

“We are all delicate teacups”: A qualitative exploration of misrecognition and gender inequality in women’s ski jumping

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Abstract

This paper examines how elite women ski jumpers experience recognition and misrecognition within ski jumping, a sport traditionally organised around masculine norms. By combining Honneth’s theory of recognition with feminist understanding of hegemonic masculinity, the study views elite sport as a place of work in which athletes seek recognition. This study drew on qualitative data from 13 semi-structured interviews with professional women ski jumpers and one representative from the governing body FIS and used reflexive thematic analysis to examine how recognition was granted, withheld, or conditioned in everyday sporting practice.

The analysis identified three interconnected areas through which misrecognition is produced: the sports organisational environment, paternalistic discourses surrounding women’s bodies, and gendered media representation. Across these themes, hegemonic masculinity emerged as the underlying mechanism of misrecognition across Honneth’s three spheres of recognition (love, rights and solidarity). Women athletes are denied full recognition through restricted decision-making power and regulatory exclusion (rights), the devaluation and sexualisation of their performances and bodies (solidarity), and paternalistic and hostile relational environments that undermine bodily trust and self-confidence (love). Moreover, these violations were found to converge to produce harm beyond a single sphere, undermining women’s professional identities, wellbeing, and sense of belonging.

By demonstrating the influence of hegemonic masculinity and the way misrecognition operates simultaneously across spheres, this paper advances recognition theory as a multi-level analytical framework for understanding gender inequality in sport. Although centred on women’s ski jumping, the findings provide insights into how gendered power relations structure recognition within the broader elite sport sector.

Keywords: gender equality, women athletes, Olympics, women’s sports, rights in sport, Honneth, recognition

40 **Introduction**

41 In Western societies, sport has historically been constructed as a domain of and for men, rooted
 42 in longstanding associations between masculinity, physical power, and public life (Messner,
 43 1992, 2002, 2010). Sport has traditionally associated men with active athletic power, while
 44 women have been constructed as biologically weak, inferior and emotionally unstable,
 45 reinforcing gender hierarchies that privilege heterosexual men (Spaaij et al., 2015; Theberge,
 46 2000; Vodden-McKay & Schell, 2010). Within this gender order, women were positioned
 47 primarily through their reproductive functions, as “mothers-in-waiting” whose bodies required
 48 protection from physical strain (Schultz, 2014). Despite lacking an empirical foundation, these
 49 socially constructed gender norms were reinforced by medical authority, naturalising ideas of
 50 female frailty (Hargreaves, 2003; Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014). They were subsequently
 51 institutionalised within sporting structures, establishing biological difference as a central
 52 justification for excluding women from sport (Pieper, 2016; Vertinsky, 1990, 2017).

53 These cultural, social and medical discourses operated within a broader structure of
 54 hegemonic masculinity, understood as the historically dominant configuration of gendered
 55 practice that legitimates men’s authority and embeds masculine norms into institutions and
 56 culture (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Sport has been a central site for the production and
 57 circulation of such hegemonic norms by positioning heterosexual men’s bodies and
 58 performances as the universal standard (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 1992). It
 59 shapes organisational cultures, regulatory decisions, and expectations of legitimate athletic
 60 performance. Activities involving strength, endurance, and physical contact have been mainly
 61 conceived as masculine activities, whereas aesthetic sports (i.e., those involving concentration,
 62 application, and flexibility) have been considered feminine activities (Plaza et al., 2017). It also
 63 shapes media visibility and narratives, which are characterised by the systematic
 64 marginalisation of women’s sport, where men’s competitions receive predominant coverage

while women are rendered nearly invisible or framed through gendered roles, thereby reproducing and legitimising masculine authority in the cultural field of sport (Cooky et al., 2015; Müller, 2016). Posbergh and Jette (2022) have shown that even sex-integrated environments reproduce such gendered hierarchies, with men's bodies and performances continuing to set normative standards. These dynamics even persist in action and lifestyle sports, often coming from countercultural origins and imagined as progressive (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2021). This has further intensified in sports historically coded as dangerous or technically demanding, where assumptions about risk, bodily capacity, and courage have further legitimised men's privileged status (Theberge, 2000).

Within this broader historical and sociological landscape, ski jumping offers a revealing case. Ski jumping offers the potential for undifferentiated participation as aerodynamics, courage and lower weight, matter more than strength (Hämäläinen, 2014; Wolfram, 2009). Despite this potential, women have faced systematic exclusion through institutionalised assumptions about reproductive vulnerability, anatomical incapacity and safety (Laurendeau & Adams, 2010). As a result, women only gained Olympic inclusion in 2014, making it one of the last disciplines to do so. Since then, women's ski jumping has gained visibility and competitive legitimacy. However, its organisational and cultural landscape continues to be influenced by these older logics, shaping resource allocation, governance, media representation, and valuation of performance. For example, women represent only 29% of FIS-licensed ski jumping athletes, while women remain excluded from Nordic Combined, a discipline that incorporates ski jumping (FIS, 2026b). These inequities also appear in everyday professional recognition, illustrated recently when Selina Freitag received shower cream, shampoo, and four towels for winning a World Cup qualifying event, while the men's winner received 3,000 Swiss francs for the same achievement (CNN, 2025).

Despite academic work on women's historical participation in ski jumping (Hofmann, 2012; Pfister, 2007, 2013), their portrayal in the media (von der Lippe, 2005), and their exclusion from the Winter Olympics (Andersen & Loland, 2017; Laurendeau & Adams, 2010; Lines & Heshka, 2009; Travers, 2011; Young, 2011), little is known about how elite women ski jumpers experience the sport today. This gap is crucial, as gendered hierarchies are reproduced not only through formal structures but also through everyday interactions that grant or deny respect, rights, and social esteem. This study addresses this gap by drawing on conversations with elite women ski jumpers to examine how everyday interactions, expectations, and struggles shape their lived experience. To analyse these dynamics, this study uses Honneth's theory of recognition which frames social injustice through the denial of respect, rights, and social esteem. In combination with feminist understandings of hegemonic masculinity, this approach illuminates how women ski jumpers encounter, interpret, and negotiate recognition and misrecognition within a sport historically organised around masculine norms. In doing so, this paper demonstrates that the challenges faced by women in sport cannot be reduced to issues of access alone, but instead reflect the entanglement of symbolic and material inequalities in shaping women's opportunities, identities, and wellbeing. The research question guiding this study is therefore: how do elite women ski jumpers experience recognition and misrecognition across the different domains of their professional lives?

