Mental Wellbeing Risk in Elite Women's Football: A Cultural and Gendered Problem?

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Abstract

Backgrounds and Objectives

Women's football is growing exponentially, especially within England, but culturally, much remains unchanged. Women athletes in traditionally 'male' sports, like football, experience gendered difficulties to a greater extent than other sportswomen which can have a toll on their mental health. This study was the first to take a cultural perspective on mental wellbeing risk in elite female footballers; exploring experiences of GD, the effects on mental wellbeing, and perceptions of how to achieve cultural change.

Methods

An explanatory sequential, mixed-methods design with 66 participants from the top three tiers of women's football completing a survey measuring perceived discrimination and mental wellbeing. Of these, eight footballers (18-35 years) completed a semi-structured interview. The transcripts from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results

The survey found significant negative correlations between past year perceived discrimination and the WEMWBS measure of mental wellbeing [$r_{(66)}$=-0.245, *p=0.05)*], and between age and past year perceived discrimination [$r_{(66)}$=-0.269, *p=0.03)*]. The survey also found a significant effect of lifetime perceived discrimination on poor mental health [$F_{(2,64)}$=7.183, $p = 0.00$). The semi-structured interviews addressed three topics. Experiences of GD were coded into 4 main themes: *Second-Class Citizenship, Use of Sexist Language, Sexual Objectification and Restrictive Gender Roles,* and *Assumption of Female Inferiority.* Players made the link between GD and mental wellbeing, suggesting 4 themes: *Mental Health*, *Psychological Support, Coping Mechanisms*, and *Gratitude*. When asked about the probability of change within sport, 5 themes emerged: *Infrastructural Support, Financial Support, Public Opinion, Attendance,* and *Media Coverage.*

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings highlighted both competing discourses of growth but constraint, progress but inequality. The discriminatory experiences were linked to numerous deleterious effects for the footballers' mental wellbeing, affecting them as players but also as people. Participants displayed unhealthy coping mechanisms such as passive acceptance, denial and gratitude, in turn limiting their capacity to challenge GD.

Glossary of Key Terms:

Term	Definition
Sexism	Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex.
Gender discrimination	When a person is treated negatively or unequally based on their gender.
Mental wellbeing	A combination of how we feel (our emotions and life satisfaction) and how we function (relationships with others, personal control, purpose in life and independence).
Misogyny	Dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

It is widely documented that women's football has experienced a surge in popularity over the past 20 years, with it now the most popular women's sport in England [1-4]. With an air of optimism surrounding women's football, the future seems bright for female players, but sexism and discrimination remain ever present within the game. It is widely recognised that women experience vastly disproportionate levels of overt and institutional discrimination compared to men in football. In the UK, the Equality Act of 2010 [5] currently legislates against discrimination on the basis of a number of protected characteristics, one of which is sex. Employees in most work environments understand that blatant sexism is unacceptable and no longer tolerable, yet overt sexism in football is still common and remains often uncontested [6]. This is despite the Equality Act covering the workplace and members or guests of private clubs or associations [5]. All discrimination is reprehensible and one "-ism" should not be pitted against another, but sexism is treated differently than other discriminatory attitudes and behaviours in football; here it is "normal" to think that women are not suitable because of their sex/gender [6].

1.2 Sexism vs Gender Discrimination

Klonoff and Landrine [7] identified certain types of sexist discrimination as "sexist events" (p. 441), which they defined as "gender specific negative life events, that is, as gender specific stressors... which happen to women because they are women" (p. 441, emphasis in original). As exemplified in the text above, the terms sex and gender are used interchangeably within the sociological literature on discrimination. Sexism arguably underpins gender discrimination, in that it denotes prejudiced beliefs and stereotyping on the basis of sex, whilst gender discrimination itself refers to the performance of that sexist prejudice and stereotyping through maltreatment and behaviours (see glossary). Sexism therefore allows

and enables gender discrimination to occur. While sex refers to "the different biological and physiological characteristics of males and females, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, etc" [8], gender refers to "the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed" [8]. In this study, we argue that the discrimination female footballers experience occurs because of the social constructions of men and women, thus we will refer to this discrimination as gender-based going forwards.

1.3 Gender Discrimination in Football

Female footballers experience various forms of discrimination including unequal pay, limited playing opportunity, less funding and support in terms of facilities and coaching, direct verbal abuse both in person and online, sexualisation and harassment, underrepresentation in the media, and unequal sports coverage [9-13]. Male entitlement within the category of football is unproblematically assumed as the cultural norm and as such, has provided a platform for this widespread gender discrimination to occur. The history of sporting culture inextricably links football with masculinity and with an environment that allows dominant gender relations to be constructed, legitimised and perpetuated [14,15]. These are relations that privilege men and subordinate women, with individuals scrutinised and othered if they do not comply with the appropriate gendered behaviours [16]. Gender relations within sport have long existed in this way, given that sport was created by men as a homosocial cultural sphere at the turn of the 20th century, to provide separation from the perceived feminisation of society [17].

While occupational sex segregation is declining in many other institutions [18], sporting occupations remain heavily sex segregated in this way. The separation of men and women in sports is presumably uncontroversial; so commonplace that one might just assume it to be

legally and morally benign, or even required as a matter of fairness [19]. Yet, in contexts outside of sport, sex-based classifications are subject to strict social, moral, and legal prescriptions, e.g., equal pay in the workplace. Critics could argue that sex segregation in sport constitutes sex discrimination [20] because it entails the exclusion of individuals on the basis of sex [19]. It relies on notions of presumed male physical superiority, reinforces gender stereotypes, and allows the domination of men within the sporting domain to continue [21].

The view that sex segregation in sport is necessary and advantageous to all is "inherently premised on the idea that males are 'faster, stronger and better' at athletics than females" [22, p.37]. As a result, the same system that supposedly guarantees a space for women to compete simultaneously communicates women's competitive inferiority [22]. As women today continue to strive for equality within sport, men likewise continue to utilise it as a powerful cultural arena to demonstrate their dominance. Sport gives testimony to the undeniable 'fact' that there is at least one place where men are clearly superior to women [23]; thus, rather than a source of empowerment for women, sport has become a place and reminder of their supposed inferiority.

