerous studies demonstrating that sexism is not only present but structurally embedded across sport's systems and cultures (Fink 2016; Goldman and Gervis 2021; McGinty-Minister et al. 2024). From grassroots participation to elite performance, women's experiences in sport are constructed through pervasive gender norms that govern the access and legitimacy of women in sport and even the recognition of women's successes. At the most basic level, patriarchal stereotypes restrict the sports women are encouraged to engage in, with contact, strength, and power-based disciplines still perceived as incompatible with femininity. While historical examples such as the banning of women's football in England from 1921 to 1971 (despite its popularity) illustrate earlier forms of this exclusion, contemporary occurrences reflect the continuing pervasiveness of gendered power imbalances in sport. One recent example is the aftermath of the Spanish women's national team's 2023 World Cup win, where the federation president initiated a non-consensual public kiss with an athlete, highlighting the enduring control exercised over women's bodies in sporting spaces - even in the most public of sporting arenas (e.g. Rodrigo-Jusue et al. 2025). Importantly, there were many reports of sexism in Spanish football *before* an assault occurred on a national stage, which the federation largely ignored; reflecting patriarchy's defence of itself, the federation asked the *athletes* to apologise to for their previous protests about the team's working conditions and allegations of sexist treatment, rather than addressing the players' concerns (e.g. Rodrigo-Jusue et al. 2025; Walker 2025). These poignant moments emblemise the broader regimes of control that operate through interpersonal and institutional mechanisms and are sustained by leadership structures that are overwhelmingly male, homosocial, and often dismissive of gender-based harm (e.g. Taylor, Sveinson, and Burton 2024).

Importantly, this is not confined to football; women athletes across sport and international contexts encounter organisational and interpersonal barriers such as sexualisation, stereotyping, and unequal access to training, coaching, sponsorship, and medical support. In Canada, women ice hockey players have repeatedly called attention to exclusion from professional pathways and inadequate league structures compared to men's systems despite their international success (e.g. Stoopler 2020). In Australia, women in rugby league and Australian rules football have criticised institutionalised sexism, unsafe cultures, and underinvestment (e.g. Toffoletti and Palmer 2019). In the United States, coverage of the Larry Nassar abuse scandal in women's gymnastics illuminated how sexism, safeguarding failures, misogynistic cultures, and institutional neglect can intersect to endanger hundreds of athletes (Kerr, Battaglia, and Stirling 2019). These structural 'failures' are too often

described as isolated incidents of leadership misconduct, deflecting from the patriarchal structures underpinning sport governance and culture. Such framings reflect structural sexism, or the inherent institutional mechanisms that systemically privilege men, and align with analyses of sport as a broader culture where masculinities are actively maintained and sexism remains structurally embedded (Anderson 2009; Fink 2016; Homan 2019). These examples reflect the broader conditions under which women are expected to achieve success despite overwhelming barriers, while also enduring the diminishment of their autonomy, safety, and legitimacy by sport culture and at an interpersonal level. Additionally, these incidents illustrate how interpersonal and institutional sexism can escalate into the harassment and victimisation of women, even on an international stage.

In line with this, disparities in pay, access to facilities, and selection opportunities are well-documented and frequently occur alongside the more covert experiences of being ignored or undermined. In a study by BBC Sport (2020), 65% of elite British sportswomen reported experiencing sexism, but only 10% felt able to report it, with many citing concerns that it would damage their careers; these findings are echoed across international contexts (e.g. Cooky and Messner 2018). Despite formal protections such as Title IX in the United States, women athletes (especially those from the global majority) continue to face disparities in access to resources, facilities, and media coverage; this is often compounded by a sense of reluctance to raise concerns due to fear of retaliation and/or reputational harm (e.g. Cooky and Messner 2018; McGinty-Minister et al. 2024). Furthermore, sport's most influential governing bodies have often failed to engage meaningfully with systemic sexism; despite rhetorical commitments to equality, tangible mechanisms to protect women or challenge entrenched patriarchal norms are limited, with accountability frequently left to individual athletes or teams. Mainstream media coverage continues to reflect and reinforce these dynamics: women's sport accounts for less than 10% of coverage in European countries, despite its growing popularity and evidence that visibility materially influences public engagement (Women in Sport 2024). This contributes to the further marginalisation and minimisation of women's achievements in sport.

Crucially, while an awareness of athletes' experiences provides considerable insight into sexism occurring in sport, it is imperative to recognise that women working in sport (as non-athletes) also experience considerable sexism and its resulting negative consequences. In 2016, 'Women in Football' disseminated a survey to women working in the football industry in the UK. Over half (61.9%) of the respondents reported that they had been the recipient of sexist banter, 40% working in leadership roles felt less valued than their male counterparts, 30% detailed experiencing inappropriate behaviour from men, and 14.8% had been sexually abused (Women in Football 2016). Furthermore, Goldman and Gervis (2021) explored the impact of sexism on women sport psychologists' ability to practice. Focus group findings suggested that the hypermasculine nature of professional sport, privileging masculinity, and failing to act upon acts of sexism exacerbated the challenges that women sport psychologists faced in professional sport settings. More recently, Taylor, Sveinson, and Burton (2024) explored women's experiences of workplace harassment in sport organisations and found that these environments are often so malignant that women actively seek to leave the profession altogether. Finally, McGinty-Minister et al. (2024) adopted an ecological approach to understand women's experiences of sexism while working in sport; findings demonstrated clear evidence of sexism at all levels of the ecological model, highlighting the need for comprehensive change throughout the sporting culture and structure. Importantly, the effects of these experiences maintain the status quo by creating hostile cultures that dissuade women from entering or remaining in the industry, a pattern that is especially visible among women aspiring to leadership (Taylor et al. 2022). Addressing sexism in sport therefore requires examining the experiences of women working across all roles, not solely those of athletes, as organisational cultures, governance structures, interpersonal exchanges, and beyond all determine the conditions under which *all* women in sport exist.

### **Minimisation of women's experiences**

Despite centuries of women detailing patriarchy and sexism more broadly (e.g. Wollstonecraft, 1759) and decades of women identifying their experiences with sexism in sport in peer-reviewed literature

(e.g. Fink 2016; Roper, Fisher, and Wrisberg 2005), change is still incremental. Notwithstanding sport's potential to facilitate societal change (e.g. Peachey, Schultenkorf, and Spaaij 2019), broader sport culture often appears to be one of the last remaining strongholds for mechanisms of social oppression such as sexism (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2024) and racism (e.g. Cable, Kilvington, and Mottershead 2022). Stories surrounding sexism, although increasing exponentially in the media, books, editorials, and so on, are often disregarded due to being perceived as 'just a few women' or purely anecdotal. The comprehensive diminishment of women's experiences at interpersonal, organisational, and cultural levels is nothing new, and has resulted in challenges ranging from issues reporting sexism (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2024) to doubting the stories of survivors of sexual harassment (Epstein 2020), not to mention the extensive and negative physical and mental health impact of patriarchy on individual and groups of women (e.g. Gupta, Madabushi, and Gupta 2023; Heise et al. 2019). These experiences are significantly compounded for women with intersecting marginalised identities (e.g. Keaton 2024; Veenstra 2011).

In light of the historical absence of women's data being studied and utilised to improve their lives more broadly (e.g. Criado-Perez 2019) and in sport (e.g. Anderson et al. 2023), it is imperative to continue to build upon evidence of women's experiences to make positive change while centring women's stories. Recently accumulating literature has provided the opportunity to take a step back and capture what we know about women's experiences of sexism while working in sport. The accumulation of research over the last several decades on women working in various roles, from coaching (e.g. Kenttä et al. 2021) through to leadership positions (e.g. Evans and Pfister 2021) means we are in the position to take a 'snapshot' of the literature regarding women's experiences of sexism at this potentially critical time in history, where we are experiencing a predicted backlash to women's progress (Faludi 1991). This backlash, often seen throughout history when women make significant strides in progress, is also reflected in the sporting world. While this used to take the form of overt sexism (e.g. banning women from sport), in the modern era, this backlash is often more subtle - but it still manages to exclude women from sport at individual, organisational, and socio-cultural levels (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2024; Taylor et al. 2022). Recognising this trend, it is imperative to continue our push for progress and equity more broadly.

