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‘WOMEN CAN’T REFEREE’: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE FOOTBALL OFFICIALS WITHIN UK FOOTBALL CULTURE

by

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A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts (Sport, Body and Society)

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THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DECLARATION

This work is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Sport, Body and Society and has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

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The purpose of this article is to explore the experiences of four female football officials who officiate in men’s and boy’s football matches in the UK. The research presents a view of men’s football from a position that has hitherto been overlooked in the social exploration of football culture. Drawing upon ethnographic data collected over a four-month period, the article offers an insight into some women’s experiences of sexism and marginalization in predominantly male football contexts. Participant observations, formal semi-structured interviews and a range of informal conversations facilitated in-depth data collection. The results demonstrate a wide range of abuse at female football officials that could generally be construed as sexist. The women used various strategies to overcome the hostile attitudes that often greeted their presence on the football pitch. Moreover, they continuously negotiated their identities as females and football officials in a space where masculinity is prevalent.

Introduction

‘If women want f***ing equal rights then they need to learn how to referee!’ (Observed 13.10.12)

This comment, directed at Rosie (a pseudonym) after taking charge of an amateur men’s league game, epitomizes some men’s response to the presence of a woman on the football pitch. The comment above, made by an amateur male player,
reaffirmed the argument that women’s participation in the male-dominated arena of football culture often triggers harassment, discrimination and abuse.¹

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

She should not be here. I know that sounds sexist but I am sexist… We have a problem in this country with political correctness, and bringing women into the game is not the way to improve refereeing and officialdom… it is bad enough with the incapable referees and linesmen we have, but if you start bringing in women, you have big problems.⁴

In response to public criticism, the FA investigated the incident and defended female officials in general and Rayner in particular. Consequently, Newell was charged with improper conduct and fined a derisory £6500. However, despite the FA’s continued support of anti-discrimination campaigns within football culture (such as the FA’s anti-racism campaign: Kick it Out), sexist attitudes continue to be accepted by many as a fundamental part of the game.⁵

The attitude of hostility, demonstrated by Newell, resurfaced in 2011 when Sky Sports presenters Andy Gray and Richard Keys were at the centre of a media furore, following the publication of an off-air conversation. Both presenters
were heard making disparaging comments about the FA’s decision to employ a female football official for such a high-profile Premier League match. Their conversation was as follows:

RK: Somebody better get down there and explain offside to her....
AG: Yeah I know can you believe that, a female linesman... Women don't know the offside rule!
RK: I can guarantee you there will be a big one today Kenny [Dalglish] will go potty... It's not the first time is it? Didn't we have one before? Wendy Toms, the games gone mad.... Did you see the charming Karen Brady this morning complaining about sexism? Do me a favor love.6

Both Andy Gray and Richard Keys expressed concern that an incorrect decision by Sian Massey (the female official in question) would overshadow the game. Although Gray and Keys dismissed the comments as banter, the content and tone of the conversation exposed sexist ideologies about the presence of women in an arena which serves to maintain masculine hegemony.

Until recently, women’s football in the UK received very little academic attention and sociological literature on football remains dominated by work on the men’s game.7 Over the last decade however, as more women and girls take up football, feminist sport sociologists have begun to look more critically at the women’s game. Building upon theoretical debates within women’s sport more broadly, feminist scholars have explored topics primarily focusing on the intersections of gender, sexuality and identity within women's football.8 Notwithstanding the growing popularity of women’s football, and a steady increase of qualified female coaches and officials, the experiences of females involved in the non-playing roles within football culture (for example, female
coaches, officials, fans and commentators) have hitherto been overlooked. Caudwell highlights the importance of continuing a gendered analysis of football culture, to extend research on critical football studies. She argues that sexism, in social and football contexts, is a reminder of the influence of gendered social relations between men and women.

In this article I explore the experiences of four women who officiate men’s and boy’s football within the UK. The article structure is as follows. In the first section, I provide a brief overview of existing literature pertaining to sexism and identity construction within football in the UK. In the second section, informed by empirical data collection, I provide an analysis of four women’s experiences of officiating men’s and boy’s football matches. Several studies have focused on women’s experiences as players and fans within football culture in the UK. The experiences of female football officials, however, have not been examined. Considering this gap in knowledge, the current study addresses three research aims: i) to explore the experiences of female football officials within male football culture; ii) to analyse techniques employed by female officials to overcome hostile attitudes towards their involvement; and, iii) to explore the tension between participants gendered and refereeing identities.