Short History of Ski Jumping

While ski jumping is likely as old as skiing itself, the first notions of ski jumping go back to 1796 and find roots in the jumping exercises of Norwegian soldiers. The first measured jump was made in 1809 by a Norwegian lieutenant to prove his courage to his soldiers (International Olympic Committee, 1994). As such, ski jumping was tied to military ideals of strength,

bravery, and hegemonic masculinity, reinforced through the traditions of Idraet (Norwegian) and Idrott (Swedish), forms of physical culture that emphasised toughness, manliness, and service to the fatherland, strengthening national defence (Goksøyr, 2002). By contrast, skiing gradually became a more socially acceptable activity for women, yet men deemed their competition immoral. Within this context, ski jumping consolidated as a sport for men, with the first competition in 1866 before spreading to America and Central Europe by Norwegian migrants (1871-1910) (Hofmann, 2012). Its inclusion in the Winter Olympics in 1924 marked its rise to the pinnacle of competitive sport, and it has remained a core Olympic event ever since.

Within this strongly masculinised sporting culture, concerns regarding women's participation were frequently framed through medicalised assumptions about female vulnerability. Historical evidence shows that medicalised discourses portraying the female body as inherently weak, especially the supposed fragility of reproductive organs, shaped decisions about women's involvement in sport (Vertinsky et al., 2009). These claims framed strenuous sport as incompatible with women's presumed primary role as mothers. This formed a powerful rationale for restricting women's participation in sport. These narratives reflect a broader history of risk discourses that aimed to 'protect' women's bodies and show how ideas about risk reflect social and historical contexts (Laurendeau & Adams, 2010). Claims about threats to reproductive health therefore functioned as a key justification for regulating women's involvement in sport. These claims contributed to the exclusion of women from ski jumping throughout the twentieth century and have continued to influence policy in recent decades (Travers, 2011; Vertinsky et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, women have been defying societal masculine expectations from as early as 1863, with Ingrid Olsdatter Vestby credited as the first woman to participate in ski jumping (Berg, 1998). Particularly from the second half of the 19th century, there are records of women

ski jumpers, with some achieving international acclaim. During the 1930s and 1940s, women such as Baroness Paula Lamberg caused a stir by competing alongside men. Others, such as Johanne Kolstad, also achieved international acclaim. As a youth, she achieved distances comparable to her male peers and held the women's ski jumping record between 1931 and 1973 (Berg, 1998). Yet despite regional newspapers claiming that Johanne Kolstad is incomparably better than her male competitors (Kristensen, 1933), the FIS's ski-jumping committee continued to exclude women from ordinary ski-jumping competitions until 1998 (von der Lippe, 2001). As such, women were mostly jumping as an entre-act to the "real" ski jumping of the men's tournament to provide entertainment. Likewise, although women were able to join ski clubs, it was expected that they would staff the kitchen and provide spectator support at events rather than compete themselves (Winlo, 1999). The right to participate in the Winter Olympics did not follow until 2014, after an anti-discrimination court case against the Vancouver Organizing Committee 2010 resulted in social outrage and the establishment of a women's circuit (World Championship in 2009, World Cup in 2011 and Ski Flying in 2023).

This history demonstrates that while women have long participated in ski jumping, their contributions have been systematically marginalised through institutional exclusion and trivialisation of their achievements. This demonstrates the symbolic and organisational misrecognition that has long defined their place in ski jumping and continues to shape how women are valued, represented, and treated within the sport today, providing essential context for understanding the lived experiences explored in this study.

Theory of Recognition

Recognition refers to the fundamental human need to be acknowledged as a valued and legitimate participant in social life (McQueen, 2014). It describes both how individuals understand themselves and how they are positioned within wider social structures. This dual

function means recognition is inseparable from power, reflecting a tension between the demand for individuation and one's social environment, which exerts pressure from established norms, beliefs, and assumptions (Golman, 2023), while determining who is included or excluded and whose contributions are valued within a given social order (Dean, 1996). These dynamics are especially salient in the gendered landscape of sport, where longstanding cultural norms regulate access, visibility, and professional opportunities.

This paper draws specifically on Honneth's theory of recognition, rooted in critical theory and Hegelian philosophy (Honneth, 1992, 2001), and extends this through feminist analyses of sport and gender. For Honneth, recognition is a fundamental human need that results in a struggle between "social reproduction and the formation of individual identity" (Honneth, 2012, p. 7). He conceptualises recognition across three interrelated spheres: love in personal relationships, solidarity within civil society, and rights within institutionalised practices and the state (Honneth, 1995). According to Honneth (2001), work is a key area in which individuals seek recognition, develop capacities, and achieve social value. For professional athletes, sport is their place of work, offering both material livelihood and opportunities for personal development and public esteem (European Commission, 2017). Andersen (2015) argues that sport embodies all three spheres of recognition, suggesting its unique potential to support self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect. Yet for women ski jumpers, this workplace is structured by gendered power relations that shape everyday experiences of recognition and misrecognition. Understanding sport as a workplace therefore clarifies how gendered institutional arrangements directly affect women's access to recognition across all spheres.