Consequently, sport remains the most publicly mediatised demonstration of difference between the sexes, with this most plainly revealed in sports that present themselves as being exclusively male [24, 25, 26]. Football is widely recognised as such, with male players producing routine displays of superior physical strength, skill, and competitiveness [27], exemplifying hegemonic masculinity; a conventional ideology and pattern of practice that justifies and upholds our socio-political system of patriarchy, thereby enabling male dominance over women to endure [26]. The history and consistent presence of hegemonic masculinity has played a pivotal role in the cultural constructions and labelling of football as a distinctly

'masculine space' and for *female* footballers, remains as one of their biggest gender issues [27].

Women participating as athletes in traditionally 'male' sports, such as football, therefore understandably face gendered difficulties to a greater extent than that of other sportswomen. Women in football have faced extensive discrimination and misogyny throughout the history of their participation in the sport; for example, in 1921, The FA (Football Association) banned women's football entirely, stating: "the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged" [4]. Only in 1971, fifty years later, was this ban lifted, enabling women to participate in football again. Despite the game growing exponentially since then, much remains culturally unchanged, and women's football has yet to recover its early popularity in terms of status or support [28].

As such, misogyny was found to be 'rife' in recent research that investigated the opinions and views of football fans [29]. Pope et al. [29] concluded misogyny and discrimination to remain very much 'alive and kicking' within footballing culture and claimed we cannot reduce such views and behaviour to some past, outmoded phase. Gibson [30] supports this statement, claiming football culture to remain unchanged since the 1970s, framed by a defensive discourse couched in terms of humour and the platitude that sexism is a joke and not so much a serious issue within society [31]. Coupling the abuse with humour serves as a smokescreen for oppressive discourse and could only happen in a culture whereby the degradation of women is decidedly quotidian, such as the case within football. Misogyny is not only widespread and deeply entrenched in western culture, but it is also naturalised here [32].

1.4 The Effects of Discrimination

1.4.1 Defining Mental Wellbeing Terminology

Mental health is defined as "a state of wellbeing in which an individual realises their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community" (World Health Organisation) [35]. A key component of this definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of disease or disorder and includes an emphasis on wellbeing and the realization of individuals' potential [35].

Mental illness on the other hand is seen as a severe and intensive type of mental health problem [36]. The point at which mental health problems are severe enough to be diagnosed as a mental illness is debatable, but they are primarily identified through diagnostic interviews where the person is required to meet certain criteria as determined by the DSM-5 (diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders) [37] and/or ICD (International classification of diseases) [38].

Keyes [39] presents a dual-factor model of mental health and mental illness, providing four groups that describe crossovers between the two continua of mental health and mental illness: 'Complete Mental Health' (no mental illness, high positive mental health), 'Vulnerable' (no mental illness, low positive mental health), 'Symptomatic but content' (mental illness, high positive mental health), and Struggling (mental illness, low positive mental health). Adults with high positive mental health are seen as flourishing with high levels of wellbeing, while those with low positive mental health are languishing with low wellbeing [39].

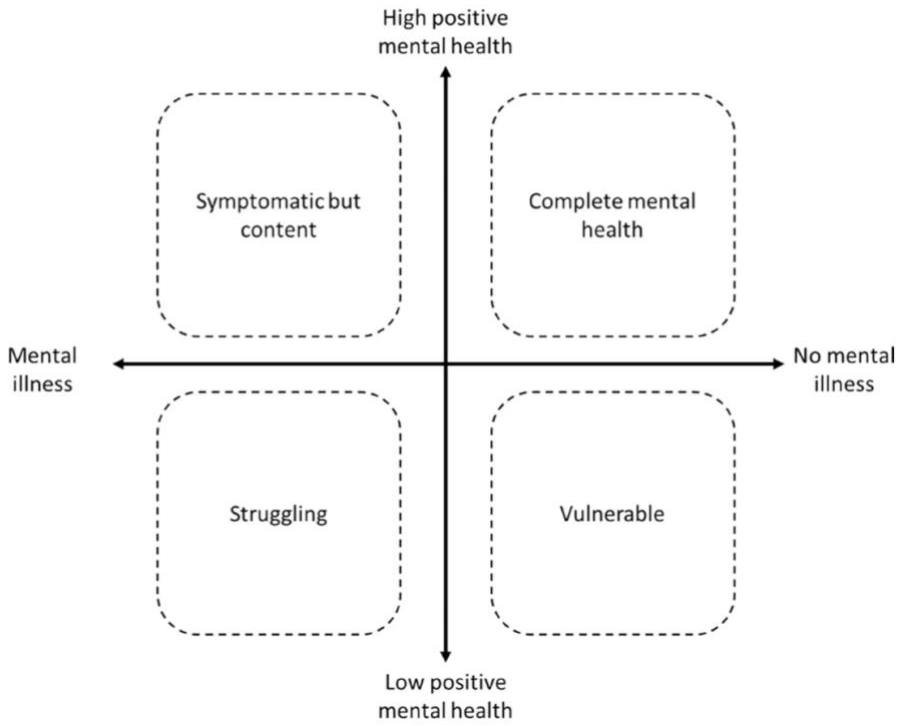

Figure 1. Dual Factor Model of Mental Health and Mental Illness [40]

Both Keyes and the WHO's definition of mental health [35, 39] seem to explicitly equate mental health with wellbeing, thus mental health and mental wellbeing can be seen to form two distinct, but correlated, continua [39]. While there is no agreed definition of mental wellbeing, it is generally seen as covering both the subjective experience of affect and life satisfaction, as well as psychological functioning, good relationships with others and self-realisation [41, 42] – it is a combination of how we feel (our emotions and life satisfaction) and how we function (relationships with others, personal control, purpose in life and independence). Therefore, within this study, an inclusive definition of mental wellbeing will be adopted to capture literature and perceptions of affect, cognition, and behaviour.

1.4.2 The Effects of Gender Discrimination in the General Population

The gender discrimination experienced by women can have prolonged and damaging effects on mental wellbeing [33] and in the general population has been found to account for more of the variance in depressive and anxious symptoms in women than that of other psychosocial stressors [9]. As a result, sex discrimination has been strongly associated with major depression [9, 34] and has been theorised to explain the gender gap in the prevalence of depression, whereby women outnumber men two to three-fold within the general population [34].