**Sexism in football**

The issue of sexism continues to be a subject of frequent debate within the sporting arena. Literature on women in sport, on the whole, suggests that marginalization and sexualization are consistent features of women’s experiences in sport. Moreover, girls and women in football consistently struggle against sexism and gendered stereotypes to be recognized as legitimate participants and
members of the football community.\textsuperscript{11} The intersections of identity, gender and sexuality remain a significant feature of feminist literature documenting women’s experiences of football both in the UK\textsuperscript{12} and further afield.\textsuperscript{13} More recently, scholars have begun to explore female football players’ experiences of the interconnections of gender, race and ethnicity, and how they impact on participation.\textsuperscript{14} However, notwithstanding the growing literature on previously underrepresented areas of women’s participation in football, little academic attention has been paid to women’s experiences of sexism within football culture more broadly (see Jones\textsuperscript{15} as a notable exception).

The increase in female football participation is considered by some to challenge the complex gender constraints that have traditionally restricted women’s sport participation.\textsuperscript{16} However, the possibilities to contest traditional gender norms through football participation are somewhat restricted.\textsuperscript{17} McGinnis \textit{et al.} argue that female athletes ‘experience daunting challenges both on and off the playing field, including a sense of extra scrutiny of their abilities and worthiness’ in male dominated sports.\textsuperscript{18} Although women are gaining greater prominence in football culture, any threat to the dominant gender boundaries often triggers discrimination and abuse. The more women engage in male dominated spaces the more men marginalize, sexualize and discriminate against women in order to protect the gender order.\textsuperscript{19} The recent opposition to female football officials cited above is indicative of the sorts of sexist responses that help to confirm the practice of masculine hegemony in football culture.

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

**Negotiating legitimate identities**

Women must reconcile football participation with an acceptable feminine identity, which Jeanes describes as a ‘complex and abstract’ area of identity construction. Failure to successfully negotiate the complex web of restrictions and contradictions to develop an appropriate identity has broadly two consequences. Women who adopt characteristics more associated with a masculine identity gain acceptance within the male football domain, but risk condemnation and harassment from female peers. Conversely, women who adopt feminine identity characteristics are not accepted as legitimate members of the football community.

Bruce’s study on female sports journalists reflects on how women negotiate their identity across different sporting contexts. For example, as a female journalist in the male dominated sporting arena of men’s basketball, Bruce was advised by a female colleague to not ‘wear anything remotely sexy’. This was a conscious attempt to avoid drawing any unwanted attention to her femininity. She wanted her position as a sports reporter to be taken seriously and thus purposely placed more prominence on her journalist identity.
describes this as an example of women distancing themselves from emphasized femininity, a strategy used to overcome sexism which is prominent for women in male dominated spaces. However, this devaluation of feminine characteristics, as Reay argues, simply reproduces patriarchal gender hierarchies. Women are accepting that femininity is unfavorable and instead of posing a challenge of what is deemed acceptable (such as, in Bruce’s case, a woman in the locker room) they are complying with men’s sexist assumptions about the place of women in sport.

The work of Jones is one of the only attempts to examine women’s experiences of sexism within male football culture. The results of her study on female football fans yield important and interesting results and, consequently, the article is worth examining in more detail. Congruent with findings from Bruce, research on female football fans suggests that women downplay their gender identities in order to be considered legitimate members of the football community, and in so doing, find themselves in a contradictory position. Research on women in other traditionally male arenas, such as male dominated occupations, can help us to further understand the contradictions of forming an appropriate identity, as parallels can be drawn between the study of women in sport and women working within male dominated occupations. As Bruce’s study confirmed, women in such occupations are devalued, considered as a threat to men and subjected to hostility and sexual harassment. As a result women employ various strategies to overcome their minority status in male arenas. However, strategies used to overcome harassment and abuse at football matches, such as complying with men’s sexist assumptions to ‘fit in with the lads’, only results in the reproduction of a patriarchal hierarchy.
This idea is not restricted to female fans. Many other scholars have also identified the tenuous position that women who play or follow football are in. Traditionally regarded as a quintessentially male arena, women who attempt to carve out a space within football culture struggle to be recognized as legitimate members of the football community. Instead, they are viewed as aggressive and unfeminine with their presence provoking sexist criticism and reference to dominant gender stereotypes. Rubin articulates this idea in relation to female fan identities:

‘In a sense, football’s defence against women is foolproof: if a woman finds sexual expression in watching football, then she is not a real fan; if, on the other hand, she demonstrates a full knowledge and enjoyment of the game for its own sake, well, then she is not a real woman.’

