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Woman's rugby, the covid-19 pandemic and the androcentric
culture in the UK
Rugby femenino, la pandemia del Covid-19 y la cultura andocéntrica en
GB
Bryony Robins* y Susana Monserrat-Revillo
Loughborough University, UK
*autora para correspondencia: brgrobins@gmail.com

RESUMEN. Objetivo: comprender las experiencias de las jugadoras de rugby
inglesas de élite durante la pandemia COVID-19, con respecto a la jerarquía
de género. Contexto: Durante la pandemia las jugadoras tuvieron un tratamiento
diferenciado. La federación inglesa de Rugby implantó un programa de detec-
ción de COVID-19 solo para los hombres, y cambió sólo el reglamento feme-
nino para evitar la propagación del virus. Se cancelaron muchos partidos feme-
ninos, se cambiaron horarios y el formato de diversos torneos internacionales,
además de declararse nula la liga femenina de 2019-2020. Durante la pandemia
de COVID-19, los clubes y los medios de comunicación priorizaron el juego
masculino sobre el femenino. Recogida y análisis de datos: entrevistas semies-
structuradas online a 11 jugadoras en activo de la liga femenina de rugby inglesa
(julio y agosto 2021), y posterior análisis temático (NVivo 12). Resultados: Du-
rante la pandemia, las jugadoras vieron agravados los efectos de la cultura an-
drocéntrica predominante en el deporte. Las participantes hicieron referencia a
disparidades en la financiación, el uso de instalaciones deportivas, la equipa-
ción, la formación, los recursos, la atención médica y la cobertura de los me-
dios. Interpretación: Los resultados demuestran que la jerarquía patriarcal de
género prevalece en el rugby de élite femenino, y fue reforzada durante la pan-
demia, consolidando la posición de la mujer como "la otra" en el rugby inglés
(Daddario, 2021; Van Pelt, 2000). Recomendaciones: Se recomienda la profes-
ionalización del rugby femenino. Se propone aumentar la exposición y la co-
bertura de los medios como la manera más eficaz de comenzar a cerrar la brecha
de género en el rugby.
Palabras clave: Pandemia del Covid-19; rugby femenino; jerarquía de género;
cultura andocéntrica.

ABSTRACT. Aim: This research project was undertaken to understand the
experiences of British elite women’s rugby players during the COVID-19
pandemic, who were exposed to a gender hierarchy and androcentric culture.
Context: England Rugby introduced law variations into the Women’s Premier
15s in place of the COVID-19 testing programme provided for the equivalent
men’s league. The women had to endure several match cancellations, schedule
and format changes to international tournaments, and their 2019-2020 league
being declared null and void. The men’s game was constantly prioritised over
the women’s by their clubs and the media. Data collection and analysis:
Through online semi-structured interviews with 11 current elite women’s rugby
players (July 2021), and posterior thematic analysis (NVivo12), a clear
consensus emerged that the women had always experienced an androcentric
culture in rugby and that this was only exacerbated during the pandemic. They
referred to disparities in funding, facilities, equipment, training, resources, medical care, and media coverage. Interpretation: This research demonstrates that a patriarchal gender hierarchy is still prevalent, and it was reinforced during the pandemic, solidifying women’s position as “the other” in English rugby. Recommendations: To challenge this narrative as we emerge out of the pandemic, a significant investment into women’s rugby is now required. To achieve equality of opportunity, funding and exposure within rugby the women’s game must be professionalised. Furthermore, the participants overwhelmingly identified that an increase in media exposure and coverage is the most realistic and achievable way to start bridging the gender gap in rugby.

**Keywords**: COVID-19 pandemic, women’s rugby, gender hierarchy, androcentric culture.

**INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic forced to stop most manifestations of sports in March 2020 (Rowe, 2020; Grix, Brannagan, Grimes and Neville, 2021). The pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequalities and affected men and women in a different way (Staurowsky, Koch, Dury and Hayes, 2020). It was foreseen that COVID-19 would have a big impact on women’s elite sport (House of Commons, 2020).

According to Bowes, Lomax and Piasecki (2020), elite women’s rugby has faced gender inequality throughout the pandemic in different ways compared (training, return to play, tests…). Women faced several law variations to minimise face-to-face contact whereas the men’s restarted sooner with a COVID-19 testing programme and no rule changes (Mockford, 2020).