1.4.3 The Effects of Gender Discrimination in Sport

This gender gap however is not exclusive to the general population; in the sporting domain, elite female athletes experience higher rates of mental illness than both their male counterparts and the general female adult population [43]. These women are more likely than men to be diagnosed with at least one psychopathology [44], with elite sportswomen reporting experiences of depression up to two to three times more than male counterparts. This gender difference has been widely identified across numerous studies and in sports such as football, athletics/track and field, baseball, cycling, among others. [44-50]. For example, Gorczynski et al. [51] found that female high-performance athletes were 52% more likely to report mild or more severe depressive symptoms than male high-performance athletes.

Within football specifically, only a few studies to date have focused exclusively on mental health in elite female footballers. Junge and Prinz [52] investigated the prevalence in Germany and found 16.6% of players indicated mild to moderate depressive symptoms, while 14.1% presented with severe symptoms. Perry et al. [53] meanwhile studied elite female footballers in England and found 26.5% of respondents reported mild to moderate depressive symptoms, 10.2% with moderate to severe, and 1% with severe on the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) scale [54]. Similar prevalence rates for female footballers have also been identified in

studies comparing the genders [51, 55], within which women reported significantly more depression than their male counterparts.

In their study, Perry et al. [53] also identified the prevalence of anxiety disorder symptoms using the General Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) [56], with 28% of players reporting mild symptoms and 11% reporting moderate symptoms. Eating disorders were also investigated via the Disordered Eating Symptoms scale (BEDA-Q) [57], with 35% of players reporting that they are currently trying to lose weight. Perry et al.'s [53] study was the first to explore the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and eating disorder symptoms in elite women's football in England. Beyond these findings, there is lesser known about the prevalence of mental illnesses outside of depression, that have been reported as problematic in other sports.

Despite the dearth of research in football specifically, the evidence that does exist remains consistent with the general clinical psychology literature and supports the consensus that elite female athletes experience the highest rates of depression. Gender has therefore understandably emerged as a strong risk factor for mental illness within elite sport, but with important variations identified according to the individual sport practiced [44]. Sociocultural and environmental influences therefore seem important in determining how the development of mental illness is facilitated or hindered for elite women athletes. The practice of sport at a high level in itself does not appear psychopathogenic [44], rather it may be the presence of problems within athletes social, personal and sporting environments that are associated with mental illness.

Risk factors for elite athletes evidently differ dependent on culture [58], but limited research has taken a cultural perspective when exploring mental health and illness within elite sport.

Only recently was the first systematic review published exploring negative cultural influences on mental health within this population, and which hypothesised a complex relationship between social and psychological factors, including sociocultural roles and adverse gendered experiences [59, 60]. Gender issues have been reported in five studies [60-63], with discrimination, segregation, and a lack of acceptance of women as athletes emerging as commonly reported cultural influences [45, 59, 62, 63].

There is no evidence that the increased risk for poor mental health and mental illness is because of any inherent vulnerability associated with certain cultural identities, rather it seems to relate to discrimination based on these cultural factors [44]. The gender discrimination vastly experienced by elite female footballers therefore needs exploring within this population. Taking this cultural perspective is necessary in exploring the vulnerabilities, risk factors and experiences of women in elite football, for such influences seem to be more prevalent than individual or psychological ones and have been called for in prior research [53].

1.5 Study

While extant literature has previously established the issue of gender discrimination in women's football; the negative mental impact of gender discrimination on women in the general population; and the significant risk of poor mental health and wellbeing in elite female athletes, no prior research has drawn these findings together. Given the increase in professionalisation of female football in England, and the rate at which football is becoming a more holistic and inclusive sport globally, the need to answer these unanswered questions is paramount [64]. This study therefore aims to address recent recommendations made for further research on mental health in elite women's football and fill the gap in the literature on gender discrimination and mental wellbeing in the women's game [43, 53, 65, 66].

Within this study, we will utilise the inclusive definition (see section 1.4.2) and term of mental wellbeing to capture the full surrounding psychological literature and to seek experiences and perceptions of affect, cognition, and behaviour.

To the best of our knowledge, this study will be the first to take a cultural perspective on mental wellbeing risk in elite female footballers in England. We will investigate experiences of gender discrimination in the top three tiers of women's football in England, the consequent effects on mental wellbeing, and player perceptions on how change can be successfully implemented. The findings thereby aim to extend existing literature by drawing together previous work from the different disciplines on gender discrimination, mental health, and women's football. To address the aims of this study, a mixed methods approach will be used to understand the scale of discrimination faced by female footballers followed by an in-depth exploration of the types of discrimination faced and the consequences of this experience.

Research Hypotheses:

- Elite female footballers who perceive greater past year discrimination (SSE past year) will present with poorer mental wellbeing (WEMWBS).
- Elite female footballers who perceive greater lifetime discrimination (SSE lifetime) will report experiences of poor mental health during their lifetime (mental health screening item).
- There will be differences in player mental health, mental wellbeing, and perceived discrimination between professional statuses.

Research questions:

- How do elite female footballers in England experience gender discrimination?
- What role does gender discrimination play in creating risk for poor mental wellbeing within this population?

- How do players believe cultural change within elite women's football can be successfully implemented?

1.6 Overview of Thesis

The thesis contains 8 further chapters. Chapter 2 will cover the method undertaken, describing the epistemology and ontology, design summary, participants, materials, analysis, researcher positionality, ethics and data management, and other methodology considerations. Chapter 3 will then detail the prevalence of discrimination and poor mental wellbeing found in elite female footballers, through an analysis and interpretation of the survey data collected. Chapter 4 will explore the first research question: 'how do elite female footballers in England experience gender discrimination?', covering 4 emerging themes of second-class citizenship/environmental microaggressions, use of sexist language, sexual objectification and restrictive gender roles, and assumption of female inferiority. Chapter 5 will then cover themes of mental health, psychological support, coping mechanisms, and gratitude to answer the second research question: what role does gender discrimination play in creating risk for poor mental wellbeing in elite female footballers in England? Chapter 6 will then answer the final research question: how do players believe cultural change within elite women's football can be successfully implemented? Chapter 7 will discuss the results from chapters 3 through 6, highlighting key findings in relation to the study aims, practical applications, limitations, and recommendations for future research, before providing a conclusion. Finally, chapter 8 provides references, while chapter 9 supplies appendices.