Some women completely reject femininity, adopting characteristics more associated with a masculine identity, which Davis describes as ‘becoming honorary men’. However, the opposing ideas about women in football are not restricted to men. Female fans, in an attempt to assert their dominant fan identities, also categorize women who emphasize their femininity at football matches as inauthentic. Women and girls who participate in football also comply with dominant notions of femininity to construct a legitimate female identity. However, there are also studies that illustrate women rejecting a feminine identity in favour of an athletic identity. The constant negotiation between woman and fan or woman and football confirms the multiplicity of trying to construct a legitimate identity in a male dominated arena.

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

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

**Methodological approach**

The methodological approach utilized in this article is inspired by feminist literature that, as Kitzinger explains, involves reclaiming and validating women’s experience in order to ‘challenge the male monopoly on truth’. One of the key strengths of using an ethnographic approach is the in-depth data that is able to be collected. Participant observations and in-depth interviews are the core data-collection methods. Many other qualitative studies exploring women’s experiences in football have utilized a similar approach. The women in the study were aged between 16 and 33 and their refereeing experience ranged between two and seven years. All four women described themselves as White-British and middle class. Three of the four women were students. All of the women started
out as players; two of the women continue to play and officiate whilst the other two women no longer play football. Pseudonyms have been provided to protect the identity of all participants in this article.

The first phase of the research involved participant observation of the officials during games, in dressing rooms and at pre and post-match functions, over a period of ten weeks. Where possible, I also travelled to and from the games with the officials. Spending time with the officials before and after the games allowed me to observe their preparation strategies, interactions with management and players, and on the occasions that the women were supported by assistant referees, the interactions that occurred between them. Conducting observations in participants’ natural settings is another key feature of ethnographic work. Informal discussions with the officials facilitated an exploration of the requirements of football officials beyond just the game itself, further enhancing the quality and depth of the data collected.

The second phase of the research entailed follow-up, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the officials. The interviews were informed by both preliminary research and the observations and informal conversations that had taken place. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and covered a range of topics. The primary purpose of the interviews was to facilitate a more formal and in-depth discussion of the women’s experiences as football officials. It was also important that the officials had the chance to describe, in their own words, the experiences that they had been through.

It was particularly important to spend time ‘in the field’ in order to develop rapport with the participants and to ensure the research findings are grounded in the experiences of the women concerned. Although the interviews
marked the end of the formal data collection, I kept in contact with the officials and, as a result, was able to ask follow up questions and clarify or expand on issues that had become significant during the research process. As Hammersley and Atkinson\textsuperscript{45} identify, one of the strengths of ethnographic research lies in the ability to move back and forth between data collection and analysis, facilitating a more rounded approach to data collection.

The sampling approach used was a mixture of convenience and purposive sampling. Initial contact was made with two female football officials (Kate and Emma) who were known through informal social networks and agreed to take part. When discussing the project Emma informed me of the social networking site Pink Whistle. Created for female football officials, members of the group are able to communicate by posting online. It is common for members to post photos, advertisements, stories and advice on the site. Like Scraton \textit{et al.}\textsuperscript{46} participants needed to fit a pre-defined set of criteria to be eligible for this study. The participants needed to have officiated men’s or boy’s football matches. An advertisement was placed to recruit participants who fulfilled the desired criteria for the project. Seven women responded to the online post showing an interest in the project and offered their assistance. A further two participants were recruited in this way. Due to location and time constraints, it was virtually impossible to include all of the females that had responded to the post as part of the sample, and therefore the most accessible women were chosen to take part in the study.