While women's stories are often unfairly dismissed, our hope is that the peer-reviewed accumulation of women's stories will present a broader picture of women's experiences while working in sport that cannot be overlooked. Against this historical and present-day context and with the aim of centring women's stories, the purpose of this scoping review is to present the first broad overview of qualitative peer-reviewed findings surrounding women's experiences of sexism while working in sport. In doing so, we identify gaps in the existing literature, including who has or has not been listened to, and subsequently propose relevant future research directions, with the aim of creating a catalyst for evidence-based prevention, management, and support policies and structures, accompanied by an essential recognition of the value of women's stories.

### **Theoretical framework: ambivalent sexism theory**

A useful lens through which to understand the paradoxical nature of women's hegemonized experiences and the relatively positive gender relations (e.g. why women and men have historically co-existed with *relatively* positive relations despite patriarchal oppression) is through ambivalent sexism theory (AST; Glick and Fiske 1996). AST poses that the relationship(s) between men and women are marked by deep-rooted contradictions (ambivalence) as a result of our biological, social, and cultural evolution and interdependence (e.g. Connor et al. 2016; Glick and Fiske 1996). In order to maintain patriarchal power structure, the dominant group (men) must incentivise women to participate in the system by 'rewarding' those who engage in preferred ideology and behaviours through what is known as benevolent sexism; those who challenge this are met with hostile sexism (Connor et al. 2016). Benevolent sexism is a more subtle type of sexism that might not be perceived as sexism upon first glance. More specifically, benevolent sexism refers to 'positively perceived' but patronising beliefs about and attitudes towards women (e.g. emphasising men's protection of women or conceptualising women as more

caring than men). Benevolent sexism ‘rewards’ and gives affection to women for engaging in their restricted (e.g. domestic, caregiving, subordinate, etc.) roles, essentially ‘offering male protection and provision to women in exchange for their compliance’ in their own oppression (Connor et al. 2016, 295).

While benevolent sexism has a more positive tone than hostile sexism, it has a significant negative impact through re-enforcing patriarchal gender stereotypes that maintain barriers to the progression of women in domestic, professional, economic, legal, social, political, and religious settings, their bodily autonomy, and in society more broadly (e.g. Connor et al. 2016; Garcia 2021). In contrast, hostile sexism is more obvious through its overtly negative attitudes and behaviours towards women who do not comply with traditional gender roles (e.g. Connor et al. 2016). When women are perceived to pose a threat to the gender hierarchy by delineating from ‘accepted’ and expected ways of being (e.g. having a leadership role in a male-dominated field or expressing their sexuality), hostile sexism is employed to put women back in their ‘place’. In other words, ‘benevolent sexism represents the “carrot” dangled in front of women to motivate them to accept inequality, while hostile sexism represents the “stick” that beats them when they do not’ (Connor et al. 2016, 298). These forms are not independent but mutually reinforcing, with benevolent sexism setting the parameters of acceptable behaviour and hostile sexism policing its boundaries.

Importantly, this theoretical lens is particularly relevant in sport, which remains a deeply patriarchal cultural institution where women’s presence is often conditional and contested. In such environments, benevolent sexism often manifests as paternalistic praise, tokenistic inclusion, or expectations that women adopt nurturing roles that support, rather than challenge, existing hierarchies (LaVoi 2016; Claringbould and Knoppers 2012). These dynamics are particularly apparent in organisational settings where women are expected to perform affective and invisible labour to maintain cooperation and workplace cohesion while also being denied access to power or progression (Sveinson et al. 2022). AST has been explicitly applied in sport to reveal how these opposing forces operate in tandem. For example, Kaskan and Ho (2016) employed AST to analyse microaggressions experienced by women athletes, demonstrating how patronising ‘compliments’ about appearance or emotional sensitivity can subtly reinforce subordinate roles. Similarly, McGinty-Minister et al. (2024) explored women’s experiences of sexism across interpersonal and institutional levels in sport workforces, identifying both overt hostility and benevolent paternalism dependent on context, demonstrating how ambivalent sexism persists within sport culture. In sum, the application of AST can allow us to better account for the complexity of women’s experiences with the aim of creating meaningful change.

## Methodology

### *Design and protocol*

The research team designed and conducted a scoping review to map women’s experiences of sexism while working in a support role in sport; more specifically, women who engage in supporting roles for athletes or sporting organisations (e.g. psychologists, physiotherapists, management roles), and are not athletes. Given that sexism simultaneously upholds exclusionary structures and fosters environments where severe forms of gender-based harm can occur, it is essential to explore how it is experienced across all facets of sport; for women working in non-athlete roles, these dynamics remain under-examined when compared to women athletes. Scoping reviews allow researchers ‘to map the literature on a particular topic or research area and provide an opportunity to identify key concepts, gaps in the research, and types and sources of evidence to inform practice, policymaking, and research’ (Daudt, Van Mossel, and Scott 2013, 8). Due to the under-researched nature of women in sport more broadly (e.g. Cowley et al. 2021; James et al. 2023) and women working in sport (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2024), a scoping review is especially relevant. Scoping reviews are particularly informative for topics that have not been thoroughly reviewed and/or are complex in nature (Mays, Robert, and Popay 2001). While systematic reviews address a specific research question for a particular area of interest, scoping reviews allow for a broader mapping of the literature on the topic in question (Arksey and O’Malley 2005; Daudt, Van Mossel, and Scott 2013). Finally, scoping reviews allow for the

examination of wide-ranging study designs and methodologies; scoping reviews do not address study quality and provide insight into available empirical evidence through a broader lens rather than a more critical analysis of a specific aspect of that topic (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Campbell et al. 2023). The research team followed the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) methodological framework to guide our approach to this scoping review, each stage of which will be addressed below.

### ***Identifying the research question***

Women's experiences of sexism while working in sport have been historically under-researched despite its 'embedded' nature in the development and present nature of sport (e.g. Anderson 2009; Fink 2016; McGinty-Minister et al. 2024); in line with this, the subject has never been reviewed. Women's experiences are frequently undervalued, and when women do have the opportunity to share their stories, their experiences are often disregarded. Peer-reviewed evidence of women's negative experiences has been mounting over the last several decades despite prevailing hurdles for women attempting to share their stories in a peer-reviewed manner (e.g. Cowley et al. 2021). With this in mind, the purpose of this scoping review is to present the first broad overview of qualitative peer-reviewed studies surrounding women's experiences of sexism whilst working in sport and identify relevant gaps in the literature. The breadth and openness of this research purpose aligns with the researchers' choice to use a scoping review approach with the aim of mapping out 'all' literature within the area of interest.

### ***Identifying relevant studies***

Eligibility criteria were developed through thorough consultation with the research team and were strictly adhered to e.g. Siddaway, Wood, and Hedges (2019); the research team discussed the broad spectrum of supporting roles in sport, and chose their terms to cast as wide a net as possible in order to best grasp the landscape in line with their research aims. Women were considered to be in a supporting role if they supported athletes or athletic programmes. In order to be included, studies must have: 1) disclosed experiences of sexism experienced by women working in a supporting role or supporting capacity within sport organisations or with athletes, 2) consist of original qualitative data, and 3) be peer-reviewed, full-text studies written in or translated to English and published between 2000 and 2024. The research team took the decision to include the full spectrum of qualitative research studies with the objective of mapping out 'how' women's experiences of sexism have been explored in sport to date. The first author searched the six databases that they had access to through the research team's institutions: SPORTDiscuss, Scopus, APA PsychInfo, MEDLINE, Web of Science, and Pubmed; this initially took place between August and September 2023, then again in February 2024.

The research team utilised their expertise in the field of women's experiences in sport to develop the following search terms: 1) women\* OR woman\* OR gender\* OR female\*, 2) Sexi\* OR Chauvin\* OR Misogyn\*, 3) Sport\* OR exercis\* OR coach OR manag\* OR psychologis\* OR nutrition\* OR physi\* OR train\* OR welfar\*. Available limiters were applied (e.g. available in English, publication year). Retrieved articles were amalgamated with the reference manager EndNote, at which point duplicates were removed through the software and then manually. Finally, manual searches of study references and Google Scholar were conducted by the first author. An initial screening of potentially relevant studies was conducted by the first author by identifying studies' research question, research framework, and key findings; potentially relevant studies (52) were recorded in a Microsoft Excel document to be examined more thoroughly at the next stage.