Chapter 2: Method

2.1 Epistemology and Ontology

This study utilised a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology to explore experiences of gender discrimination in elite female footballers. Relativist ontology suggests that there are multiple realities that are subjective [67]; reality is constructed within the human mind, such that no one 'true' reality exists. Instead, reality is 'relative' according to how one experiences it at a given place and time. Meanwhile, constructivist epistemology posits that knowledge is created through social interactions, is influenced by social and historical contexts, and is generated through research reflecting participants' and researchers' interpretations [68]. The common core of constructivist theory is that we do not find knowledge, instead we construct it [69]. The above-outlined philosophical foundations well-align with this study's purpose to understand the lived experiences of elite female footballers in relation to gender discrimination and their mental wellbeing, based on the recognition that knowledge is subjective and based on personal experience [68].

It is important to note that at the time of writing, England had recently won the Women's Euros as the host country, which has increased visibility and public opinion on the game significantly across the country and has been dubbed a 'watershed moment' for the sport. It has heightened expectations of change, which may have influenced the responses given in the interviews and has occurred contemporaneous with a backdrop of women's rights and equality movements, such as 'Me Too' and 'Time's Up'.

2.2 Design Summary

The research utilised a sequential, explanatory mixed method involving two phases: a quantitative online survey and semi-structured qualitative interviewing. Inclusion criteria was applied to select a sample of elite female footballers currently involved in the top three tiers in England. The study received ethical approval from the University of Essex (ETH2223-0065) and data collection took place during November 2022. In Phase One, participants completed an anonymous online survey which provided an opportunity at the end to provide their email address should they wish to be involved in Phase Two, the semi-structured interviews.

2.3 Participants

Female footballers aged 18-35 years, who currently play in the top three tiers of women's football in England, were invited to take part in the survey. This included players competing within the FA Women's Super League (WSL), Women's Championship (WC) and Women's National League (WNL) Northern and Southern Premier Divisions. Participants must have played first team football at this level for a minimum of one year.

2.3.1 Female Football League Structure in England

The WSL is the only fully professional female league in England, attracting many of the best female footballers from across the world and rapidly becoming the most competitive league for the sport globally [(9)]. The WC is the second highest tier in women's football in England, with numerous players competing at the international level [(9)]. The WC is not yet considered an entirely 'professional league', with some players still working alongside their footballing careers to afford life expenses [(9)], however many of the Championship teams are becoming increasingly full-time and moving to a professional status with each passing season. The WNL southern/northern make up the third tier of women's football in England and are

described as the 'foundation of the professional leagues' [70]. The third tier consists of a growing number of semi-professional and newly professional teams, seeking to gain promotion to the top two divisions. Please see Figure 2. for a summary of the women's football pyramid in England.

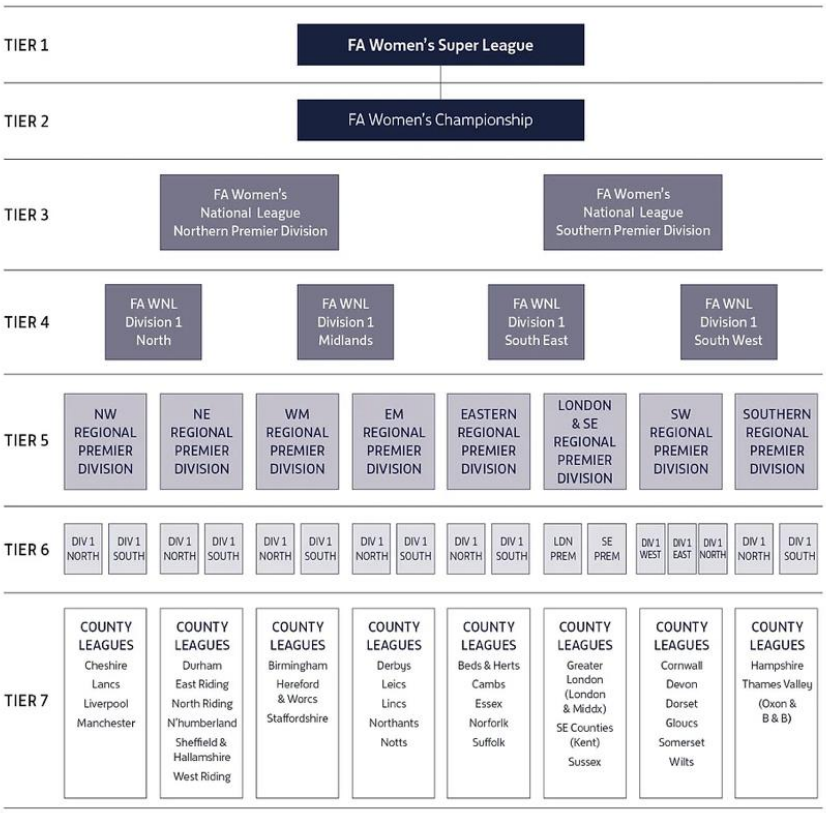

Figure 2. The Women's Football Pyramid Structure in England (71)

Within women's football, it is important to note that the terms 'professional' and 'elite' are not straightforward and are instead highly contested, due to being culturally defined in terms of men's professional sport [72]. Nonetheless, the participants within this study are referred to as 'elite' female footballers, despite the range of professional statuses, abilities, earnings, and contact times that can be seen in the leagues and clubs themselves.

2.3.2 Phase One

The survey was accessed by 195 participants and was completed in full by 66 participants, which equates to ~6% of the target population. 58 were white, while 8 reported their ethnicity as mixed. 33 participants identified as straight, 18 as gay, 13 as bisexual/pansexual and 2 were not willing to disclose. 3 participants were from the WSL, 12 from the WC, 6 from the WNL Northern and 35 from the WNL Southern. 12 self-identified as professional, 11 as semi-professional, 33 as receiving some financial remuneration, while 10 classified themselves as amateur.