As a result of the small sample size used, it is important to address questions regarding generalizations. Williams\textsuperscript{47} argues that generalizations in interpretative research ought to be made cautiously. He posits that generalizing claims are both necessary and inevitable, however, they must be made explicitly
and acknowledged accordingly. In qualitative sociological research it seems acceptable (due to the focus on small sample size and in-depth studies) that ‘moderatum generalizations’ are made.\textsuperscript{48} I am not claiming that female football officials are a homogenous group with shared experiences. However, as I found during my research, female football officials do share some similar experiences and in order to ‘make sense’ of such experiences I rely on placing particular incidents into a wider social context. Williams\textsuperscript{49} provides a lucid argument in support of making certain generalizing claims without claiming cultural homogeneity. He contends that micro-detail features must be understood in such a way as to explain how they do, or do not, create, reproduce or destroy wider social structures. Therefore, the existence of some shared norms can allow at least some reciprocity of perspective and viable comparisons to be made. Thus, although the observations and interviews that I conducted occurred within a specific cultural context, my discussion will rely on placing incidents within a wider context to provide an in-depth critical analysis.

It is recognized that the process of data analysis in ethnographic projects is not a distinct phase, but an ongoing one, that begins in the pre-fieldwork phase and is embodied in the researchers ideas or hunches.\textsuperscript{50} I had a preconceived idea of some of the experiences likely to emerge from the data. However, using a semi-structured interview approach encouraged the participants to share experiences that they thought could contribute to the research, and thus, the conversations were not restricted by preconceptions. Once the interview data had been recorded and transcribed, the formal stage of the data analysis began. The interview transcripts were coded, and key themes that were apparent in the data were identified. The key themes were then condensed, and the experiences of the
four football officials were analysed in reference to the literature review that illustrated other underrepresented women’s experiences in football.

Results and discussion
The results of this study demonstrate a wide range of abuse directed at female football officials that could generally be construed as sexist. Similar to findings by Jones, the data suggests that female football officials adopt strategies akin to those used by female football fans to overcome sexist attitudes in an arena where women’s football knowledge is often questioned. Moreover, female football officials also downplay or ignore sexist abuse by accepting gender stereotypes as a fundamental part of the game. The results of this study reflect some of the findings in previous research on women in football. In particular, the data reflects the complex and abstract area of identity construction for women in football and specifically for female football officials.

‘Females can’t referee’: perceptions of a female football official
One significant theme that emerged during the interviews regarded the women in this study representing the category of female referee. Recently feminist scholars have begun to challenge certain strands of feminist thought, realizing that classifying women as a homogenous group is problematic. The women provided examples of peoples’ preconceived perceptions of female football officials. These perceptions were usually negative and generally reflected a stereotypical view of women, who are considered to have insufficient knowledge to competently officiate men’s football matches. All four of the women realized that officiating in men’s or boy’s football matches would result in their gender being discussed as a
significant topic of conversation. This is especially true when players, coaches or spectators felt that the women had made an incorrect decision:

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

This stereotypical view of female football officials consequently puts added pressure on the women. When officiating, the women feel that they are representing all female officials and therefore want to conquer negative stereotypes that currently surround their participation. Kate’s response when asked about being the only female on her refereeing course illustrates the responsibility she felt to improve the image of female officials:

AF: How conscious of being the only girl [on the course] were you?
Kate: I was obviously aware that I was the only girl, the only thing that I thought about was if I failed, I kind of felt like I was representing the females so had more pressure to pass… I care about the image of females within sport so I like to be seen to be helping that image progress and grow.

Kate described the added pressure she felt when qualifying as a referee. Similar to the comments from Sky Sports presenters Andy Gray and Richard Keys, the observations illustrated that some men would automatically assume that women don’t have the required knowledge to be competent football officials. Although the women in this study felt unfairly stereotyped, it was clear that they were used to hearing these kinds of attitudes from some men. As a result, they accepted a
certain amount of responsibility to try and overturn such negative stereotypes. In this respect, the findings are similar to research by McGinnis et al.\textsuperscript{53} on female golfers, who found that women in male dominated sports felt highly visible, unfairly stereotyped and under increased performance pressure.

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

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

Although Rosie had made the correct decision, the stereotype of women not knowing the offside rule seemed to override the fact that the decision she had made was correct. As a result one spectator concluded that ‘women ref’s are fucking shit’. This provides another example of an individual female official’s actions within football being representative of the whole category, whereby female football officials are regarded as a homogenous group.
Rosie implied that abuse started to become personal when they made reference to her gender. It was evident during my observations that although comments about female football officials at first seemed positive, abuse soon started to become personal and sexist. Rosie discussed a particular incident after a men’s game:

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

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

As women become more visible in male football culture, the participants of this study were in agreement that sexist attitudes would begin to be challenged. Although the women have experienced hostile sexist attitudes it is also common for them to receive more subtle forms of sexism. Aicher and Sagas⁵⁴ argue that pressures of society are suppressing traditional sexist forms and gender
stereotypes, and as a result more subtle forms of sexism, that Glick and Fiske coined benevolent sexism, are being used. All four women cited examples of benevolent sexism:

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

Emma: There’s a space on my cards that say captains number and so I’d say ‘captain what’s your number’ and you’d quite often get 07941… and that’s something that they wouldn’t say to a male referee but it’s just them trying to be funny. But it reminds you that they’ve got in their head that you’re a female referee not just a referee.