Love refers to close relationships with significant others in which individuals acknowledge and respond to one another as people with their own needs, emotions, and vulnerabilities (Honneth, 1995). It involves valuing the other person as they are and

appreciating their presence as meaningful within one's life, including recognition of bodily integrity, emotional needs and individual competence. It is through these primary bonds that individuals develop the basic self-confidence necessary to engage with broader social life and to form trusting relationships with other persons (Lysaker, 2017). Love is situated within intimate relationships such as family ties, romantic partnerships, and close friendships, as it is through such unconditional bonds that foundational self-confidence is formed (Honneth, 1995). However, the unique character of sports allows for other intimate bonds to form, such as those within coaching relationships and the immediate relational environment between athletes (Andersen, 2016, 2021). In these relationships, athletes depend on these relationships to affirm their bodily competence, respond to their individual vulnerabilities, and provide the relational trust that underpins confident athletic performance. Misrecognition in this sphere can therefore be expanded to the disruption of these sport specific relational structures. For example, when coaches dismiss athletes' bodily knowledge, when training environments are made hostile, or when the relational conditions necessary for self-confidence are systematically withdrawn, athletes are denied the recognition required to sustain a secure sense of self. This dynamic is especially visible in women's sport, where athletes' bodies are often viewed through gendered assumptions shaped by hegemonic masculinity. These assumptions portray women as inherently weaker or more vulnerable to harm. Such paternalistic framings operate as forms of misrecognition, denying recognition of women's embodied competence while reinforcing their subordinate status within gendered sporting hierarchies, thereby undermining the conditions for self-confidence (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The love sphere thus illuminates how gendered discourses embedded in hegemonic masculinity destabilise women's basic relation to self.

Solidarity concerns the social esteem individuals receive for their distinctive skills and contributions, supporting the development of self-esteem (Honneth, 1995). Misrecognition in this sphere occurs when individuals or groups are devalued or marginalised, signalling that

their abilities or ways of life are not respected. In this sense, the social status of a person can be understood as the degree of social acceptance within their community (Honneth, 2007). In sport, solidarity is reflected in how athletes' performances are culturally valued. This is often expressed through media visibility, sponsorship, tournament scheduling, event prestige, and the everyday attitudes of peers, officials, and audiences. Gender inequalities are particularly visible here with women's events often receiving less visibility, lower financial reward, weaker organisational support, and being positioned as secondary to men's competitions (See Donnelley, 2023; Elyasi et al., 2024; Lesch et al., 2023). These violations of solidarity are shaped by hegemonic masculinity, which positions men's achievements as the normative benchmark of athletic excellence and systematically devalues women's performances. Such patterns constitute misrecognition because they deny women the social esteem necessary to experience their abilities as meaningful and publicly acknowledged (Andersen & Loland, 2015). In this sense, the solidarity sphere illuminates how social judgments of value limit women athletes' opportunities for self-esteem, belonging, and career development.

Rights concerns being recognised as autonomous and morally equal members of a community, enabling them to develop self-respect, respect for others and feel like legitimate participants of communities (Honneth, 1995). Misrecognition occurs when members are denied rights or excluded from certain rights within a community, a signal that they are not equally valued. In sport, rights-based recognition is reflected in equitable access to competition, transparent selection criteria, meaningful inclusion in governance, and institutional norms that acknowledge women as meaningful contributors to the sporting community. Misrecognition occurs when these expectations are violated such as when women are formally excluded, structurally marginalised, or confined to inferior competitive opportunities. This signals that they are not regarded as full rights-bearing members of the sport community (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Hegemonic masculinity sustains these patterns by normalising men's

authority and shaping institutional norms in ways that devalue women athletes. This is operationalised by creating both material disadvantage and diminished moral and professional standing of women. Framing rights this way provides a lens for examining biased procedures, marginalising norms, and institutional arrangements that fail to treat women as equal rights-bearing members of the sporting community. Rights-based recognition is therefore more than legal equality or procedural fairness, it provides athletes with legitimacy, authority, and self-respect within the sporting community.

These three spheres together provide a framework for understanding how gendered inequalities in sport are not merely distributional but are grounded in the systematic withdrawal of the recognition that women need to develop stable, positive identities as athletes. Crucially, however, hegemonic masculinity and recognition theory should not be treated as parallel analytical lenses operating independently. Rather, hegemonic masculinity is the specific social mechanism through which misrecognition is produced and sustained across all three spheres. In the sphere of love, it generates a hostile relational environment, often through paternalism, that disrupts the conditions upon which basic self-confidence depends. In the sphere of solidarity, hegemonic masculinity establishes men's athletic performance as the normative benchmark of sporting excellence, which means women's performances are structurally evaluated against a standard that was never designed to include them. In the sphere of rights, hegemonic masculinity naturalises male authority within governance and institutional structures, producing the conditions under which women's formal exclusion and marginalisation appear legitimate or even protective. Understanding hegemonic masculinity here as the operating mechanism deepens the explanatory power of Honneth's framework. It shows that misrecognition in sport is not arbitrary but structurally produced through gendered power. Together, these frameworks reveal that transforming women's position in sport requires both structural change in the distribution of resources and opportunities, and a fundamental

shift in the cultural schemas that determine whose achievements, bodies, and voices are deemed worthy of recognition.

Methodology

Research paradigm

This study adopts a qualitative research design situated within a constructivist ontology and a critical feminist epistemology. Constructivism positions gendered sporting experiences as socially produced through cultural norms and institutional practice and that individuals make sense of their experiences through interaction with their environments (Poucher et al., 2020). The critical feminist epistemology challenges assumptions of neutrality and value-free inquiry. Instead, it emphasises that knowledge is shaped by power relations, social hierarchies, and the historical privileging of men's experiences in sport and science (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987). This perspective also stresses the importance of centring marginalised voices and interrogating how gender structures shape what is seen, known, and legitimised (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Consistent with feminist methodological principles, the research approach emphasised reflexivity, attention to gendered power relations, and a commitment to generating knowledge that can support structural and cultural change within sport (Cook & Fonow, 2019). These assumptions underpin the study's focus on the lived experiences of elite women ski jumpers in a male-dominated sport and informed the qualitative interviews and reflexive thematic analysis.