### ***Selecting relevant studies***

The first author read and screened each of the potentially relevant studies ( $n=52$ ) to determine possible suitability. Studies that clearly fit within the inclusion criteria as outlined above were highlighted in green, while studies that clearly sat outside inclusion criteria were highlighted in red; studies with unclear fit were highlighted in yellow. The first author included notes regarding their

reasoning for studies' respective labels. Following this, two additional authors randomly screened ten percent of the studies highlighted in green and red, and all studies highlighted in yellow, to allow for a thorough examination of manuscript suitability (e.g. Van Tulder et al. 2003). Subsequently, the research team discussed the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria to any studies in question. For example, it was initially unclear whether studies examining sport-academics would be included in the review; the research team concluded that studies examining sport-academics specifically in their university environment would be excluded due to the specific focus on sport culture rather than academia, but if those academics were discussing their broader experiences inclusive of consultancy or working within a sporting organisation, studies were eligible for inclusion. 40 relevant studies were selected for data extraction and analysis.

### **Charting the data and critical analysis**

As recommended by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), a significant amount of data was extracted and charted in order to best represent the landscape of current literature; descriptive content was charted to a Microsoft Excel sheet, while qualitative data was charted to NVivo, as described below. First, descriptive content including study name, author(s), year of publication, study aim and research question, details surrounding sample (sample size and participant gender, age, disability, ethnicity, and sexual orientation), study location, competition level, team or individual sport, sport type, theoretical model, methodology, and key findings was extracted by the first author and stored in a Microsoft Excel document. After the first author read each study twice to familiarise themselves with the dataset, the articles were uploaded to a qualitative analysis software (NVivo). In line with the significant amount of data the studies' qualitative findings were analysed using qualitative content analysis (e.g. Mayrig, 2022). Inductive categories were initially developed by the first author; these categories were then discussed and refined with the last author through an iterative process, whereby the authors compared codes and clarified their scope. Subsequently, the research team refined the categories through critical reflexive discussion, categorising them into four over-arching dimensions: *benevolent sexism*, *hostile sexism*, *managing sexism in sport*, and *intersectional pressures*. This process ensured that the dimensions were grounded in the data and critically, systematically developed.

In line with Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework purposes of a) examining the extent and range of research, b) determining the need for undertaking a systematic review, c) summarising and disseminating findings, and d) identifying gaps in existing literature, the research team sought to develop and present findings that would present a comprehensive portrayal of available literature surrounding women's experiences of sexism in sport to allow for more critical examination of the topic. Due to the exploratory, complex nature of this study and the considerable quantity of data, the presented findings include a descriptive overview and tables reporting more specific findings from our analysis. Importantly, it must be acknowledged that the authors engaged in feminist research theory and principles (e.g. Cook and Fonow 2018); in line with this, the authors' experiences as women of varying intersecting identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, neurotype, and country of origin) who work in sport informed the analysis of the data.

### **Consultation**

The research team engaged in this 'optional' stage of Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework in order to provide deeper meaning to our analysis and presentation of the women's stories in the included studies. Following the above analysis and development of dimensions and categories, the research team invited one researcher onto the project to apply their own additional intersectional lens, applying their unique lived experiences and expertise to the data analysis. This allowed the research team to offer a distinct meaning and perspective to our findings. While our team's analysis and presentation of the present data is unique to our own context and analysis, the research team did attempt to conduct a thorough review within the specifications outlined above.

## Findings

### *Descriptive summary*

#### *Year range of publication*

There were 40 manuscripts in total included within this review. From the year 2000–2010, only four papers were published. A surge of research was conducted from 2011 onwards, with 36 papers having been published from 2011 to 2024. Further, 47.5% (19) of the included papers were published since 2020, demonstrating a growing interest in the topic.

#### *Author gender*

Of the 40 manuscripts, 22 were authored by women-only authors (individual or team), and 18 manuscripts included a mixed-gender authorship team. No manuscripts were solely authored by a man or men.

#### *Theoretical model and methodological design*

Studies were situated in a broad range of theoretical models and study designs. The most common theoretical lenses employed were various feminist approaches (14), while intersectional (8), socio-ecological (2), and organisational culture (2) approaches were also used. Three studies did not report their theoretical model. All studies were qualitative in nature, and while there was a varied approach to engaging with data collection and analysis, semi-structured interviews (25) were the most common form of data collection and thematic analysis (14) was the most reported mechanism by which to engage with the data. Only one study employed a qualitative survey to capture participant data.

#### *Sport and sport types*

Level of sport varied, with elite (13) and mixed levels (13) being the most common; eight studies did not report sport competition level. As for team versus individual sports, studies reported that the women operated in mixed (15), team (11), or individual (1) sports, while 13 studies did not report this metric. Finally, studies examined women operating in either one specific or various sporting environments. The most common sports investigated included soccer/football (13), basketball (9), and volleyball (6), with 14 studies examining multiple sports and 11 studies not reporting which specific sporting environment(s) the women operated in.

#### *Sample size*

Stories were collected from a total of 515 women. Study sample size ranged from three to 105 participants; the second highest sample size was 30, and all but one manuscript ranged from 3 to 30 participants.

#### *Population*

*Participant roles.* A range of roles were studied, and some studies explored the experiences of women occupying various roles at once. Of the 515 women, their primary roles consisted of 230 coaches, 67 working in director roles, 50 occupying management or executive roles, 42 physiotherapists or athletic trainers, 42 sport psychologists, 23 women in organisational support roles, 17 participants' roles were unspecified, 15 were strength and conditioning coaches, ten were coach developers, eight were conference commissioners, six were Japanese *Manêjâ* (in Japan, *Manêjâ* are women who perform 'miscellaneous tasks' for men's sport teams, such as keeping records and monitoring athlete health; Seki 2015, 1), and five occupied an equity, diversity, and inclusion role.

*Participant characteristics.* Only 22 studies reported participant age, while 18 did not. Of those 22 studies, participants' ages ranged from 17 to 63 years old. Twelve studies did not report ethnic background; while two of those studies noted that this was to maintain anonymity, the other studies

did not reference ethnicity at all. Some studies consisted of women from various ethnic backgrounds, while others did not, either intentionally or unintentionally. White women were the most investigated (18), with 13 studies examining the experiences of Black women. Few studies explored the experiences of Asian (5), Latino (4), women from mixed ethnic backgrounds (4), and Maori (1) women, or any women from additional ethnic backgrounds. In terms of participant country, most studies were conducted on Western women, with 18 studies involving participants from the United States, nine from England, eight from the United Kingdom more broadly, five from Canada, and one from Poland. Only one study was conducted with Japanese women, and one with women from New Zealand.

Out of 40 studies, 34 did not report on the sexual orientation of their participants; three studies explicitly explored the experiences of lesbian women, while two studies explored the experiences of lesbian and straight women, and one study had nineteen heterosexual and one 'non-heterosexual' participants. Only one study reported a broader spectrum of sexual orientation. Finally, an overwhelming 36 studies did not report whether participants were disabled; three studies reported that their participants reported no disability, and one study reported that one participant reported a disability.

### Qualitative dimensions

Through inductive qualitative content analysis, the research team identified four over-arching dimensions: *benevolent sexism*, *hostile sexism*, *managing sexism in sport*, and *interpersonal pressures*; each dimension comprises multiple own categories and subcategories. In line with this scoping review's aim to present our findings rather than discuss their meaning throughout, we present each general dimension alongside their categories and subcategories with study data examples on Tables (1-4).