Rosie: There’s a joke about me being a woman, sort of horrible chatting up lines and things. And then you get the abusive ones that are just wow.

You’re not gonna get a man chatting up a male referee as much are you?

Although the participants often found the comments light hearted and funny, they realized that they were nonetheless sexist. As Rosie correctly highlighted ‘they wouldn’t be saying those things to a male referee would they?’ Despite the light-hearted nature of most of the comments, they can undermine the women’s authority of the game. For Emma, hearing benevolent comments ‘reminded [her] that she was a female referee, and not just a referee’. This reflects data collected on female football fans, who also had a mixed response to benevolent forms of sexism. Although some of the women found comments funny, they also, in some cases, challenged sexist abuse. However, subtle forms of sexism, often disguised as humour, highlight the dangers for women trying to challenge ‘football’s transgressive atmosphere’. Women who do not find comments funny are labeled
as either part of the joke or part of the problem, and thus humour is described as a ‘potent way of silencing women’.

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

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

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

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

[They’re] not actually being sexist or racist it’s just an excuse to be able
to shout at someone.

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

Emma argued that the abuse directed towards football officials wasn’t ‘actually sexist or racist’ but gender and race were being used as distinguishing features. This finding is similar to some female fans, who argued that gender and race were ‘just something to hone in on’. By arguing that ‘football’ sexism and racism ought not be taken as seriously as more overt forms of sexism or racism draws a distinction between casual sexism and overt or premeditated sexism. As
Jones argues ‘racism and sexism end up being equated with other kinds of more personal abuse, which denies their institutionalized status in society’. 59

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

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

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

Both of the women suggest that although they tend to try and ignore sexist comments, being silent about such issues can have negative implications. Whilst women are a minority within men’s football culture, if female officials do not complain about or confront abusers, there is little incentive to rid the sport of
sexism. As some of the participants in Jones’s study argued, not confronting sexist behaviour makes it acceptable, and thus, some female fans decided to ‘poke [their] nose[s] in’ as a resistant femininity practice to challenge abuse. It has been argued that the introduction of anti-discrimination campaigns have reduced racist and, to a certain extent, homophobic abuse at football matches. However, the lack of an explicit anti-sexist policy has resulted in sexist comments not being contested or taken as seriously as other forms of abuse. Emma discussed why this could be the case:

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

There are times however, when particular incidents are not as easily forgotten about or ignored. At one particular match Rosie experienced a lot of sexist abuse off players, management and supporters. It made her seriously question whether to continue officiating men’s football matches. Rosie explained how she felt after the game:

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

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

‘I don’t make decisions based on my gender’: reconciling a legitimate gendered and refereeing identity

Some studies have found that, similar to female golfers, female footballers resist dominant image stereotypes of masculine sports by embracing emphasized femininity. However, in contrast to these findings, the participants in this study tend to emphasize the importance of proving their knowledge to gain acceptance and overcome the stereotypes of female referees, as opposed to conforming to idealized gender stereotypes. Kate explains why she would rather people ‘focus on [her] performance as a referee as opposed to [her] appearance’:

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

Kate was adamant that she wants to be viewed as a referee as opposed to a female referee as gender has no influence on the decisions that she makes. Like Rosie, Kate feels under more pressure as a female referee because she ‘needs to do a
better job [than a male referee]’ so that her gender isn’t questioned. During our interview Kate’s frustration resonated:

Kate: Pretty much every game… it’s always, every decision you make you’ve made it because you’re a female… not because you’re a referee.

The ball will go out of play and you’ll put your arm up to say it was say a blue ball and you’ll here everyone going ‘oh females cant ref’ but that decision was me just establishing which colour had kicked the ball out… it has nothing to do with whether I was male or female. It’s irrelevant. It doesn’t matter.