Participants and sampling

Participants were selected through a purposive key informant sampling method ($n=11$) (Lokot, 2021) and purposive snowball sampling ($n=3$) (Walker & Melton, 2015). This resulted in a group of 13 women competing at the World Cup level and one representative of the FIS. While

the sample size is modest, it reflects the very small global population of elite women ski jumpers. FIS quota regulations typically select about 45 women for World Cup competition (FIS, 2026a), with actual event participation varying between 40 and 65 athletes. Given this small overall population, our sample represents a substantial proportion. Such sample sizes are common in qualitative research on world-class athletes (e.g. Brown et al., 2018; McCall et al., 2023). Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved (Guest et al., 2006). Due to the small size of the women's ski jumping population, anonymity was a central ethical concern. Wiles et al. (2008) demonstrate that individuals from small communities may remain identifiable even when direct identifiers are removed because contextual characteristics can still reveal their identity. Due to the quota system of the FIS, many countries have only one to six women competing in World Cup events, meaning that disclosing nationality or using culturally appropriate pseudonyms would risk deductive disclosure. Following recommendations for research in small communities (Adam, 2025), contextual identifiers were withheld, and only essential descriptive information was retained. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Data Collection

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore athletes' experiences of recognition and misrecognition across their professional environments. The interviews were conducted through a combination of phone and email (Hawkins, 2018). Because data collection occurred during the competitive winter season, several athletes were unable to commit to synchronous interviews. Email interviews offered flexibility and enabled participants to respond reflectively at times that fitted their training and travel commitments (James, 2016). During data collection, many athletes who were engaged in an email interview expressed a preference to supplement their written responses with a phone call. This was incorporated into

the study protocol, and these follow-up calls averaged around forty-five minutes. Although shorter than typical semi-structured interviews, these calls were designed to enrich and clarify participants' written reflections rather than serve as standalone interviews.

Data analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflexive thematic analysis guided data interpretation, recognising the active role of the researcher and the influence of theoretical positioning on analytic decisions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Trainor & Bundon, 2021). Analysis followed a multi-stage process. Both authors first familiarised themselves with the data by reading the transcripts in full. The second author generated inductive codes that captured recurring experiences, meanings, and concerns. These codes were then organised into preliminary themes. Through iterative discussion between authors, themes were refined to ensure conceptual clarity and analytic depth. To support credibility, the first author reviewed the coding structure and theme development, consistent with recommendations for trustworthiness in qualitative analysis (Hruschka et al., 2004).

Following theme development, Honneth's theory of recognition was applied to interpret how women athletes experienced respect, rights, and social esteem within the lived experience of everyday interactions and organisational practices within elite ski jumping. This framework provided a structured way to examine how forms of misrecognition were intertwined with the sport's historical gender order and the broader dynamics of hegemonic masculinity that continue to shape women's opportunities, identities, and wellbeing. Integrating reflexive thematic analysis with a recognition-theory lens enabled deeper interpretation of how symbolic and material inequalities were reproduced in athletes' lived experiences and supports naturalistic generalisability, allowing readers to recognise elements of these dynamics within their own contexts (Smith, 2018). In the following sections, the

themes derived from the data analysis will be presented and discussed in the context of recognition theory.

Findings and Discussion

The reflexive thematic analysis generated three overarching themes that illustrate how elite women ski jumpers navigate a complex, historically gendered sport system in which recognition is contested at multiple levels. The first theme explores how the ski jumping environment shapes women athletes' everyday struggles for recognition. The second examines how perceived anatomical differences fuel stereotypes and paternalistic attitudes that undermine recognition. The final theme considers how media coverage further reinforces misrecognition.

The sport environment – Struggling for recognition

The first theme highlights how the wider ski jumping environment creates continual struggles for recognition among women athletes. Participants' accounts revealed that their experiences of exclusion, paternalism, and devaluation are not isolated incidents, but manifestations of a broader organisational and cultural landscape shaped by historically entrenched gender norms.

Leadership – a lack of recognition

Participants consistently described governance and leadership structures in ski jumping as overwhelmingly male-dominated, a finding that reflects a long institutional history in which women's concerns, perspectives, and needs have been systematically marginalised (Burton, 2015). Analysis of the data revealed two different forms of misrecognition. The first is structural underrepresentation, a rights-based violation in which women lack access to decision-making roles that shape the sport. The second is cultural silencing, a solidarity-based violation in which women's voices are discounted or disregarded even in those cases where

women are formally present. While these are distinct phenomena, both are produced by the same underlying mechanism: hegemonic masculinity, which naturalises male authority and renders women's contributions as less legitimate or less relevant (Loviscky et al., 2024).

Structural underrepresentation constitutes misrecognition in the sphere of rights because it denies women formal standing as decision-makers within the institution that governs their professional lives. When women are excluded from governance structures, or confined to subordinate roles within them, the implicit message is that they are not regarded as full rights-bearing members of the sporting community (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Participants emphasised the lack of representation at the organisational and leadership level as being a key mechanism for the differential treatment of women in ski jumping. They explained that decision-making bodies with inadequate women's representation, omnipresent in sport (Pape, 2020), are likely to overlook women athletes' needs, wants, and expectations due to their one-sided perspective.