**Table 1.** General dimension one: benevolent sexism.

Category	Subcategory	Subcategory Definition	Example Data
<i>Patriarchal Assumptions about Women</i>	<i>Assumed (and enforced) Femininity</i>	Women were assumed to be 'feminine' and were 'punished' when stepping out of prescribed patriarchal gender norms	'Come on girls, get your make-up on, let's go' (Goldman and Gervis 2021, 90)
	<i>Assumed Domesticity</i>	Women were assumed/expected to have and prioritise lives as wives and mothers	One point said to me: 'oh you've got a daughter so obviously you can't come' (Goldman and Gervis 2021, 91)
	<i>Assumed Fragility</i>	Women were deemed too fragile to handle crass language or assumed to be mentally or physically weaker than men	I thought I was part of a group discussion, and one of the males turned to me and said 'sorry for swearing darling, I forgot you were there' (Lafferty et al. 2022, 10)
	<i>Benevolent Objectification</i>	Women were assumed to be objects to 'date' or 'have children'. Benevolent objectification cherished women in these roles, unlike hostile objectification.	Married women, she said, do not face the same scrutiny regarding player relationships because they are seen as 'less of a threat... I mean, more of just a person, and less of she's female?' While Lisa alluded to the idea of married women restoring some amount of their 'personhood' versus 'womanhood', it appears that their objectification as women does not necessarily lessen, but rather shifts direction (Hindman & Walker, 2020, 70)
<i>Benevolent Sexism in the Sporting Workplace</i>	<i>Mothering Role at Work</i>	Women were expected to partake in 'mothering' activities in the workplace (e.g. look after others)	The female athletic trainers in our study described their role in relation to that of a mothering figure or 'team mom' (Barrett, Pike, and Mazerolle 2018, 116)
	<i>Patronisation towards Women</i>	Men were condescending towards women	It is little comments like 'oh, I am surprised you have managed to get the match on', and I will just think why are you surprised? The members of the committee also call me 'love' all the time. That annoys me. You would not be calling me 'love' if I was a male colleague (Clarkson et al. 2019, 77)

**Table 2.** General dimension 2: hostile sexism.

Category	Subcategory	Subcategory Definition	Example Data
<i>Barriers to Entry and Career Progression</i>	<i>Boys' Club</i>	Groups of men acted as exclusionary mechanisms for women	Men often meet outside official business hours and make friends. With time, they develop relationships that allow them to work effectively and help each other. Most often, women are absent from these meetings that make work easier for men and good for their careers (Organista, 2020, 506)
	<i>Double Standards</i>	Double standards for women and men meant women struggled to do their jobs or gain entry/progress through sporting careers	You couldn't oversee a man's sport because you hadn't played that sport and you can't oversee football because you've never played football...you'd be in the same environment where they have men hiring men to coach women sports (Welch et al. 2021, 24)
	<i>Having (or the potential to have) Children/a Family</i>	Having or the ability to have children was used against women for hiring decisions, responsibility allocation, etc.	She casually mentioned to her boss that she planned to have children someday, he 'freaked out'. She had to reassure him it was not happening anytime soon (Hindman & Walker, 2020, 71)
	<i>Occupational Gender Stereotypes</i>	Gender stereotypes informed the work women were expected to do, and/or prevented women from obtaining male-coded roles and leadership positions	They assumed I was there to make the cups of tea and to tidy up (Lafferty et al. 2022, 10)
	<i>Overt Misogyny and Discrimination</i>	Women experienced overt discrimination in hiring and career progression	These golf outings are often used to raise money for the athletic arm of the institution, so when Faith was hired she knew donors 'wanted to invite me, but this one guy who's in this group just flat out told me, ahh, you have the wrong plumbing'. As she laughed, she continued to say 'so they invited my husband to go with them'. (Taylor & Wells, 2017, 168–169)
	<i>Lack of Salary or Equal Pay</i>	Women either struggled to be paid for their work or did not have equitable pay, leading to many leaving their profession	Lack of financial compensation was a common factor that was brought up by many participants, and precipitated their departure from athletic training (Mazerolle et al. 2017, 17)
<i>Bullying and Harassment</i>	<i>Bullying and Intimidation</i>	Women were actively bullied and intimidated by men	One method by which women's performance is often undermined is by threats to their physical and mental well-being and safety: 'Male coaches would interject to take over a conversation with an athlete, even though I was coaching at a much higher level and have much more experience. One male coach followed me around when I was coaching, which I felt was intimidating, and he wouldn't stop when I told him it was making me uncomfortable'. (McGinty-Minister et al. 2024, 11)
	<i>Sexual Advances, Harassment, and Assault</i>	Women experienced sexual advances from co-workers who were men, were sexually harassed at work, and/or experienced sexual harassment from men	'I've had people try to kiss me on the mouth'. She also shared a story of a season ticket holder 'jokingly' telling her she could sit on his lap (Hindman & Walker, 2020, 70)
<i>Dehumanisation and Lack of Respect</i>	<i>Banter</i>	Men used banter as a tool to disrespect and/or dehumanise women	Shelcey offered one such example, sharing how a man in her department joked, 'Whose d*** did you suck to get that lead?' (Hindman & Walker, 2020, 68)
	<i>Inferiorising Women and their Accomplishments</i>	Regardless of position, women's skills, accomplishments, experience, etc. were systematically undervalued by men	One participant recounted her experience of not being selected for a national coaching position because her playing achievements were trivialized by the [male majority] board of selectors...they start saying that 'you've only played women's [sport]!... I've played at the top; I've played in a World Cup final! (Norman, 2010, 95)
	<i>Isolation and Alienation</i>	Women were actively alienated by men and felt isolated and 'othered'	Ann previously worked for a team where she was the only—and the first—full-time woman on staff. She described her relationship with her boss, the team's general manager: 'He wouldn't talk to me, he would have somebody who was considered on the same level as me tell me how to do things'. (Hindman & Walker, 2020, 68–69)
	<i>Sexualisation and Objectification</i>	Women were viewed as sexual objects, especially those who did not 'fit' with the prescribed benevolent gender roles	A man in Christy's organization said of the women in the office, 'I can't wait for you girls to wear sundresses all of the time'. Diane described how some members of the event staff at her team's arena were 'treating us like we're meat' (Hindman & Walker, 2020, 70)

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Category	Subcategory	Subcategory Definition	Example Data
<i>Privileging Men and Masculinity</i>	<i>Exclusion of skills coded as feminine</i>	Skills women are socially constructed to possess or might naturally possess were unvalued, seen as suspicious, or mocked	'the first team director of rugby will not allow a psychologist in, even though his players are crying out for it, because it will make them weaker. She will make them cry'. (Goldman and Gervis 2021, 89)
	<i>Prioritising men and men's teams</i>	Men and sports/teams consisting of men were the 'marker' by which everyone were prioritised for funding, progression, marketing, development, etc.	Participants also argued that men tend to receive more resources and funding, and female coaches are 'judged against' male coaches (Kamphoff, 2010, 366)
	<i>Privileging Men's Knowledge and Skills coded as masculine</i>	Men's knowledge and expertise was valued and prioritised	Although not everyone who already had access to the table had experience playing or coaching football, their male status granted them permission and acceptance Gerri was not afforded (Taylor et al. 2018, 327)
<i>Systematic and Institutional Sexism</i>	<i>Lack of (development and job) opportunities for women</i>	Women's careers were inhibited by a lack of development opportunities, and there were far less jobs available for women than men; men were prioritised in hiring and development	One coach believed that flawed coach education in her sport had prevented her from being the best coach she wanted to be (Norman, 2010, 100)
	<i>Lack of facilities, kit, etc.</i>	Organisations did not provide women with appropriate facilities (e.g. toilet, locker room) or kit	'No female toilets, I quickly got the sense that they felt this was not a place for women' (Lafferty et al. 2022, 9)
	<i>Sexism as Part of the Culture</i>	Women reported that sexism permeated all aspects of sport culture and often outlasted staff changes	Overall, the women felt their organizations were unaware—or perhaps unconcerned—with the sexism women experience (Hindman & Walker, 2020, 68)
	<i>Sport is built for and by (coded for) men</i>	Sexism was interwoven throughout all social, economic, infrastructural, etc. structures in sport	Hope declared '[Men] get these opportunities because it's built for them' (Price et al. 2017, 71)
<i>'Women and sport don't mix'</i>	<i>Assumed Lack of Competence</i>	Women were automatically assumed to have no or little knowledge about sport, despite qualifications and/or experience	She has had to show parents "that I know what I'm talking about, I know what I'm doing" and there were "kids [boys] saying oh my Dad didn't think I should be coached by a girl". (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2016, 414)
	<i>Being Unable to do Job</i>	Men consistently undermined women's attempts to do their job; women needed to design strategies to be able to do their job	'I would have a father approach me and [say] 'I want to speak to who's in charge here', [and I say] 'Well, it's me' [and the parent will respond], 'No, I want to speak to who's in charge' [and I have to respond again] 'Sorry, you're speaking to the person in charge'" (Norman & Simpson, 2022, 9)
	<i>Overt Questions about Women's Place in Sport</i>	Women's involvement in sport was constantly questioned and invalidated	'women shouldn't be involved in our sport, you should be at home, making the dinner'. This was in front of players, I felt humiliated and unable to defend myself (Lafferty et al. 2022, 10)
	<i>Unfair Standards and Scrutiny</i>	Women were held to unfair performance standards, felt they needed to be perfect and had no room to make mistakes, and felt like there was a constant microscope on them	Women stated that they were treated with a high degree of distrust, they had to work harder than men and prove their utility for work (Organista, 2020, 506).