As this comment suggests, Kate often experiences sexism when officiating and is aggravated by the persistent reference to her gender when doing so. Similarly, Rosie also believed that female football officials decisions received more scrutiny than those made by male officials because: ‘to be an average [female] referee [women] have to be better than average. Better than every man.’ This finding reflects McGinnis et al.63 who identified that women in male dominated sports are under increased scrutiny and performance pressure.

Although what is recognized as acceptable feminine behaviour has shifted, compared with the traditional view of women as weak and submissive, Jeanes64 suggests that restrictive norms surrounding the female body have been maintained. The ideal woman continues to be underpinned by traditional feminine discourses concerning appearance and presentation.65 Similar themes have been identified by existing research on women’s football. Although some female football players are challenging dominant masculine values by participating in football they still feel compelled to legitimize their participation by constructing an idealized feminine appearance both on and off the pitch.66
The female football official’s identity construction in this study both support and contest the idea of a legitimate female identity. Kate shows some resistance to this idea by consciously wearing clothes that do not emphasize her femininity when officiating. When officiating older boy’s ‘who are more likely to have an opinion’ Kate opts to wear a bigger kit to ensure that she does not draw more unwanted attention to herself as a female. Conversely, Rosie is more conscious of her image as a female when refereeing:

AF: Do you feel conscious that you’re a female refereeing a men’s game?
Rosie: Yeah I do. [When] I’m getting changed for a match I’m thinking [about my appearance]… Everyone mocks you because you put make up on… and I’m not doing it for any other reason than my own self-confidence.

For the female football officials in this study, reconciling a gendered identity with a legitimate football refereeing identity highlights the complex and abstract area of identity construction. Kate makes a conscious effort to devalue her feminine identity when officiating, as she wants to appear ‘authoritative’.

There was a mixed response about the importance of drawing attention to being a female referee. Although Kate doesn’t try to draw attention to her gender, instead preferring to ‘let [her] officiating do the talking’, she is very aware of her gender and other peoples perceptions of her:

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

Although Kate consciously avoids drawing attention to her gender it is common for her gender to be discussed by others.

AF: Do other people draw attention to your gender?
Kate: Yeah. I’ve never ever reffed a game where it hasn’t been pointed out!
AF: Why do you think they do that?
Kate: Because they haven’t adapted to the idea that football is no longer a man’s game, and there is a place for females as officials, players and coaches.

The contradictions that female football officials have to negotiate to be considered legitimate members of the football community were apparent throughout the observations and interviews. In constructing a legitimate identity women often found themselves in a tenuous position. However, research on women in other traditionally male arenas, such as male dominated occupations, can help comprehend such ambiguities. Many findings in this study are closely linked to Jones’s study on female football fans experiences of sexism within male football culture. It seems that for female fans, female officials, and females in male dominated occupations, who are considered a threat by some men to the masculine image and domination of these spaces, being subjected to hostility and sexual harassment is a way for men to reassert their dominance over women, thus reconfirming the gender order. As a result, and as the results of this study have
confirmed, women have to consistently negotiate this complex contradiction in an effort to be accepted as legitimate members of the football community.

Conclusion

The research findings suggest that the attitudes towards female football officials are embedded within a wider culture of abuse directed at referees in general. However, not only do women have to negotiate such abuse, my research illustrates that female football officials also have to contend sexist abuse. Perceptions of female officials were widely based on gender stereotypes. The women in this study often found that their competence as football officials was questioned even before they had entered the field of play. The stereotypical image of female football officials was reinforced through language used by players, management and spectators. If any of the men perceived an officials decision to be incorrect they quickly asserted that ‘females can’t ref’. This was problematic for the women in this study as they often felt that they were representative of all female football officials. As a result, the women in this study put themselves under increased pressure to get decisions correct and rebut the stereotypical image that females do not have the required characteristics to be competent football officials. This reaffirms findings by McGinnis et al. that women who are involved in sports that were traditionally the preserve of men often feel under increased performance pressure. Moreover, when female officials weren’t being confronted with hostile sexist abuse, more subtle forms of ‘benevolent’ sexist views of women’s roles were being expressed.