2.3.3 Phase Two

The interview sample consisted of eight participants, representing a range of demographic backgrounds and psychometric profiles (see Table 1). This included players aged between 19 and 32 from the three different tiers; of the two reported ethnicities (white and mixed) and of varying sexualities; those of all professional statuses; those who self-reported both good and poor mental wellbeing; and those with both high and low perceived discrimination scores. While sexism can be referred to as a universal experience based on gendered expectations, it will be experienced differently contingent on individuals' other characteristics (6). It is for this reason that it was important to obtain a diverse sample of players.

Table 1: Phase Two Participant Profiles

Code	Tier	Age	Sexuality	Ethnicity	Professional status	Wellbeing (WEMWBS)	Discrimination lifetime /48 (SSE)	Discrimination past year /48 (SSE)
1	WNL	19	Straight	Mixed	Some financial remuneration	Low	27	28
2	WC	21	Straight	White	Professional	Moderate	25	18
3	WSL	23	Bisexual	White	Professional	Moderate	23	20
4	WNL	30	-	Mixed	Some financial remuneration	Moderate	36	20
5	WNL	28	Bisexual	White	Some financial remuneration	Low	21	14
6	WNL	21	Bisexual	White	Amateur	Moderate	24	16
7	WNL	32	Straight	White	Some financial remuneration	Moderate	21	14
8	WNL	22	Straight	White	Some financial remuneration	Low	29	24

2.3.4 Recruitment

In phase one, a mixture of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used to conduct an anonymous, online Qualtrics (Provo, UT) [73] survey, which later acted as a recruitment strategy to screen participants for the phase two, semi-structured interviews. A

post advertising the study was shared via social media (on Instagram and Twitter, see Appendix 1a) and to personal contacts within the footballing community (via text and email) i.e., convenience sampling. As part of the sampling strategy, I encouraged and requested personal contacts in football to share the study on social media and for my participants to refer people to the survey through word of mouth (i.e., snowball sampling). Clubs in the top three tiers (N= 48) were also contacted directly via an email (see Appendix 1b) explaining the study and asking for them to act as gatekeepers to access potential participants. All participants provided informed consent for the survey via an online Qualtrics [73] form, after reading the participant information sheet and prior to survey completion (see Appendix 1c).

Participants who completed phase one of the study were asked to provide an email address if they were willing to be involved in the phase two interviews. Those who provided an email address were contacted to arrange the interview, dependent on their responses in the survey. The goal was to produce an interview sample with the greatest diversity of demographics, perceptions of discrimination, and mental-wellbeing scores. When contacted, the participants were provided with further study information via an interview participant information sheet and were given the opportunity to ask questions. All participants provided informed consent via an online form, and reconfirmed consent orally with the researcher immediately prior to the interviews (see Appendix 1d).

Research that concerns elite athletes is notoriously challenging to obtain due to limited access to this population, thus this kind of research is often not possible without personal connections [9, 74, 75]. It is important to note that I personally compete at a high-level of football in England and fall under the classification of elite football within this study. I maintain many personal connections with prior and current teammates who compete in the

top three tiers, which provided greater survey distribution and higher participation rates. I. however ensured that the participants selected to participate in the interviews were not those that I hold close relationships to, to reduce bias in the research.

2.4 Materials

2.4.1 Phase One

The survey collected demographic variables and psychometric measures to assess personal and sociocultural variables. The survey was created using Qualtrics software [73] and collected demographic measures, such as age, sexuality, ethnicity, and gender; playing history and information, such as current playing level (league), years' experience of first team football, and current professional status (see appendix 2a); and closed self-report questions on psychometric history (please see appendix 2d) - for example: "Have you ever struggled with poor mental health?" (=yes, no, I don't know).

A validated measure of lifetime and recent sexist discrimination was used to measure participants' perceived discrimination. This questionnaire utilised the Schedule of Sexist Events (SSE) framework, designed and validated by Klonoff and Landrine [7] but adapted to be football-specific (see appendix 2b). The SSE is a self-report inventory consisting of items rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (the event never happened) to 6 (the event happens almost all of the time). This framework is a measure of participant's responses to discrimination-related statements, such as "how many times have you been verbally abused online because you are a woman in football". Each item is completed twice, once for the frequency of these sexist events in a woman's entire life (lifetime), and once for the frequency of these events in the past year (recent). The adapted framework involved 8 items, with ratings summed and scores ranging from 8 to 48 whereby higher scores equal higher

perceived frequency of sexist events. The SSE framework is a reliable and externally valid subscale to be used across age, education, race, and ethnicities [76]. To the best of our knowledge, the SSE framework has not previously been applied within the sporting domain but provided an appropriate framework upon which to build our adapted questionnaire.

Mental wellbeing was assessed using The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) [77]- see appendix 1c. The WEMWBS [77] is a measure of mental wellbeing suitable for use in the general population, consisting of 14 statements covering both feelings and functioning aspects of wellbeing based over the previous two weeks; for example, 'I've been feeling relaxed', 'I've been feeling close to other people' (see Appendix 2c). Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale, relating to how often they have experienced each statement during the last 14 days (ranging from 1 = 'none of the time' to 5 = 'all the time'), with higher scores indicating better individual mental wellbeing. Scores for items are totalled providing a score from 14-70 and were categorised into low wellbeing (total score 14-40), moderate wellbeing (41-59), and high wellbeing (60-70). The WEMWBS has good content validity and acceptable internal consistency (alpha= 0.89) [77] and is an appropriate tool to assess and measure mental wellbeing across a range of populations [78].

2.4.2 Phase Two

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit further qualitative information on experiences and perceptions of gender discrimination and its respective link to mental wellbeing. All participants were asked about the following topics: their experiences at the time of getting into football and growing up; equal opportunity and financial inequalities; direct abuse, both in person and online; support in terms of facilities, resources, and medical care; respect and appearance; mental health and coping; standing up to discrimination, and

suggestions for future change (the structured interview questions are listed in appendix 3).. Participants were also asked follow-up questions dependent on their responses. The interviews lasted between 40- and 75-minutes and took place using Zoom video conferencing software (Zoom Video Communications Inc.) [79] at a mutually convenient time, during November 2022.