Cultural silencing constitutes misrecognition in the sphere of solidarity where the social esteem afforded to women's knowledge, experiences, and perspectives is systematically withheld. As opposed to structural underrepresentation, this form of misrecognition does not rely on formal exclusion, it functions through the devaluation of women's contributions even when they are present. One athlete captured this directly, describing how “It was really hard to get some of the men, that made decisions, just to sit down and listen to what we were saying (...). Getting them to ‘understand’ us”. This was experienced as a form of disrespect and, in addition to structural underrepresentation, a cause of sexist and paternalist decision making. This failure to accord women's perspectives the social esteem necessary for genuine engagement violates the solidarity sphere (Honneth, 1995) and undermines their self-esteem as legitimate contributors to the sport. This dynamic is reinforced by the cultural ideals historically tied to ski jumping, such as toughness, risk-taking, and its militaristic heritage,

which reinforce its status as a "male" sport. Alsarve (2024) argues that sports such as ski jumping, which are culturally coded as masculine, are systematically awarded greater institutional value and symbolic power, helping to explain why it is particularly hard for women in ski jumping to gain legitimacy and participate in governance.

Taken together, these experiences position women athletes as powerless stakeholders compared to their male counterparts. Participants provided various examples of this, including controversial decisions regarding competition formats, equipment standards, and resource allocation, discussed later in this paper. This demonstrates that ski jumping is based on a masculine conception of operating in which men are perceived as powerful, and women as compliant (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). In this sense, hegemonic masculinity serves as an operating principle that restricts women's access to leadership positions, relegating them to a subordinate position within the sport and denying them the formal standing necessary to develop self-respect as legitimate institutional actors (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Sexism and gender stereotypes

Sexism and gender stereotypes were found to be omnipresent throughout the interviews, manifesting in ways that constitute misrecognition primarily across the spheres of solidarity and rights, and, where they operated through proximate training relationships, in the sphere of love. Participants frequently referred to historical instances of sexist remarks within their sport, drawing on these examples to illustrate the broader cultural context in which they were embedded. For example, one such account referred to a widely reported statement by Russian ski jumping coach Alexander Arefyev, who, as reported in *The Guardian*, claimed that "Women have another purpose – to have children, to do housework, to create heart and home" (Gibson, 2014). From a recognition theory perspective, such statements do not simply reflect individual prejudice but reproduce the logic of hegemonic masculinity, which establishes

405 men's athletic participation as the natural expression of masculine identity while framing
 406 women's participation as anomalous or threatening to the sport's cultural integrity. This
 407 constituted a violation of solidarity, illustrating how sporting values have long been defined
 408 around men as the norm.

409 Women athletes interviewed for this study described experiencing these dynamics
 410 directly and consistently in ski jumping. One participant expressed this shared experience
 411 clearly: "I was never told I couldn't do something based on my sex until ski jumping, when I
 412 was told I couldn't do something based on my sexual organs". Another participant captured
 413 the structural logic underlying this exclusion:

414 Women, who are supposed to produce babies, take care of the home, and are
 415 perceived as the weaker sex, shouldn't participate in extreme sports (...) It might
 416 raise questions about the [masculine] image the sport has built for itself and its
 417 existing [male] athletes.

418 These statements reveal how ski jumping's cultural coding as "extreme" and masculine
 419 functions to sustain restrictive gender roles. Women's participation and competence are
 420 experienced as a threat to the sport's identity because it risks disrupting the hierarchy of value
 421 on which hegemonic masculinity depends. This constitutes misrecognition in the sphere of
 422 solidarity through a systematic devaluation of women's abilities and social status, signalling
 423 that their contributions are not regarded as legitimate within the ski jumping community
 424 (Honneth, 1995, 2007). It also represents a violation of rights-based recognition, as women are
 425 positioned outside the sporting community and denied legitimate participation (Fraser &
 426 Honneth, 2003).

427 This also represents misrecognition in the sphere of love by depriving women of control over
 428 their own bodies, with consequences for self-confidence, self-image, and even physical
 429 performance (Andersen, 2016).

430 Women who entered the sport despite these attitudes encountered increasingly severe
 431 forms of sexism, which participants reported becoming particularly pronounced at the
 432 international level, where they began noticing looks and comments that made them feel
 433 uncomfortable. They described dealing daily with "pessimistic opinions" and the exhausting
 434 pressure of continuously having to prove their belonging. One participant illustrated this
 435 broader pattern by recounting her experience of sexual harassment in a training context:

436 One day I had the audacity to wear a sports bra under my suit on a hot day and
 437 suddenly I was getting nasty notes from people I have never known or interacted
 438 with about how inappropriate my behaviour was to bring "sex" into the sporting
 439 arena (...) Day in, day out, year after year fighting to show we were equal was
 440 exhausting. If someone asked me to do it all over again, I don't think I could
 441 (...) It is stress that few women know and a pressure the men will never
 442 understand.

443 This represents misrecognition in the sphere of solidarity, as women are denied the dignity,
 444 respect, and moral consideration extended to their male peers and subjected to sexualised
 445 scrutiny that withdraws the social esteem and respectful inclusion that Honneth (1995)
 446 identifies as the basis of self-esteem. Although these sexualised comments originate outside
 447 the sphere of intimate relations, their effects penetrate the love sphere by undermining women's
 448 bodily autonomy and self-confidence. The cumulative psychological toll, including fatigue,
 449 near-breakdown, and a sense of futility, reflects our findings on the consequences of sustained
 450 misrecognition and is consistent with the effects of internalised sexism (Feigt et al., 2022). This
 451 demonstrates the erosion of an athlete's ability to value their own skills and contributions as
 452 genuinely valuable, resulting in diminished self-worth.

453 These dynamics were further present throughout intimate training relationships, which
 454 constitute misrecognition in the sphere of love (Andersen, 2021). Participants described a range
 455 of microaggressions, including the practice of "snaking", where male athletes would move the
 456 start gate in front of women using a higher gate, cutting in line. One participant reflected on
 457 the psychological consequences of these accumulated microaggressions, saying, "It was

intimidating to jump alongside people who didn't take you seriously". This deliberate peer exclusion and intimidation disrupts the relational trust that athletes depend on to develop self-confidence in training and competition. When the immediate relational environment is made hostile through gendered microaggressions, the conditions for basic self-confidence are systematically undermined (Andersen, 2016, 2021). It also infringes upon rights-based recognition by undermining their entitlement to a safe, non-hostile sporting environment (Andersen, 2015). These dynamics further reflect the operation of hegemonic masculinity, through which women are systematically denied respect and social inclusion, reinforcing their marginalisation within gendered sporting norms (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The cumulative effect of these practices extends across multiple spheres, simultaneously undermining women's self-confidence, social inclusion, and rights, and demonstrating how misrecognition in sport generates compound harm beyond any single violation.