**AIM**

We wanted to analyse how elite women’s rugby players were treated by clubs and governing bodies during the covid-19 pandemic in regard to gender equality.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Three theoretical approaches have been used to explore the topic: gender hierarchy, androcentrism and “the other”. A contextualisation of the impact of COVID-19 on sport have been included as well.

**Theoretical Approaches**

**Patriarchal Gender Hierarchy**

Patriarchy is defined as a ‘system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women’ (Walby, 1989, p.214). Sport has traditionally been considered an arena where gender inequality is clearly shown (Spaaij, Farquharson and Marjoribanks, 2015) and it is contemplated a sexist institution, where male privilege is validated (Bernstein, 2002; Sribbeltrang, 2018).

It can be consider that gender hierarchy exists when women ‘are differentially ranked and evaluated according to a standard of masculine norms and behaviour’ (Fox, 2006, p.441). Sport maintains a patriarchal gender hierarchy emphasising gender differentiation (Kane and Parks, 1992).
The traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity are the basis of gender differentiation. Masculinity features are the standards by which everything else is measured, therefore women are perceived as less valuable than men (Duncan, 1990; Kane and Parks, 1992). Contemporary sports culture is entrenched in gender-differentiated roles and reproduces inequality (Birrell and Cole, 1990; Channon, Dashper, Fletcher and Lake, 2016).

**Androcentric Culture**

Androcentrism is defined by Bailey, LeFrance and Dovidio (2019, p.307) as the ‘propensity to centre society around men and men’s needs, priorities, and values and to relegate women to the periphery’. It permeates cultures through institutions such as the law, organisations and language (Hegarty, 2006), which regard men as central whilst women are considered as peripheral and usually gender-marked (Hegarty, Parslow, Ansara, and Quick, 2013).

Sport has been an extraordinary institution perpetuating male superiority (McGuigan, 2011). In many cases women’s teams are gender-marked (Roth and Basow, 2004), implying that the male team is the norm. In most cultures, sports are usually male-dominated, male-identified and male-centred (Johnson, 2006; Coakley, 2009) and women’s sport are seen as a deviation with less opportunities at all levels (Pfister and Bandy, 2018; Senne, 2016; Azumara, 2020).

**“The other”**

Being identified initially by Simone de Beauvoir (1949), the concept “the other” refers to those people who do not occupy the essential position in society and are defined, marked and reduced by their differences to the norm (Bordo, 1996). It can be applied to race, class, gender, nationality, or disability to distinguish one person from another (Van Pelt, 2000). Simone de Beauvoir (1949) declared that ‘He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other’.

Sport traditionally reinforces men as the norm and women as “the other” through stereotypes, prioritisation of men’s sport and trivialisation of women’s sport (Daddario, 2021).

**COVID-19 and women’s rugby.**

COVID-19 was labelled as a ‘global pandemic’ on the 11th March 2020, by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). The UK was under three national lockdowns with differing restrictions for elite sport (Baker, Brown and Barber, 2021) during different periods of time along 2020 and 2021. Although sport was stopped for everyone, there were extensive governmental planning and media attention on resuming men’s professional sports safely, whilst women’s sport seemed almost abandoned (Bowes, Lomax and Piasecki, 2020; Rowe, 2020). During the pandemic, rugby women’s elite teams experienced an unprecedented level of inequality, not only having their appearance, being delayed, being denied their access to the COVID-19 testing programme but experiencing law changes in place to allow their return (Schaverien, 2020). The England Rugby Football Union (RFU) introduced several rule adaptations to the women’s game only to
minimise face-to-face contact (Mockford, 2020).

Somewhat inexplicably, the media reported positive responses from England women’s players claiming there were no objections from clubs in regarding these special rules only for women.

**METHODOLOGY**

Subjectivist epistemology and relativist ontology are the bases of the philosophical basis of this research. A qualitative methodological approach through a cross-sectional case study was applied. Sampling method: purposive and snowball sampling. Sample: 11 current Premier 15s players.

Data collection: online semi-structured interviews. When: July and August 2021

Data analysis: Thematic analysis using NVivo 12.