2.4.3 Piloting of Semi-Structured Interviewing

Prior to carrying out the research methodology outlined above, I completed a pilot of the semi-structured interviewing. This involved interviewing 3 individuals who participate in women's football but who did not meet the criteria required to be involved in the final study e.g., have played in the top three tiers previously but do not currently. Completing this pilot allowed me to experiment and test my structured interview questions, finding out which questions produced detailed and rich responses, and which were not well-understood or well answered by participants. In turn, I was able to refine my questions to facilitate ease of response and to ensure the correct material was covered. The experience was greatly beneficial to the study, as it also helped me gain confidence in my interviewing ability and gave me an understanding of what to expect from the interviews.

2.5 Analysis

2.5.1 Phase One

The data collected was downloaded from Qualtrics into IBM SPSS Statistics (v27) [80]. Data on the self-report and demographic detail was presented as percentages of responses. A univariate, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to determine central tendencies (Mean, M), dispersion of data (standard deviation, SD) and normality of distribution (Z Skew and Z Kurtosis) for each independent variable (demographic characteristics) and dependent

variable. All dependent variables (psychometric measures) were then two-way correlated using Pearson's Moment to assess the significance of relationships and were parametric at alpha level 0.05. An inferential analysis of the data was then conducted using SPSS software v25, with the significance level set at 0.05. This involved performing one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) to test the hypothesis relating to differences in mental wellbeing, mental health, and perceived discrimination between players of different professional statuses. Within these ANOVAs, the professional status acted as the independent variable between 4 groups (professional, semi-professional, receive some financial remuneration, and amateur) on the dependent variables of mental wellbeing (WEMWBS), mental health (screening item question), and perceived discrimination (SSE). Bonferroni post-hoc tests were then used to prevent data from incorrectly appearing to be statistically significant i.e., false positives.

2.5.2 Phase Two

All interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom video conferencing software [71] and then transcribed verbatim into text ready for analysis. Thematic analysis was then used following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke [81] (see Table 2), allowing exploration of individual perspectives, identification of similarities and differences within the dataset and for the discovery of unexpected findings. In step one, I became familiar with the data/transcripts, making initial comments on the codes that arose. A coding framework was developed and used to code the first few transcripts, before being revised as coding continued and other codes emerged from the data. Themes were then searched for, reviewed, defined, and written up.

A-priori themes were used as a means of declaring any potential bias to the data from the researcher, as well as to draw on previous and personal knowledge of discriminatory

experiences and issues within women's football. Themes also emerged deductively through the coding and were labelled accordingly. Notes were taken of the patterns that emerged between the transcripts and of any key similarities or differences that were observed. Sub-themes were further attached to each theme, allowing more specific conclusions to be drawn. The development of the codes and themes were also guided by the aims of the research study, and participants were invited to review the text script of the interview to check for accuracy in the information shared and/or to offer clarity or correction to the script.

Table 2: Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis [81]

Step 1	Familiarisation	Transcribing the data, reading and re-reading, noting down initial codes.
Step 2	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features in the data in a systematic fashion across the dataset, collating data relevant to each code
Step 3	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each theme
Step 4	Involved reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, generate a thematic map
Step 5	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics for each theme, generating of clear names for each theme
Step 6	Producing the report	Final analysis, selecting appropriate extracts, discussion and relation back to the question or literature, and production of report

2.6 Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality "reflects the position that a researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" [82 p.71] and influences both how the research is conducted, its' outcomes and results; "a researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" [73, p.483-484]. Positionality recognises that researchers are part of the social world they are investigating and is pivotal in qualitative research due to its interpretative nature. Through reflexivity, researchers acknowledge and disclose themselves in their research, seeking to understand their part in it or influence on it [84].

It is therefore important to be transparent about my role as an insider within women's football in England and how my experiences and beliefs will unashamedly have influenced both the collection and interpretation of the data. I am a semi-professional female footballer in England and have competed at the elite level from the age of 11, representing clubs such as Arsenal, Tottenham, and Ipswich Town. My experiences at different clubs of different levels and my biography as a player have helped shape my research ambitions; to understand the cultural influence on mental wellbeing risk in women's football. There are times I have felt as a woman, completely oppressed and marginalized within football, and at the same time massively misunderstood as a female footballer struggling with depression and anxiety. Scholars support this notion, suggesting our interests guide our decisions before the research is conducted. My lived experiences as a footballer have underpinned my ambitions for this research and have impacted my feelings and thoughts towards the object of it- the players. For the purpose of this study, as a researcher I am a footballer insider.

To help gain distance from the analysis however, I have two critical colleagues with excellent credentials within the fields of sport science and psychology, one of whom has significant knowledge of the game as both a scientist and an athlete. They have both helped to provide an outsider's perspective and an alternative lens through which to consider and analyse my research.

2.7 Ethics and Data Management and Security

Part of the access problem involves a residual fear for informants that they may be viewed as openly criticising or complaining- whether that be other players, managers, their club, or organisations such as the FA. Therefore, players were given assurances as to the

confidentiality of the research and reminded that comments will not be traceable to their source at the outset of interviews. Morse [82] advises however against promising absolute confidentiality in the process of gaining consent, as this can be very difficult to achieve within certain forms of qualitative inquiry; the 'better' a qualitative study is, the 'worse' it is likely to be at maintaining the anonymity of both the participant and the setting. This is even more so the case if participants are members of an elite that is already known to the public, such as the case within this study [83]. Due to the sensitive topic of mental wellbeing within this research, the anonymisation of participants was appropriate and measures were taken to ensure participant privacy was maintained. With that being said, the setting (e.g., club) was more difficult to anonymise when examples were included within the final write-up.

Informed consent was obtained from participants before both the surveys and the interviews and privacy was maintained throughout. The records obtained were not accessible to anyone outside of the research team and an identification number was given to each participant, as opposed to using their name or other personal details by which they could potentially be identified. Audio recordings were downloaded and stored in the University's secure cloud (Box), only accessible to the lead researcher. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and all raw data was deleted in accordance with ethical requirements. All potentially identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

2.8 Other Methodology Acknowledgements

It should be acknowledged that the research involves assessing perceived discrimination and distress, and therefore individuals' perceptions of having been treated in a discriminatory way, rather than an objective yes or no. While we refer to the discrimination as perceived, this terminology does not function to imply that women "overperceive" the amount of

experienced discrimination or that their perceptions are wrong, rather that we communicate clearly that the data are based on retrospective self-reports. According to Crosby [84], these individual judgements may represent underestimates (or overestimates) of the amount of discrimination experienced [85].