Anatomical differences: an excuse for differential treatment

The second theme to emerge from the data analysis concerns the impact of perceived anatomical differences on women's suitability to participate in ski jumping, a debate with deep historical roots in sport more broadly. Historically, women were considered unfit for vigorous physical activity, as it was thought that it could make women infertile or cause other medical harm (Pfister, 2007; Vertinsky et al., 2009). In ski jumping, this discourse has proved particularly durable, repeatedly deployed as justification for restricting women's access to competition and for the paternalistic governance of women athletes' bodies and careers (Laurendeau & Adams, 2010).

Paternalism, understood as one person deciding on behalf of (or speaking for) another, in what he or she believes to be the latter person's best interest (Schneider, 2000), is important here because it constitutes misrecognition across multiple spheres simultaneously. Its most

direct effect is in the sphere of rights. Formal restrictions, such as limiting the hill sizes women can jump to 95 percent of men's, and excluding women from ski flying competition until 2023, deny women equal standing as autonomous competitors and embed differential treatment within the organisation's regulatory structure. These are not merely procedural inequalities but communicative acts that signal, through institutional practice, that women are not regarded as fully competent and autonomous members of the sporting community (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Yet, respect for autonomy is critical for developing self-confidence, self-respect, and a sense of belonging within society (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Paternalism also operates in the sphere of love, in sport-specific relations, when coaches and officials override athletes' knowledge of their own bodies, dismissing women's assessment of their own capacity and risk tolerance. This disrupts the relational trust that underpins basic self-confidence (Andersen, 2021). Several participants described feeling "like delicate teacups", a framing that captures relational imposition of fragility onto athletes who understand themselves as capable competitors. One participant noted:

It seems like they are overly cautious with the women to the point where I do not think they are doing the women any favours (...). We [women ski jumpers] are now all treated like kind of delicate teacups.

When coaches and officials, who are central to athletes' daily lives, undermine the affirmation of bodily competence that Andersen (2016) identifies as essential to self-confidence in sport, this constitutes both a violation of rights, as expressed through policy, and a violation of love, by disrupting the relation of trust fundamental to confident performance.

The justification offered for these restrictions reveals how hegemonic masculinity functions as the mechanism that produces and sustains this misrecognition over time. Helmut Weinbuch, General Secretary of the German Ski Association and FIS chairman from 1973 to 2002, argued that "women's backbones were not up to the impact of the landing and that the vertebrae might spring out of the spinal column" (Pfister, 2007, p. 60). FIS president Gian

Franco Kasper (1998 to 2021) maintained that such activity “seems not to be appropriate for ladies from a medical point of view” (Mann, 2005). A current representative of the FIS repeated this framing during our interview, “For sure, ski jumping is not easy for the ladies because of the anatomical difference ... and that needs to be taken into account to make sure ski jumping is safe for the ladies”. The persistence of this narrative across several decades, and its reproduction by current officials, demonstrates that it is not an outdated attitude but an institutionalised logic through which hegemonic masculinity naturalises male authority by positioning women as requiring protection from their own choices. Participants were consistent in their interpretation. These measures were experienced not as genuine safety provisions but as paternalistic acts designed to reinforce male authority and to define men as essential guardians of the sport, a dynamic consistent with Honneth's (2001) analysis of how the marginalisation of others can serve to assert the indispensability of the dominant group.

The empirical basis of this justification is undermined by both sport science and participant accounts. Griffin (1995) and participants alike argued that risks associated with anatomical differences can be addressed through adapted training, with one athlete noting that “women need to focus more on the strength and injury prevention training compared to men, but the risk is the same”. Weather conditions and landing technique were also mentioned by both participants and the literature (e.g. Stenseth et al., 2020) as more relevant than hill sizes or gender. For example, the telemark landing is considered less safe than other forms of landing, yet scores higher for style, highlighting a selective concern for safety. This demonstrates that the anatomical narrative functions primarily as an ideological resource rather than a genuine safety framework, a means through which hegemonic masculinity sustains women's subordination by translating gendered authority into the language of medical concern.

The cumulative effect of these paternalistic policies was experienced as a sense of exclusion from the ski jumping community. Many women reported feelings of alienation, with

one noting, “it often feels as if I do not belong in this sport”, illustrating the impact of misrecognition in the sphere of solidarity and highlighting how organisational narratives can reinforce social marginalisation. Yet, participants were adamant that, just like men, they have the right to decide what risks of harm they will engage in. Subject to normal limits on freedom, it is immorally paternalistic to decide on behalf of another competent adult what personal risks they choose to engage in (Schneider, 2000). According to Honneth, such marginalisation and undervaluation of one’s rights and desires expresses disrespect and doubt that an individual can make rational choices or is aware of potential consequences (Andersen, 2015).