**Data analysis**

**Pre-existing gender inequalities and the hierarchy**

Gender inequalities were exacerbated during pandemic with disparities in funding, facilities, equipment, resources, care, coverage and training, as player 2 explained:

“The main issue was probably funding...not being able to afford testing,... no extra changing rooms for us ... the pandemic just highlighted the differences that were already there.”

Player 11 recalled how, sharing facilities with men was detrimental to them:

“Anytime an issue with COVID came up, we were the first people to be kicked out or it was our schedule that had to shift, or we had to go through extra steps of testing and masks and things like that, when the men didn't have to do that”

Player 10 similarly thought: “It just reminded you of where in the hierarchy you sit – you sit behind”

The players attributed this to the ongoing stigmatisation they received playing rugby, a typically male-dominated sport. This supports previous findings by Bowes, Lowes and Piasecki (2021) that stated that the pandemic amplified gender inequalities and the system privileges men (Pape and McLachlan’s, 2020).

**Androcentric culture and solidifying women as “the other”**

All participants considered that women were relegated to the periphery, specially when male players had a full COVID-19 testing programme and women had law adaptations instead. Many women questioned these new rules, with Player 7 saying: “Well, they obviously were testing the men a lot earlier... and we kept being asked ... should not we be tested?”

Only when the RFU received negative media attention after some protests the situations changed. Some attributed the disparity the men’s premiership teams being professional, whilst only the England players are professional in the Premier 15s, not the rest of UK players. Player 8 argued: “I don’t think we can compare men's rugby and women's rugby on the same platform”. Additionally, there was anger about the decision to change the format of only the women’s Six Nations tournament. This corresponds with Mogaji,
Badejo, Charles and Millisits’ (2020) findings that sportswomen believe they are treated as second-class citizens to men, and therefore, they are subjected to an androcentric culture in rugby (Bailey, LeFrance and Dovidio, 2019).

**Coverage and professionalism**

Most participants felt positively about delaying the Six Nations as it was an opportunity to be more exposed in media. Player 9 described: “it provided us with more opportunity... we definitely wouldn't have had the number of people watching the games”. This was identified as a way to start bridging the gender gap, as player 5 explained:

“It all comes down to social media and viewership and promotion because, through that, is how we can grow the sport, get more people to watch the sport and join the sport and therefore get more money into it ... it feeds into a big circle”

Many players thought that a bigger exposure on social media would result in the transformation of the premiership players into role models. Player 3 explained:

“These girls are like - wow we really want to be like you. And I think just having that, if I’d had that when I was younger, I think my brain would have just exploded”.

Although coverage and exposure are essential (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018), most participants concluded that equality would not be possible until the funding into women’s rugby increased sufficiently to make all premiership players professional.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It was widely predicted that the pandemic would amplify existing gender sporting inequalities and disproportionately affect women (Findlay, 2020; Rowe, 2020; House of Commons, 2020; UN Women, 2020). All participants felt this was reflected in their experience playing premiership rugby during the pandemic and that there was a gendered imbalance which valued sportsmen and marginalised sportswomen.

Sport has repeatedly been found to be a patriarchal institution that plays a powerful role in maintaining gender differentiation (Channon et al., 2016; Skrubbeltrang, 2018). The treatment of elite women’s rugby throughout the pandemic has contributed to a gender hierarchy and androcentric culture that transcends sport to influence women’s position in society (McGuigan, 2011; Roth and Basow, 2004). Consistently enforcing changes just for the women reinforced men as the norm in rugby and trivialised women to be “the other”. A clear consensus emerged that women felt they were still relegated to the periphery. Their experiences of the pandemic are barely comparable to those of the men since they accentuated pre-existing disparity between them (Grey-Thompson, 2021). The lack of professionalism is another example of how women faced inequalities before the pandemic that meant they were negatively impacted more during it. As we emerge out of the pandemic, professionalism and an increase in investment and coverage were all recommended as the next steps for women’s rugby.
Limitations and future work
Interviewing a bigger number of England international players would have increase the scope of this research. Current pandemic related research serves as nothing more than a snapshot of the current situation of sport. Continued, detailed research into how the pandemic impacted women, and other intersections (e.g. social class, sexuality, ethnicity, race and disability), in sport is essential, to help women’s sport starting to shift in the right direction.

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