## Discussion

Our scoping review identified 40 peer-reviewed studies published between the years 2000–2024 that qualitatively explored women's experiences of sexism while working in sport. This is the first review to explore women's experiences working in sport more broadly, and more specifically, the first to explore women's experiences of sexism in the sporting context. Importantly, while our coding distinguished between hostile and benevolent sexism to make them more visible, it is evident that benevolent sexism was insidiously woven throughout all four dimensions; for example, even overtly hostile

**Table 3.** General Dimension three: managing sexism in sport.

Category	Subcategory	Subcategory Definition	Example Data
<i>Importance of Role Models and Mentors</i>			100% lack of female role models. Who do I have to look up to? (Lewis et al. 2018, 35)
<i>Internalised Misogyny</i>			One woman explained the problem: I don't do the low-cut shirt thing. I don't do any of that because it's not me. But I see, I see women giving the sideline reporting for NFL games in a tank top. And I'm thinking 'I wouldn't listen to her'. (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011, 219)
<i>Managing Perceptions through Gender Performance</i>	<i>Managing Appearance</i>	Women crafted their appearance to fit an identity that would be more positively perceived. These 'masks' offered some form of physical and/or career safety by making others more comfortable	'I have to think carefully about how I'm presenting myself before I go to work' (Goldman and Gervis 2021, 92)
	<i>Regulating Behaviour and Body Language</i>	Women altered their behaviour and body language to 'better' fit identities that would be the most palatable to those around them	'I've had some times where I've thought, should I change my personality?' (Hindman & Walker, 2020, 71)
<i>Coping with Sexism</i>	<i>Normalising and/or Accepting Sexism</i>	While most women agreed that the sexism they experience was not right, they coped with their situations by normalising their experiences and maintaining that sexism was just 'part of the job'	'It's pretty much the norm for women working within male sport environments, and the worst part is you can feel like you need to let it slide, or go along with it, otherwise you aren't seen to be 'one of the lads' and thus you're not integrated within the sporting culture and your work can be rendered ineffective'. (McGinty-Minister et al. 2024, 9–10)
	<i>Problem-focused Coping</i>	Very few women reported actively attempting to take steps to confront, mitigate, or stop sexism. These efforts were often unfruitful and resulted in accepting sexism as part of their job, or left sport altogether	'I'm not being gagged, I am not submitting to it'. She left, I'm still involved, but getting an awful lot of grief about it. (Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018, 437)

acts were often underpinned or legitimised by benevolent narratives that reinforced traditional gender roles and expectations. This pervasive undercurrent highlights the intersecting and interwoven nature of the dimensions and suggests that benevolent sexism may be underestimated in its ramifications in sport. This echoes broader social psychological research demonstrating that patriarchy's (and subsequently, sexism's) persistence is not simply due to overt hostility, but also to its more insidious and socially acceptable manifestations (e.g. benevolent sexism) that often remain unrecognised yet still perpetuate inequality (Barreto and Ellemers 2005; Glick and Fiske 2001).

### **Descriptive findings**

The majority of studies had a similar design (e.g. semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis), with only one study employing a survey to capture data. While interviews are essential for exploring women's stories, this methodological narrowness reflects the broader minimisation of women's stories: research has prioritised documenting and *re*-documenting their experiences as if to prove the reality of sexism, rather than exploring its mechanisms (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2024). This aligns with evidence that more subtle and benevolent forms of sexism are often unrecognised by perpetrators, their enablers, or even targets, compelling women to repeatedly evidence its existence (Barreto and Ellemers 2025; Barreto et al. 2009). The studies reviewed suggest that women remain positioned as needing to justify the persistence of sexism in sport, reproducing an epistemic cycle that constrains deeper exploration of its intersections with patriarchy, culture, sport governance, and more. Additionally, we might interpret this methodological homogeneity as a reflection of the broader dynamics of

**Table 4.** General dimension four: intersectional pressures.

Category	Subcategory	Subcategory Definition	Example Data
<i>Cultural Taxation</i>	<i>Burden of Creating Change</i>	Women with intersecting identities felt a personal burden to create change, instead of individuals with privilege and/or systemic power	Participants felt that the onus was on them to change the system themselves, rather than relying on members of the existing structures to enact change (Clarkson et al. 2022, 7)
	<i>Increased or Assumed Role Model or Maternalistic Pressures for Black Women</i>	Black women were often expected to be role models or take on a maternalistic role towards others, primarily Black student-athletes	Out of the 105 [players], 90 of them are black and they probably look at her, they'll probably pay more attention to [a black woman] and they're viewing her as a mother figure or sister figure that they don't get the same from an administrator or white male (Price et al. 2017, 66)
	<i>Representative Status</i>	Women with intersecting identities felt additional pressure to 'inspire' those around them rather than be able to exist alongside their role description; they were also often given, or felt the responsibility, to take on extra labour to represent their 'group' (e.g. sitting on boards, develop policy, etc). This labour was not compensated.	Tamara's comments reflected the manner in which her identity as a person of color was seen as an important tool by a white, male administrator for relating to student-athletes (Price et al. 2017, 67)
<i>'Further from the Norm'</i>	<i>Intersecting Identities as a Barrier</i>	Women with intersecting marginalised identities found this to be a barrier to securing roles and adequately doing their jobs; they often wondered which of their identities this was a result of, but determined the intersecting of identities was the cause	The double disadvantage of being Māori and female was more noticeable in a Pākehā environment: A classic is going into a Pākehā environment and they immediately discount you because you're a Māori and you're a woman (Palmer and Masters 2010, 336)
	<i>Privileging Heterosexuality</i>	Heterosexuality was privileged and preferred in sporting contexts	During school holidays, many heterosexual administrators and coaches would have their family meet them at their office for lunch...I decided to have my [same-sex] partner and stepdaughter meet me at my office before heading off to lunch...the next day my head coach sat me down and relayed a message from the athletic director, in which he said I am not allowed to bring 'those people' to the office any more (Walker and Melton 2015, 264)
	<i>Privileging Whiteness</i>	Being white, and engaging in white-coded behaviours, afforded women (and men) privilege and preference in their sporting context	You mean that you have diverse people, but they need to act like you. We can be a different color, but we need to act like you (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017, 402)
<i>Self-Regulation</i>	<i>Systemic 'Don't ask don't tell' towards non-heterosexuality</i>	Non-heterosexual women were encouraged or blatantly told to hide their sexuality	Kim continued to discuss the frustration she felt for having to hide 'the person you are' and 'this little secret world with a lot of pressure'. (Kamphoff, 2010, 368)
	<i>Managing Appearance</i>	Women with additional marginalised identities felt the need to regulate their appearance to 'fit' prescribed cultural expectations	And now I feel like I have to think about, "Okay, well I'm a woman in this space, so how am I dressing properly? I'm Black in this space? So is my hair appropriate? (Keaton, 2022, 8)
	<i>Managing Expression and Expectations of Behaviour</i>	Women felt the need to manage their body language and behaviour to more closely reflect prioritised identities and needed to provide explanations for some behaviour (e.g. leadership styles) to manage others' perceptions	During her initial interview, she recalled feeling the need to emphasize her 'straight forward' behavior that she understood to be off-putting to some men (Price et al. 2017, 69).
<i>Systemic and Institutional Barriers</i>	<i>Lack of Opportunity for development and career progression</i>	Women with additional marginalised identities experienced increased lack of opportunities to progress through their careers compared to women with no other marginalised identity	They talked generally about three areas that served as barriers: access discrimination or limitations placed on minority groups that were not related to their potential performance in a head coach position; lack of ongoing support from their own athletic departments to encourage development; and harmful stereotypes that alter the perception of gatekeepers that Black females can be leaders (Borland & Bruening, 2010, 412)
	<i>Systemic Lack of Diversity and/or Inclusion</i>	There was a broad lack of diversity and inclusion throughout the sporting context, and a systemic lack of support for those with marginalised identities	All of the coaches and coach developers felt that The FA needed to work harder to diversify their workforce to be more representative and attractive to, the playing and coaching population (Norman et al. 2018, 403)
<i>Unfair Standards and Scrutiny</i>			Not only would boosters and stakeholders question their presence, but their colleagues would challenge their decisions more often (Price et al. 2017, 71)

ambivalent sexism in sport, where women's accounts are welcomed only within controlled formats that avoid direct confrontation or systemic critique. Interviews allow institutions to *appear* inclusive by 'listening' to women without necessarily being accountable for what they say, a dynamic reflected in recent research demonstrating that organisational mechanisms for 'listening' to women (e.g. anonymous reporting systems) often result in institutional inaction, leaving women disillusioned and reinforcing the idea that being heard does not equate to action (Taylor, Sveinson, and Burton 2024).