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

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

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

1 Caudwell, ‘Gender, Feminism and Football Studies’; Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
3 Caudwell, ‘Gender, Feminism and Football Studies’; Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
4 Jones and Edwards, ‘The Woman in Black’.
5 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
6 Jones and Edwards, ‘The Woman in Black’.
7 Scraton et al., ‘Bend it like Patel’.
9 Caudwell, ‘Gender, Feminism and Football Studies’.
10 Bruce, ‘Never let the Bastards see you Cry’; Caudwell, ‘Gender, Feminism and Football Studies’; Jones, ‘Female Fandom’; Lenskij, ‘Sport and the Threat to Gender Boundaries’; Scraton et al. ‘It’s Still a Man’s Game’.
11 Caudwell, ‘Gender, Feminism and Football Studies’; Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
12 Caudwell, ‘Women’s football in the UK’; Caudwell, ‘Hackney Women’s Football Club’; Jeanes, ‘I’m into High Heels and Make Up’; Magee et al., ‘Women, football and Europe; Scraton et al. ‘It’s Still a Man’s Game’.
13 Cox and Thompson, ‘Facing the Bogey’; Cox and Thompson, ‘Multiple Bodies’; Mennesson and Clement, ‘Homo-sociability and Homosexuality’.
15 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
16 Jeanes, ‘I’m into High Heels and Make Up’.
17 Harris, ‘No You can’t Play You’re a Girl’; Jeanes, ‘I’m into High Heels and Make Up’.
19 Lenskij, ‘Sport and the Threat to Gender Boundaries’; Rubin, ‘The Offside Rule’.
20 Jones and Edwards, ‘The Woman in Black’.
21 J. Williams, ‘The Fastest Growing Sport?’.
22 J. Williams, ‘The Fastest Growing Sport?’, 126.
23 Jeanes, ‘I’m into High Heels and Make Up’.
24 Charlton, ‘“Bad” Girls Versus “Good” Girls’.
25 Jeanes, ‘I’m into High Heels and Make Up’.
26 Caudwell, ‘Gender, Feminism and Football Studies’.
27 Bruce, ‘Never let the Bastards see you Cry’, 71.
28 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
29 Reay, ‘Spice Girls’.
31 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
32 Bruce, ‘Never let the Bastards see you Cry’.
33 Bruce, ‘Never let the Bastards see you Cry’.
35 Caudwell, ‘Gender, Feminism and Football Studies’.
37 Davis, ‘The Ladies of Besiktas’.
38 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
39 Cox and Thompson, ‘Multiple Bodies’; Harris, ‘The Image Problem in Women’s Football’; Jeanes, ‘I’m into High Heels and Make Up’.
41 Kitzinger, ‘Is ‘Woman’ Always Relevantly Gendered?’, 43.
43 Biggam, Succeeding with your Masters Dissertation.
44 Wagg et al., Key Concepts in Sports Studies.
45 Hammersley and Atkinson, Ethnography.
46 Scraton et al. ‘It’s Still a Man’s Game’.
47 M. Williams, ‘Generalizations in Interpretive Research’.
49 M. Williams, ‘Generalizations in Interpretive Research’.
50 Hammersley and Atkinson, Ethnography.
51 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
52 Caudwell, ‘Gender, Feminism and Football Studies’; Scraton et al. ‘Bend it like Patel’.
53 McGinnis et al. ‘I Just Want to Play’.
55 Glick and Fiske, ‘Ambivalent Sex Inventory’.
56 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’, 528.
57 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
58 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’, 526.
59 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’, 526.
60 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’, 522.
61 Bradbury et al., ‘Structural Discrimination in Football’.
62 Cox and Thompson, ‘Multiple Bodies’; Harris, ‘The Image Problem in Women’s Football’; McGinnis et al. ‘I Just Want to Play’.
63 McGinnis et al., ‘I Just Want to Play’.
64 Cox and Thompson, ‘Multiple Bodies’; Harris, ‘The Image Problem in Women’s Football’; McGinnis et al. ‘I Just Want to Play’.
65 McRobbie, The aftermath of feminism.
66 Cox and Thompson, ‘Multiple Bodies’; Harris, ‘The Image Problem in Women’s Football’; Jeanes, ‘I’m into High Heels and Make Up’.
67 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
68 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’; Lenskij, ‘Sport and the Threat to Gender Boundaries’.
69 McGinnis et al. ‘I Just Want to Play’.
70 Jones, ‘Female Fandom’.
71 Jeanes, ‘I’m into High Heels and Make Up’.
72 Charlton, ‘“Bad” Girls Versus “Good” Girls’.
References


Appendix A
Journal output – Soccer & Society

This journal uses ScholarOne Manuscripts (previously Manuscript Central) to peer review manuscript submissions. Please read the guide for ScholarOne authors before making a submission. Complete guidelines for preparing and submitting your manuscript to this journal are provided below.