Furthermore, the importance of the women-athlete-in-masculine-sport ethnographies and stories lie in that they reveal testimonies to women's experiences in these sports that demonstrate difference (to men's experiences) [86]. Within masculine sports in particular, women will experience vastly different treatment, support, and provision and therefore their experiences of participation in such sports have to be read within the context of being despised, ignored or forgotten [86]. However, by moving the marginalised stories of these female athletes into the 'centre of interest and concern', the woman is allowed to become the author of her own experiences [87, 88].

Chapter 3: Prevalence of Discrimination and Poor Mental Wellbeing in English Female Footballers

3.1 Participant Characteristics

All participants involved in the study identified as female and were aged between 18 and 35 years, with these required participation criteria. Most participants described their ethnicity as white (87.7%), with the rest mixed (12.3%). Half of the participants identified as straight/heterosexual (50.7%), followed by gay or lesbian (27.7%), and bisexual or pansexual (18.5%). Two participants (3.1%) opted not to report their sexual orientation. Most of the participants reported that they currently participate in the Women's National League Northern/Southern (76.9%), followed by Women's Championship (18.5%), and the Women's Super League (4.6%). 49.2% of participants reported to receive some financial remuneration, 18.5% reported being professional, 16.9% reported being semi-professional, while 15.4% classed themselves as amateur. Participants were asked the following question: "Have you ever struggled with poor mental health?". Of the 91.1% who responded, most participants reported "yes" to having poor mental health (50.8%), while 33.8% reported "no" i.e. having good mental health, and 6.5% reported that they did not know or were unsure. The majority of participants reported that they have never received a mental illness diagnosis (84.5%), while 15.5% reported that they have.

3.2 The Relationships Between Mental Wellbeing, Mental Health and Perceived Discrimination

As shown below in Figures 3 and 4 and in Table 3, results of the two-way Pearson's Moment correlation tests revealed significant negative correlations at the .05 level between past year perceived discrimination and the WEMWBS [77] measure of mental wellbeing [$r_{(66)} = -0.245$, *p=0.05)*], and between age and past year perceived discrimination [$r_{(66)} = -0.269$, *p=0.03)*]. The results also revealed a strong and significant positive correlation at the 0.001 level between past year perceived discrimination and lifetime discrimination.

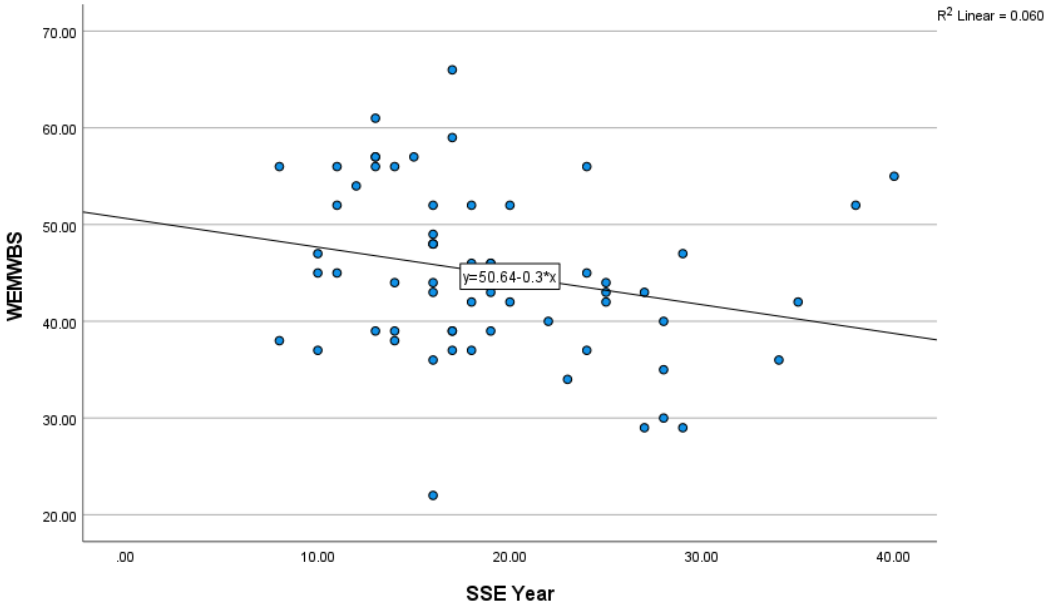

Figure 3. Correlation between perceived discrimination in the past year and mental wellbeing.

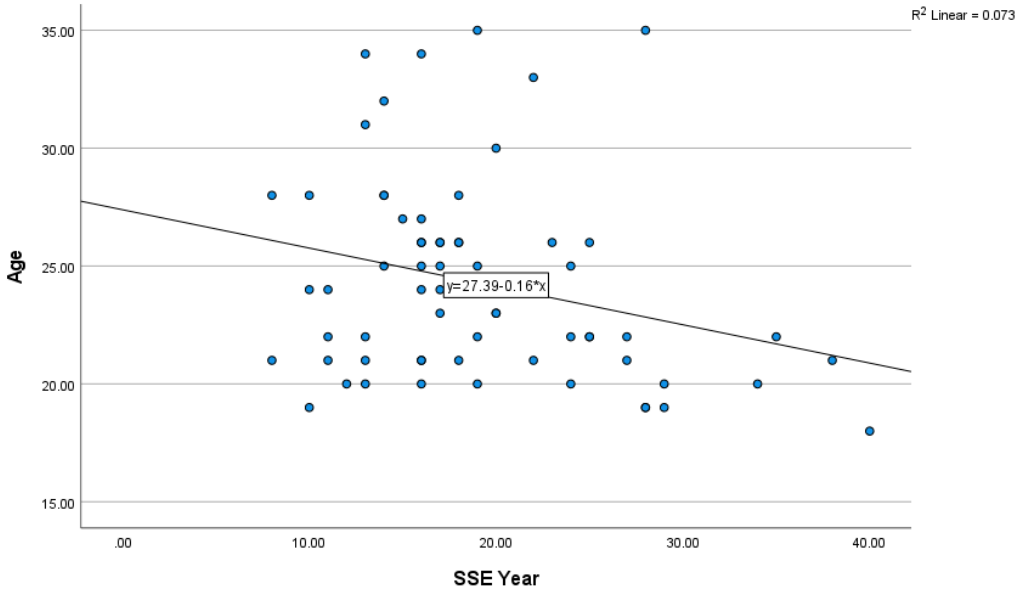

Figure 4. Correlation between perceived discrimination in the past year and age.