Shifting to focus on sport more specifically, there was a great deal of data *not* reported. For example, 13 studies did not report level of sport, and 11 did not report in which sporting environment(s) the studies took place. Across what *was* reported in the literature, there was a relatively varied representation of sport level; however, the research team did not find an explicit focus on grassroots-level sports. Mixed and team sports were significantly represented in the literature, with only one study exploring women's experiences in an individual sporting context. This lack of contextual detail reflects a wider gap in the sexism literature, where ideological and structural conditions are rarely distinguished, even though the same act (e.g. agentic challenge) can be received differently depending on whether it upholds or disrupts traditional gender roles in that specific context (Kahn et al. 2021). Importantly, soccer/football, basketball, and volleyball represented a significant portion of the sport cultures examined. While other sport contexts (e.g. swimming) were explored, there are many more sporting cultures to examine; for context, the Olympics alone consists of 40 unique sporting events (International Olympic Committee 2023). Finally, many of the studies in this review examined women working in a single sport culture, rather than comparing and contrasting women's experiences of various sports. Given that perceptions of what constitutes 'appropriate' roles for women can differ significantly across contexts (Barreto and Doyle 2023), this lack of comparative analysis may obscure the ways that sexism is reproduced in different contexts (e.g. high-contact sports, elite sports, grassroots sports, individual sports, etc.). Level of play, team or individual sports, and of course, sport type can significantly impact sport culture and environment, and therefore the interpersonal and individual experiences within (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2023). With this in mind, future research must diversify its focus *as well as* report this valuable data in order to better represent how these variables might impact women's gendered experiences.

Importantly, results indicated a marked increase in published research relating to the topic since 2010; notably, 47.5% of the research was conducted in the most recent four years, and every article included women authors. This is positive on many levels. First, these findings are indicative that more women are either researching or detailing their experiences, potentially beginning to forsake the assumption that sexism is a part of sport culture that we should neither speak about nor attempt to solve. Second, this suggests that women's interests are being explored to a greater extent in peer-reviewed research, and to extend this further, that the leaky pipeline that acts as a barrier to women progressing in academia (e.g. Cowley et al. 2021) is becoming less pervasive. The widespread lack of women researchers has been linked to the underrepresentation of women in exercise sciences (James et al. 2023), indicating that the leaky academic pipeline has had a direct impact on the repression of women's (psychological, biological, sociological, physiological, etc.) experiences in sport and therefore the insufficient progress and representation of women in sport and sport science. While this suggests growing recognition of sexism in sport, we must be cautious not to conflate volume with depth; in reality, much of the research explored documents women's resilience rather than exploring the patriarchal structures that necessitate it. Interestingly, this mirrors benevolent sexism's tendency to reward endurance over resistance and positioning of women as 'inspirational survivors' rather than legitimate critics of sport's gendered architecture, thereby reinforcing the status quo (Barreto and Doyle 2023; Glick and Fiske 2001). These results represent steps towards positive change, rather than systematic change - there is still a long way to go.

Unfortunately, many studies lacked any focus on the intersectional nature of sexism. The majority of participants were white, Western women, and even when studies reported participants from a range of backgrounds, the intersectional nature of their experiences was rarely discussed unless this was specifically related to the research question. Only six studies reported participant sexual

orientation, and there was no exploration of disability, with most studies not engaging with this characteristic even in their reporting. One possible explanation is survivor bias, where women with multiple marginalised identities are further excluded from sport, resulting in fewer women with these identities participating in research. Additionally, women with multiple marginalised identities might feel either more of a burden (e.g. cultural taxation) to participate in research or that voicing their experiences might add to environmental stressors through increased sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, etc. This gap is a serious failing from an intersectional feminist and qualitative research perspective, where we have the chance and responsibility to explore the nuance of participants' experiences and how individuals' intersecting identities might impact their interaction with sport culture.

Acquiring knowledge can be dialectical in nature (e.g. Weskott 1983), and qualitative research can be crucial in understanding context and providing a voice to marginalised individuals and groups to facilitate progress (e.g. Elliot & Timulak, 2005). Notably, one might argue that qualitative research's broad objective to uncover meaning suggests a responsibility to design research that provides the opportunity for marginalised groups to make their experiences, and what this means to them, clear. Additionally, feminist enquiry has both critical and emancipatory power, and arguably the responsibility to act in line with this (e.g. Weskott 1979; 2018). Importantly, we must ensure that future feminist research does not fall into the trap of employing research to advance careers and fail to improve the lives of those who provided the data; we must avoid exploiting *all* 'women as objects of knowledge', or else we contribute to the patriarchal structures that we are attempting to deconstruct (e.g. Weskott 2018, 63). While there are clearly ethical matters to consider, transparent, authentic research can positively contribute to progress when recognising the co-creation of data throughout the research process (e.g. Smith & Sparkes, 2016). It is imperative that researchers improve their focus on individuals with marginalised and/or non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) identities to explore possibilities that facilitate positive change and make sport a more welcoming environment for all. While it is important that we do not reduce women to statistics, an essential starting place for normalising the broad spectrum of women existing in sport and providing solutions for their negative experiences is to both explore the experiences of women with various marginalised identities and to accurately report this data. Failing to do so risks reproducing the same visibility hierarchies that sexism (especially benevolent sexism) thrives on, where some women's experiences are amplified as emblematic of women's experiences while others remain invisible and unaddressed (Barreto and Doyle 2023).

### **Qualitative findings**

While it is impossible to provide a nuanced discussion of this review's qualitative findings in the present format, we attempt to consider what we perceive as the most consequential aspects of our findings. Women experienced both benevolent and hostile sexism interpersonally through to organisational and systemic mechanisms. Hostile sexism was much more obvious and widely reported; however, as noted, benevolent sexism acted in an often more insidious manner by reinforcing gender hierarchy in relatively more 'hidden' ways, and likely had a much larger impact than we are aware of. While some sub-categories (e.g. 'exclusion of skills coded as feminine') may not seem hostile at first glance, the reported experiences were direct and hostile in nature (e.g. barring women from doing the jobs they were hired for because of perceived femininity). Not only were women bullied and dehumanised at an interpersonal level, but the systems in place were active barriers to women existing in sport through factors such as being unable to do their job, lack of equal pay, double standards, or the mere potential to have children resulting in assumptions about how women's time should be spent (benevolent sexism) and being denied career progression they have earned (hostile sexism). Such examples reflect Kahn and colleagues' (2021) findings that benevolent sexism often manifests as 'protective' restrictions on women's opportunities framed as concern for work-life balance or well-being, while hostile sexism is used to 'sanction' those who reject those imposed limits. Importantly, benevolent and hostile forms of sexism coexist as mutually reinforcing ideologies that exist to maintain gender hierarchies. Emphasising the interrelation between categories and the nuance of women's experiences, women often encountered both benevolent and hostile sexism in parallel,

sometimes even in the same relationship or professional context; they were praised for being nurturing or supportive, while simultaneously denied leadership opportunities or criticised for being too emotional or cold depending on context. These parallels foster an ‘ambivalent bind’, where women cannot respond to discrimination without risking social penalties, leading to strategic silence or self-censorship (Barreto et al. 2009). This dynamic obscured the workings of structural power by creating a sense of ambivalence and confusion about what constituted sexism and what was simply ‘part of the job’.