Controversial regulations around women’s body suits, regularly brought up during the interviews, illustrate most clearly how paternalism, sexism and hegemonic masculinity interact to produce compound misrecognition across multiple spheres simultaneously. Until 2020, women were required to add additional hip panels to their suits, a rule framed by the FIS as necessary for “fit” but experienced by athletes as sexualisation. Participants referred to Sarah Hendrickson, who brought the issue to the media, saying “they were trying to come up with ways that accentuated our hips and our curves a little bit more” (Dalby, 2025). Analysed through Honneth's framework, this constitutes misrecognition in the sphere of solidarity by defining women's bodies according to male aesthetic norms rather than athletic function, thereby devaluing their athletic identities as competitors. In the sphere of rights, the rule constitutes a violation by embedding this gendered differential treatment within formal regulatory practice, undermining women’s autonomy and moral standing as equal participants. While these rules originate outside the love sphere, their effects spill into it by eroding bodily self-trust and basic self-confidence. The disqualifications at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, in which five women ski jumpers were excluded from the mixed team event for suits deemed "too baggy" despite having previously competed in the same suits without issue (Baver, 2022), further demonstrate the inconsistent and gendered enforcement of these

regulations. That the same suits were acceptable in one context and penalised in another was experienced by participants not as neutral technical standards but as mechanisms of gendered control, which was deemed “disrespectful” and damaging to self-worth. This demonstrates how a single regulatory practice simultaneously violated women's bodily integrity, withdrew social esteem, and denied equal competitive standing. A convergence of misrecognition across all three spheres that increased the struggle between their “sporting” body and their “social” body, resulting in increased body dissatisfaction (Kong & Harris, 2015).

The media: a source of (mis)recognition

The final theme to emerge from the data concerns the role of the media as both a source of recognition and a mechanism through which institutional gender inequality is reproduced and naturalised. The media carries particular analytical weight within recognition theory because, as Honneth (2012) argues, it functions as an arena for the “public display of a value or achievement that is attributed to a person or social group” (p. 78). Thus, making it a primary site in which solidarity, the social esteem accorded to individuals for their distinctive contributions, is publicly awarded or withheld. Media visibility is therefore not only a commercial or reputational matter for athletes but a direct institutional expression of whether their achievements are regarded as socially meaningful.

Participants reported moments of positive recognition, particularly when women's technical abilities were acknowledged to equal the level of male ski jumpers, “So, I think if you take Maren [Lundby] or Sara [Takanashi], they are technically very similar [to male ski jumpers]”, with one observing that in certain respects, “The jump is technically better performed by a woman”. These moments constitute recognition in the sphere of solidarity, affirming women's competence and legitimating their participation. When this occurred, participants felt pride and solidarity, demonstrating the positive impact recognition can have

on self-esteem. Yet participants were consistent in noting that the positive recognition was conditional and contained. Recognition was found to be confined within the sphere of women's sport rather than translating into equal representation or equivalent coverage alongside men's competitions.

By contrast, mirroring broader patterns in the sports media landscape (See Antunovic, 2019; Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019), traditional media coverage disproportionately focused on women's private lives and physical appearance, even during competition, putting their sporting success in the shadow. One participant recalled, "I think especially if you get older than the age of like twenty-four or so, it's like are you married yet? When are you having kids?". This framing constitutes misrecognition operating simultaneously across the spheres of solidarity and rights. In terms of solidarity, it withdraws social esteem for women's athletic contributions and replaces it with interest in their conformity to domestic gender roles, signalling that their value as public figures derives from their femininity rather than their sporting achievement. In terms of rights, it implicitly communicates that women athletes are not regarded as professional subjects in the same respect as their male counterparts. Their careers are framed as secondary to their reproductive and domestic identities.

Participants also described experiences of sexual objectification by the media, with one saying: "An outgoing, beautiful woman that also happens to be a good athlete is something that the media and people really like". This constitutes misrecognition in the sphere of solidarity, privileging visual appearance over athletic achievement, framing women's media value in terms of looks rather than skill, thereby reproducing the hegemonic logic that casts women as objects of male evaluation rather than agents of athletic accomplishment. Yet the consequences of such objectification are not confined to the social-reputational dimension of solidarity alone. When media-driven body ideals are internalised (Şahin et al., 2024), they penetrate the athlete's most immediate relation to her own body and competence, disrupting the basic self-confidence

that Honneth situates in the love sphere. Participants reflected that media-driven body ideals affected their self-esteem and body image, contributing to performance anxiety and mental health challenges. This further increases the struggle between their sporting body and their social body as discussed in the previous section, while forcing women into a hegemonic understanding of what they can be and achieve in life.

This has structural consequences as athletes who conform to hegemonic ideals of femininity tend to receive the most media coverage and sponsorship (King, 2013). The economics of sport thus embed within women's sport a system in which athletic recognition and distribution of resources are conditional on gendered aesthetic compliance. This was recognised by our participants who mentioned the benefits of being a good-looking woman in ski jumping, referring to “improved market value” and “better sponsorship deals”. This acceptance can be explained by Honneth's tripartite division of normative expectations, which assumes that social ties are not the source of choice but rather a "context of identity that structures our choices and aspirations" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 187). This suggests that individuals involuntarily fall within the frames of conformism, which, from the perspective of the individual, can appear as a rational choice made to satisfy fundamental needs for recognition. Indeed, women seem to rationalise objectification as a trade-off to secure scarce resources (Lobpries et al., 2018). These representational tactics reinforce gender differences and uphold masculine privilege in sport by positioning women athletes as inferior to male standards while maintaining hegemonic values in sports (Bruce, 2015).

The rise of social media has altered this dynamic, changing how spectators, athletes, and the sport itself interact with each other (Achen & Clavio, 2017). As one FIS representative noted, “Through social media, the athletes themselves have more control over what is going out to the masses, and they can create more of a picture of who they are”. Participants echoed this, emphasising that social media allows them to share their perspectives and successes and

present themselves on their own terms, thereby providing them with more “control”. Social media can thus function as an alternative arena of recognition, giving women athletes greater autonomy in articulating their identities (supporting self-confidence), enabling them to receive affirmation from an audience they have cultivated (solidarity), and providing a space from which to contest dominant narratives that have historically undermined their professional legitimacy (rights). In doing so, it offers social esteem outside the gatekeeping structures of traditional media and creates opportunities to build a sporting brand through which women can publicly assert the standing that institutional structures have often withheld.