Notes for contributors
Statements of fact or opinion appearing in Soccer and Society are solely those of the authors and do not imply endorsement by the editors or publisher. The editors cannot accept responsibility for and damage to or loss of manuscripts.

Referees and submissions. Soccer and Society is a refereed journal. Articles submitted to Soccer and Society should be original contributions and should not be under consideration for any other publication at the same time. If another version of the article is under consideration by another publication, or has been, or will be published elsewhere, authors should clearly indicate this at the time of submission. Manuscripts should be submitted through the Journal's ScholarOne Manuscripts site. Authors should first create an account, then submit their paper through the Author Centre.

Reviews. Books for review should be sent to the Gavin Mellor, Manchester Institute for Popular Culture, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manton Building, Oxford Road, Manchester, M15 6LL, UK.

Length. Articles should not normally exceed 8000 words in length inclusive of the notes.

Abstract. An abstract is required and should not exceed 150 words in length. Search engine optimization (SEO) is a means of making your article more visible to anyone who might be looking for it. Please consult our guidance here.

Author note. Details of the author's institutional affiliation, full address (including email) and other contact information should be included on a separate cover sheet.

Figures and illustrations. All photographs, diagrams, charts and graphs (but not tables) should follow the same numerical sequence and be shown as Figure 1, Figure 2 etc. The approximate position of the tables and illustrations should be indicated in the paper.

Captions. All illustrations should be accompanied by a caption, which should include the figure number, and an acknowledgement to the holder of the copyright. It is the author's responsibility to ensure the proper permissions are obtained.

Style guidelines
Description of the Journal's article style, Quick guide
Description of the Journal's reference style, Quick guide
Please use British spelling as in the Oxford Dictionary (e.g. colour, organize) and punctuation. Use single quotation marks with double within if needed.

If you have any questions about references or formatting your article, please contact authorsqueries@tandf.co.uk

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Word templates are available for this journal. If you are not able to use the template via the links or if you have any other queries, please contact authortemplate@tandf.co.uk

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Last updated October 2012

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Appendix B
Taylor & Francis description of journal article style

Advice to authors on preparing a manuscript
NB: Please follow any specific instructions for authors provided by the Editor of the journal

Font: Times New Roman, 12 point. Use margins of at least 2.5 cm (1 inch).
Title: Use bold for your article title, with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns.
Authors’ names: Give the names of all contributing authors on the title page exactly as you wish them to appear in the published article.
Affiliations: List the affiliation of each author (department, university, city, country).
Correspondence details: Please provide an institutional email address for the corresponding author.
Full postal details are also needed by the publisher, but will not necessarily be published.
Anonymity for peer review: Ensure your identity and that of your co-authors is not revealed in the text of your article or in your manuscript files when submitting the manuscript for review. Advice on anonymizing your manuscript is available here.
Abstract: Indicate the abstract paragraph with a heading or by reducing the font size. Advice on writing abstracts is available here.
Keywords: Please provide five or six keywords to help readers find your article. Advice on selecting suitable keywords is available here.

Headings: Please indicate the level of the section headings in your article:

- First-level headings (e.g. Introduction, Conclusion) should be in bold, with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns.
- Second-level headings should be in bold italics, with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns.
- Third-level headings should be in italics, with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns.
- Fourth-level headings should also be in italics, at the beginning of a paragraph. The text follows immediately after a full stop (full point) or other punctuation mark.

Tables and figures: Indicate in the text where the tables and figures should appear, for example by inserting [Table 1 near here]. The actual tables and figures should be supplied either at the end of the text or in a separate file as requested by the Editor. Ensure you have permission to use any figures you are reproducing from another source. Advice on artwork is available here.

Running heads and received dates are not required when submitting a manuscript for review.
If your article is accepted for publication, it will be copy-edited and typeset in the correct style for the journal.
If you have any queries, please contact us at authorqueries@tandf.co.uk, mentioning the full title of the journal you are interested in, or see our Author Services homepage.
Appendix C
Journal reference style

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Appendix D
### Soccer & Society journal style

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**Number 1**  
**December 2007**  
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| Book reviews       | **BOOK REVIEWS (as section heading)**  
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