As discussed in the introduction of this study, the histories of women’s progress and sport are significantly intertwined, and alongside this, women’s mere existence in sport might be considered a threat to patriarchal norms (at a broader cultural level). With this in mind, it is not surprising that hostile sexism was the most frequently reported, and most deeply explored, type of sexism in the reviewed studies, with many studies not even delineating experiences of benevolent sexism. When one considers that sport was built for and by men as one powerful mechanism by which to maintain the white, heteronormative patriarchy we are embedded within (e.g. Anderson 2009, Bourdieu 2001), it makes sense that women (and queer or disabled individuals or those of the global majority) simply existing in sport might be considered an act of defiance against patriarchy, and therefore, leaves them open to hostility. However, while the heavy reporting of hostile sexism identifies sport as a hostile context for women to exist within, this reporting *also* reflects Barreto and Ellemers (2005) observation that women more readily identify hostile sexism, as it is overtly negative, whereas benevolent sexism often remains invisible (and/or protective) because it is packaged in subjectively positive terms, making it more resistant to challenge.

In the studies examined, being a woman in itself was a barrier to simply existing in sport that often-provoked various forms of hostile sexism, and women engaged with varying methods of coping with their experiences. Women were often at a loss as to why they were obliged to change how they looked and worked, how they acted, and their presentation of self more broadly to (even attempt) to work effectively in the domain they were passionate about. This often subconscious need to fit the mould of the ‘benevolent woman’ in order to avoid exclusion and/or hostility engendered ambivalence, with this contradiction reflecting one plausible reason for the considerable accounts reflecting Fink’s (2016) article detailing the embeddedness of sexism in sport; the women in these studies attempted to normalise their experiences as the price they paid for engaging with their passion, with variations of ‘it’s just part of the culture!’ common throughout the studies’ data. This normalisation is an integral function of ambivalent sexism, which justifies and disguises inequity by framing it as admiring or praise (Glick and Fiske 2001). Research demonstrates that when benevolent sexism is present, women are more likely to downplay discrimination and less likely to engage in collective action, inadvertently sustaining the very systems that disadvantage them (Barreto et al. 2009). In the studies examined, the women’s desires to work in sport and be seen as competent and ‘not difficult’ led some to downplay or rationalise sexist incidents, particularly when these were delivered in a polite or ostensibly caring tone. Benevolent sexism therefore became a mechanism by which women internalised structural exclusion, adapting to or internally coping with the discomfort rather than challenging its source.

Women strategically performing traits congruent with traditionally masculine fields are often looked upon more favourably than those who do not (e.g. Wessel et al. 2015); therefore, it is no surprise that women working in sport were frequently analysing and altering their self-presentation to survive the hyper-masculine sport culture. This in itself is an extremely contradictory experience. Presenting oneself as feminine is often a defence against hostile sexism, but women often felt the need to diminish their femininity, and face potential hostility, to fit into sport culture and be taken more seriously. This is yet another example of sport being an inhospitable place for women, who must often either maintain traditionally accepted roles and presentations and be limited in their roles and/or effectiveness, or they must face potential hostility by embracing more traditionally masculine characteristics in the hopes of being taken more seriously, completely discounting *who* the person is. This can be linked to the gendering of characteristics such as communication and leadership styles, which was reflected frequently in the literature examined. In line with our findings and AST more broadly, women must often choose between being liked and taken seriously (e.g. Connor et al. 2018),

resulting in a myriad of complications to navigate such as the leadership double-bind commonly documented in business settings (Player et al. 2019). Many women were extremely aware of this paradox, describing in several studies how women in leadership positions adopted a more authoritative leadership style, only to be perceived as bossy or aggressive. Barreto and Ellemers (2005) note that this punitive response to women's leadership is amplified in contexts where benevolent sexism is normative, as women are expected to lead without *visibly* exercising authority, a contradiction that makes sustained leadership success structurally precarious and serves to obscure women role models, further perpetuating gender inequity. Equally, across the data, those who embraced traditionally feminine traits were often overlooked for promotion or removed from decision-making spaces. This double-bind epitomises the rigidity of gendered expectations in sport; furthermore, this kind of identity performance often precedes 'voluntary' exit from the profession altogether (Darvin, 2020).

In the sporting context, where the presence of women is not only unwelcome but antithetical to the emergence and development of organised sport over time (e.g. Anderson 2009), women might be navigating an even more complicated and contradictory array of identity performance and management. Constant regulation of oneself to conceal a stigmatised identity has been linked to anxiety, memory impairment, and compromised well-being, as well as physical impacts such as negative effects on one's cardiovascular system (Elliott and Doane 2015; Richards et al. 1999). Moreover, this identity concealment can compromise performance (e.g. Ellemers and Barreto 2006), adding to the idea that women do not belong in sport. The cognitive load imposed by constant self-monitoring in benevolently sexist contexts can directly impair working memory and problem-solving (Barreto et al. 2009), and concealment itself can make individuals less liked by others, further undermining women's ability to thrive, or even perform relatively well, in high-performance sport settings.

Importantly, perceived organisational support is integral to embedding strategies to confront stigmatisation in fields dominated by men (e.g. Ryan et al. 2019), signifying a significant onus on sport organisations to actively challenge sexism rather than accept it as part of a culture they cannot change. The absence of perceived organisational support was particularly evident in the emotional and physical coping strategies women employed across the studies in this review. From 'gritting their teeth' through destructive cultures to downplaying their leadership styles or expertise to avoid being perceived as too ambitious, the women's accounts revealed a deep ambivalence about whether sport was a place they could belong. Rather than confronting sexism directly within their organisations (often due to fear of retaliation or isolation) many relied on hypervigilance, withdrawal, or internalisation, behaviours that mirror coping strategies described in other hypermasculine sectors (e.g. Hing et al. 2023). These coping strategies are not merely individual choices; they reflect constrained agency within environments where challenging sexism carries significant relational and career risks – burdens that men are not required to contend with (e.g. Barreto et al. 2009).

While women as a whole were excluded from career entry and progression in sport, experienced a great deal of hostile sexism, and engaged in necessary but potentially damaging coping mechanisms to survive in the sporting environment, this experience was compounded for women with additional marginalised identities. Women with intersecting marginalised identities, particularly women from the global majority, described experiencing cultural taxation through additional interpersonal and organisational burdens. This reflects accounts highlighting this burden in Black women's accounts of being simultaneously tokenised and over-relied upon as informal mentors, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leads, or cultural mediators; this often occurs without recognition or remuneration (Keaton 2024). Adding to the ethical issues surrounding this increased unpaid emotional and organisational labour, diversity-related labour can have a negative impact on performance (e.g. Rosales et al. 2022), which might provide (false) evidence that these women do not belong in the sporting environment. Additionally, women with intersecting marginalised identities described engaging in extended identity management. Non-heterosexual women were actively encouraged to conceal their identities from both interpersonal and organisational sources. Women from global majority backgrounds necessitated suppressing their cultural authenticity, with many Black women referencing continuously walking a fine line to avoid the 'angry black woman' stereotype. As stated, considerable research demonstrates that the above identity management can have negative impacts on both well-being and performance

(e.g. Boyles 2008; Ellemers and Bareto 2006; Williams 2017). While there were no direct discussions surrounding managing or hiding a disability or disabilities in sport organisations in the included studies (due to the lack of reporting and/or exploration), we are aware that this can significantly compromise mental and physical well-being (e.g. Pryke-Hobbes et al. 2023). Importantly, benevolent sexism is racialised, ableist, and heteronormative; women who do not fit the dominant cultural template of 'ideal womanhood' are less likely to receive paternalistic 'protection' and more likely to encounter outright hostility, compounding the exclusionary impact of intersecting oppressions (Sibley et al. 2025). In sport, there is clear evidence that the contradictions and ambivalence of women's experiences in sport are compounded by a certain magnitude when one experiences additional identities marginalised by our current governing societal structures.