Yet this potential is structurally constrained in ways that recognition theory makes visible. Studies show that women athletes who conform to heteronormative ideals (e.g. playing into the sexualised body) and avoid challenging gender norms often achieve the most success on social media (Thorpe et al., 2017). Women also bear the burden of generating media coverage, creating an image of women's athleticism, and establishing themselves as a unique sporting brand in crowded digital markets, making recognition uncertain and unevenly distributed. Recognition on social media is therefore not unconditional but governed by the same hegemonic logics that structure traditional media. Athletes who present themselves in ways that conform to dominant expectations often gain visibility and fan engagement, strengthening solidarity through increased esteem, while those who resist these norms risk losing access to all three forms of recognition simultaneously. Thus, while social media appears to enhance autonomy, recognition remains conditional. Social media, therefore, does not escape the logic of traditional media but reinscribes it, situating women athletes in an ambivalent position where recognition is always mediated by gendered norms.

Although not drawn from ski jumping directly, the case of Dutch speed skater Jutta Leerdam provides a recent illustration of how traditional and social media interact in shaping women athletes' recognition. Leerdam maintains a highly curated online presence and has built

a massive following of more than six million Instagram users, increasingly using social media as the primary site through which she manages her public identity. This strategic use of social media represents precisely the kind of autonomy discussed above, an attempt to assert narrative control, cultivate recognition outside traditional gatekeeping structures, and present herself on her own terms. Yet following her 2026 Olympic gold medal, rather than celebrating her record-setting performance, online users on Dutch X, Reddit, and Instagram fixated on her persona, accusing her of being overly polished, self-promotional, or presenting the "wrong" kind of femininity (Mew, 2026). Traditional media amplified this scrutiny, publicly condemning her behaviour and labelling her a "diva" and "selfish", in part because she broadcast her private-jet travel and charted her Olympic journey through Instagram rather than conforming to expected media norms or team protocols (McEntyre, 2026). In this way, her athletic achievement was displaced by scrutiny of her femininity and self-presentation, mirroring the patterns of objectification and domestication identified earlier in this section. Leerdam's case, therefore, demonstrates the double bind women face when leveraging social media to assert narrative control. The very autonomy gained online can provoke hostility from both algorithmic publics and traditional media gatekeepers, revealing how recognition remains policed across interconnected media spheres. Moreover, the tone of the criticism directed at Leerdam, centred on policing her femininity, disciplining her visibility, and questioning her legitimacy, reflects how hegemonic masculine norms continue to determine who is deemed acceptable, credible, or deserving within elite sport. Women's choices are therefore shaped, and in many ways constrained, by institutionalised gender hierarchies (Van Leeuwen, 2007), demonstrating how the media has the potential to be simultaneously empowering and oppressive (Beaver, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper set out to understand how elite women ski jumpers experience recognition and

misrecognition within a sport that has long been organised around masculine norms. By using Honneth's tripartite theory of recognition in combination with hegemonic masculinity, the findings reveal a pattern of systematic misrecognition within women's ski jumping. Unlike earlier work that has tended to focus on isolated dimensions of exclusion (See Andersen, 2021; Andersen & Loland, 2015, 2017), our findings demonstrate how misrecognition operates simultaneously across all three of Honneth's spheres simultaneously (love, rights, and solidarity). This is important as these forms of misrecognition are interconnected and reinforce one another, making the overall impact more severe. As the findings demonstrate, paternalistic bodily governance, exclusion from decision-making, and everyday microaggressions do not produce separate harms but come together in women's everyday sporting lives. Together, these experiences harm women's practical identities as legitimate sporting subjects while eroding their self-identity, self-respect, and sense of belonging in ways that individual-level reforms cannot adequately address.

This study further shows how hegemonic masculinity is the operative mechanism through which misrecognition is produced, sustained, and naturalised across each sphere. It establishes men's athletic performance as the normative benchmark of sporting excellence, legitimises male authority within governance structures, and generates hostile relational environments in training and competition. In doing so, it determines which bodies are deemed competent, whose voices carry institutional weight, and whose achievements are recognised as socially valuable.

Although the study focuses on ski jumping, the issues identified here are unlikely to be unique to this sport alone. The dynamics identified here, the conditional nature of women's recognition, the ideological function of paternalistic safety discourses, the reframing of hegemonic norms through digital media, and the compound harm produced by intersecting violations across spheres, are likely to resonate across sports settings that share ski jumping's

history of masculine coding, late inclusion, and reactive reform. The recognition-based framework developed here, therefore, provides a transferable analytical lens for examining gender and diversity across the broader sport sector. This demonstrates that recognition can be used as a multi-level analytical tool which encompasses structural, cultural, epistemic, and intersectional dimensions of gender.

To conclude, the findings suggest that genuine recognition will not be achieved through piecemeal or reactive reforms but requires systemic changes that confront individual, structural and cultural barriers to equality. We recognise the positive advancements of women's sport in recent times. However, the progress in ski jumping has been notably slow, inconsistent and controversial. For instance, the FIS did not establish a quota for women's representation on their board until 2019, women remained excluded from ski flying until 2023 and continue to be excluded from Nordic combined. This highlights the reactive pace of reform and the deeply entrenched gender inequalities within ski jumping. Using a recognition-based framework in combination with hegemonic masculinity helps to explain why this progress is not only slow but also why such incremental progress is insufficient. Our findings show that such progress addresses the more visible or superficial issues of equity, but does little to tackle the deeper patterns of paternalism, symbolic devaluation, and relational hostility that shape women's everyday experiences in the sport. Therefore, to achieve meaningful and durable change, it is important to go beyond formal inclusion. It demands keeping governing bodies accountable, challenging entrenched gender norms and the active inclusion of women athletes as equal voices in shaping the future of ski jumping. Ultimately, it is high time for society to stop treating women as "delicate teacups" and to build the structural conditions through which they can be recognised fully, unconditionally, and on their own terms as equal members of society.

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