While this review has explored women's experiences and available data, it is important to explore what experiences were *not* shared. At this point in time, and linking to how patriarchal power structures protect those engaging in sexism, we do not have any understanding of which stakeholders *perpetrate* sexism the most (or even if role influences this behaviour), or which sports might facilitate sexism and negative gendered experiences more broadly. There is also no research on whether women occupying certain roles experience more or less sexism, and/or whether certain sport cultures are protective against sexism. This absence is significant; perceptions of sexism's prevalence and acceptability are constructed by who enacts it. For example, when sexism comes from high-status figures or is embedded in organisational policy, it is more likely to be tolerated and/or normalised (Barreto and Ellemers 2005). This nuanced information is essential in informing interpersonal, organisational, and cultural interventions. Similarly, we did not discover literature explicitly exploring the consequences of perpetuating sexism, or if they exist. While some studies included data where women elucidated that there are no consequences when sexism occurs in their respective settings, explicit exploration into this is necessary to determine institutional readiness to enact change. From the point of view of the authors, it is time to both diversify and narrow our foci on women's experiences of sexism in sport to better understand the complexities of the problem, and importantly, work toward relevant and attainable solutions.

### **Recommendations for future research**

This scoping review has revealed a significant dearth of peer-reviewed information surrounding women's experiences of sexism while working in sport, despite the acknowledgement of sexism as embedded in sport culture (Fink 2016), the numerous and consistently rising anecdotal reports of women's experiences, and the damaging personal and career consequences (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2024). This review has made clear the paucity of research attending to intersectional identities in sport, alongside a persistent prioritisation of Western experiences. While each reader's individual expertise, experience, and interpretation of the presented data will likely inform additional areas to explore, the research team can recommend some initial areas to prioritise.

Primarily, we recommend that researchers engage in a 'zoomed-in' approach so that we might gain a more nuanced understanding of sexism in sport. Importantly, sport research requires closer examination of sexist attitudes and experiences while working in a) various sports, b) women's, men's, and mixed-gender sports, c) various levels of sport, and d) various sport countries and cultures. Crucially, this examination must extend beyond 'counting' hostile sexism and explore how benevolent sexism sustains gendered hierarchies by reinforcing traditional roles and making exclusion appear polite or inevitable. For instance, who is considered 'naturally suited' to caregiving or support roles, and what happens when women resist those ascribed identities? Additionally, it is consequential to learn who is perpetrating the most sexism at interpersonal, organisational, and cultural levels. For example, it is relevant to understand whether there are specific stakeholder roles, sporting organisations, or sport-specific cultures that engage in more sexism; if so, we must explore instances of hostile and benevolent sexism, what sexism looks like in practice, and its outcomes. Researchers should consider how sexism in organisations impacts all performers, inclusive of stakeholders and athletes, as recognising its systemic embeddedness and reach is imperative to dismantling structures that ultimately harm everyone within them.

We must move beyond examining merely individual responses and address how sport organisations themselves may deflect or deny responsibility, particularly when sexism is framed as tradition, banter, or accidental (e.g. McGinty-Minister et al. 2024). Importantly, we must deduce whether organisations have policies in place to manage hostile and benevolent sexism like they do many other forms of discrimination. Future research must investigate how organisational responses (or lack thereof) differ when sexism is packaged as ‘supportive’ or framed as ‘protective concern’, forms of benevolent sexism that are equally as exclusionary. To date, there is little evidence on whether benevolent sexism is even recognised within sporting policies as a legitimate barrier to gender equity. This raises important questions surrounding whether perpetrators of benevolent sexism are held accountable, and how targets are expected to respond when sexism is disguised as kindness or mentorship. Are institutional reporting mechanisms prepared to recognise and address these forms of exclusion, or are they implicitly structured to overlook them? Without formal acknowledgment, benevolent sexism remains a largely unregulated and unknown manifestation of harm in sport. Further, it is crucial to explore the interpersonal and organisational outcomes of sexism; for example, are perpetrators disciplined, and what are the psychological impacts of experiencing and witnessing sexism in sport?

Additionally, research should diversify in its exploration of a range of characteristics (e.g. job role); despite the wide-ranging roles individuals might occupy in sports, only 11 roles were specifically investigated in the 40 studies, 44.5% of which were coaches. These questions are especially urgent given that benevolent sexism has been linked to lowered career expectations, impaired self-efficacy, and the internalisation of limiting beliefs. Moreover, benevolent and hostile sexism operate in tandem to reward conformity while punishing resistance, making it critical that future studies explore how these dynamics unfold in women’s actual work experiences and career trajectories (e.g. Glick and Fiske 2001).

From an intersectional perspective, significantly more research must be conducted on the cultural taxation women engage in and the mental and physical impacts this has on women in sport-specific settings. Further exploration of the broader spectrum of sexual orientation, and how this impacts women’s experiences of sexism, must also be prioritised. Considerable research needs to be conducted on disabled women working in sport, and how their intersecting identities impact their experiences of sexism and subsequent coping. Specific exploration into the physiological and psychological impacts of constantly managing self-expression for women of all identities in sport is paramount. Importantly, future research must also explore who receives benevolent treatment and who is excluded from it. Black women, for instance, may be excluded from paternalistic ‘care’ and disproportionately subject to hostility or suspicion (e.g. Lewis et al. 2016). Similarly, disabled women, queer women, and women from non-WEIRD contexts may not be seen as ‘worthy’ of protection within Western gendered norms, suggesting that benevolent sexism covertly operates through and reinforces other systems of marginalisation (e.g. Sgarra et al. 2025).

Additionally, there are several broader approaches to explore. First, because scoping reviews do not assess study quality (e.g. Campbell et al. 2023), it is imperative to explore the quality of research being conducted on women’s experiences in sport. Further, exploring more specific intersecting identities at a broader level (e.g. a systematic approach) might highlight priorities for research and intervention. We should also examine sport culture more broadly, considering the culture itself was often identified in the studies as the intermediary between women’s experiences and sexism. Importantly, one merely needs to examine the descriptive findings of this study to understand that we must prioritise exploring significantly more diversity in women’s experiences. Broadly speaking, this review can only paint a very white, Western picture of women’s experiences of sexism, which is a major finding in itself. This reflects a broader epistemic exclusion, whereby knowledge production privileges experiences that align with dominant norms (Barreto and Ellemers 2005), thereby reinforcing the invisibility of marginalised groups and overlooking the culturally specific forms of sexism in different global contexts (Barreto and Doyle 2023).

Finally, researchers should look to broaden the scope of their study design when considering exploring women’s gendered experiences in sport to represent a broader approach to data collection and analysis. For example, combining observational methods with surveys and/or interviews might

offer a more holistic approach to data collection (e.g. O'Donovan, Van Dun, and McAuliffe 2020), and story completion methods can be an interesting and participant-focused mechanism for discursive meaning-making (e.g. Gravett 2019).

### Summary

Barriers for women in sport, and society more broadly, are not unheard of; in fact, these restrictions and obstacles are so normalised that we often look past them. This is incredibly evident in our scoping review, which has identified numerous sexist barriers and experiences that are rarely highlighted, and when they are, are often unlikely to be taken seriously. Despite the challenges associated with women's experiences being documented in peer-reviewed sport research (e.g. Cowley et al. 2021; James et al. 2023), we have presented a review of the experiences of 515 women; even in light of the understanding that the reported population is far from representative, we have provided credible, peer-reviewed evidence that women working in sport experience various forms of hostile and benevolent sexism, and that these experiences are compounded by additional marginalised identities and result in various coping and management strategies, many of which can compromise mental and physical well-being. Benevolent sexism, in particular, remains insufficiently recognised despite evidence that it functions as a key mechanism of exclusion and silencing of critique, reflecting how sport has begun to rely on more subtle forms of sexism to exclude women in sport.

### Limitations

As with any review, there are limitations to the present scoping review. While we aimed to be exhaustive in our searches, data analysis, and reporting, there is a chance that the research team omitted relevant studies or 'missed' data that another research group might have reported. For example, given that the inclusion criteria meant that only studies written in or translated into English were included, research from non-Western and Global South contexts that could have informed our findings was excluded. Notably, the research team utilised the language excluder in the final stage of the exclusion process and noted that this changed the number of database-generated studies by between one and four studies on the various databases, depending on the database searched. As referenced, there are various considerations to engage with when undertaking qualitative research of this nature; the research team recognise that their interaction with the data resulted in data co-creation, and while employing their own experiences in the research process this is a key, beneficial aspect of our chosen methodology, we acknowledge that we cannot completely depict the stories of the represented women. Finally, an obvious limitation of this review is reflected throughout in the nature of the white, Western, heteronormative, and ableist focus that excludes the experiences of many women working in sport. This limitation reveals which women's voices have been most readily included in academic research and/or sport, and which have been further excluded.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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