Table 3: Correlations between perceived discriminations, mental wellbeing, and age.

		SSE Life	SSE Year	WEMWBS	Age
SSE Life	r		.781**	-0.18	-0.09
	p		0.00	0.15	0.46
SSE Year	r			-.245*	-.269*
	p			0.05	0.03
WEMWBS	r				0.03
	p				0.84
Age	r				
	p				

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

These results show the detrimental effect of perceived discrimination on mental wellbeing i.e., as perceived discrimination increases, mental wellbeing worsens. The results show that younger players perceive higher levels of perceived discrimination compared to older players, perhaps because older players are more accustomed to poor treatment/discrimination; it is the norm for them and what they have always experienced. The above results also indicate that those who have experienced greater gender discrimination throughout their lifetime were more likely to also perceive it within the past year, suggesting that discrimination continues to be an enduring issue for these women.

The results from a one-way ANOVA also revealed a significant effect of the mental health screening item (yes/no/don't know) on perceived discrimination [$F_{(2, 64)} = 7.183$, $p = 0.002$), with the post-hoc Bonferroni test finding significant difference between those who answered yes and no to having suffered with poor mental health during their lifetime (*MDiff* of 6.48485 ± 1.75823, $p = 0.001$). The results demonstrate that those who have suffered with poor mental health (=yes), are more likely to perceive greater discrimination in their lifetime compared to those players who did not suffer from poor mental health (=no). An alternative explanation might be that those players who perceive greater discrimination are more likely to report suffering from poor mental health in comparison to those who perceive less discrimination.

3.3 Wellbeing and Discrimination Differences Between Football Professional Status

The results of one-way ANOVAs revealed a significant effect of professional status (i.e., professional, semi-professional, some financial remuneration, and amateur) on mental wellbeing [$F_{(3, 64)} = 3.124$, $p = 0.032$) (see table 4) but post hoc tests using Bonferroni's test revealed no significant individual differences between groups.

		Age	SSE Life	SSE Year	WEMWBS
Overall (n= 66)	Mean	24.29	23.29	19.08	44.97
	Std. Deviation	4.23	6.93	7.02	8.57
	Z Skew	3.13	0.02	3.20	0.02
	Z Kurtosis	0.55	-1.37	1.32	0.02
Professional (n = 12)	Mean	25.25	23.42	18.75	48.67
	Std. Deviation	5.15	6.17	6.82	6.93
	Z Skew	1.39	-0.03	1.72	-0.75
	Z Kurtosis	-0.38	0.38	0.82	-0.77
Semi-Professional (n = 11)	Mean	22.18	23.91	23.00	42.73
	Std. Deviation	3.28	9.14	10.49	9.31
	Z Skew	0.96	-0.19	0.53	-0.50
	Z Kurtosis	-0.73	-1.32	-0.89	-1.03
Receive Some Finance (n = 33)	Mean	24.88	22.94	18.45	42.78
	Std. Deviation	4.38	6.72	6.00	8.04
	Z Skew	2.02	0.04	1.50	0.23
	Z Kurtosis	0.15	-0.45	0.85	0.86
Amateur (n = 10)	Mean	23.50	23.60	17.20	50.00
	Std. Deviation	2.88	6.79	4.92	8.64
	Z Skew	0.51	0.10	0.69	1.25
	Z Kurtosis	-1.16	-1.31	-0.59	-0.40

Table 4: Age, perceived discrimination, and mental wellbeing across different professional status.

3.4 Interpretation of Results

3.4.1 Mental Wellbeing

Average mental wellbeing score (measured using the WEMWBS scale) in the surveyed participants was 44.97 ± 8.57 (n=66). This falls just within the moderate wellbeing category which ranges from scores of 41-59, but near to the low wellbeing category (14-40). Between 2011 and 2019, the NHS reported a mean score between 49.6 and 52.3 in adult women [89], showing that elite female footballers reported poorer mental wellbeing in this study than the female adult general population in England. This supports prior research [43] which found elite female athletes to report lower mental wellbeing than the general population.

The WEMWBS measure has not been used to date to explore mental wellbeing in elite female footballers exclusively. To the best of our knowledge, the WEMWBS measure has

only evaluated mental wellbeing in female footballers in one study, which was measured concurrently with athletes competing in other sports in Australia. They reported wellbeing scores of 48.17 ± 8.80 for uninjured athletes and 44.41 ± 9.13 for injured [90]; scores were not reported irrespective of injury. In Australian elite athletes more widely and across a variety of sports, female athletes produced a wellbeing score of 48.9 ± 9.3 [91], which is higher than the result in our study. In female rugby players in England, mean scores for wellbeing were 44.88 ± 12.38 [92] and therefore similar to our results. From the few comparable studies on elite female athletes and the WEMWBS measure, our findings suggest that elite female footballers in England seem to experience poorer mental wellbeing than both the general adult female (and male) population in England, and similar, poor mental wellbeing to elite female athletes more globally across other sports.

Mental wellbeing scores varied across our study with differing reported professional status. Players who reported being semi-professional or as receiving some financial remuneration displayed the lowest mental wellbeing scores (see Table 4) compared to professionals and amateurs. This requires further investigation to explore possible reasons for these differences.

3.4.2 Perceived Discrimination

Our scores of perceived discrimination are not fully comparable to other uses of the SSE framework since our research involved adapted statements. However, work by Landrine et al. [93] highlighted the significant contribution that sexist discrimination made to depression and anxiety, when using the SSE framework and the Hopkins subscale (ref). Similarly, other research [94] found that SSE lifetime and SSE past year were related positively to psychological distress. This supports our finding whereby higher perceived discrimination is positively correlated with lower mental wellbeing.

Chapter 4: How Do Elite Female Footballers in England Experience Gender Discrimination?

4.1 Description and Summary of Themes

Four overarching themes were identified in the analysis (Figure 5) which are considered in turn.

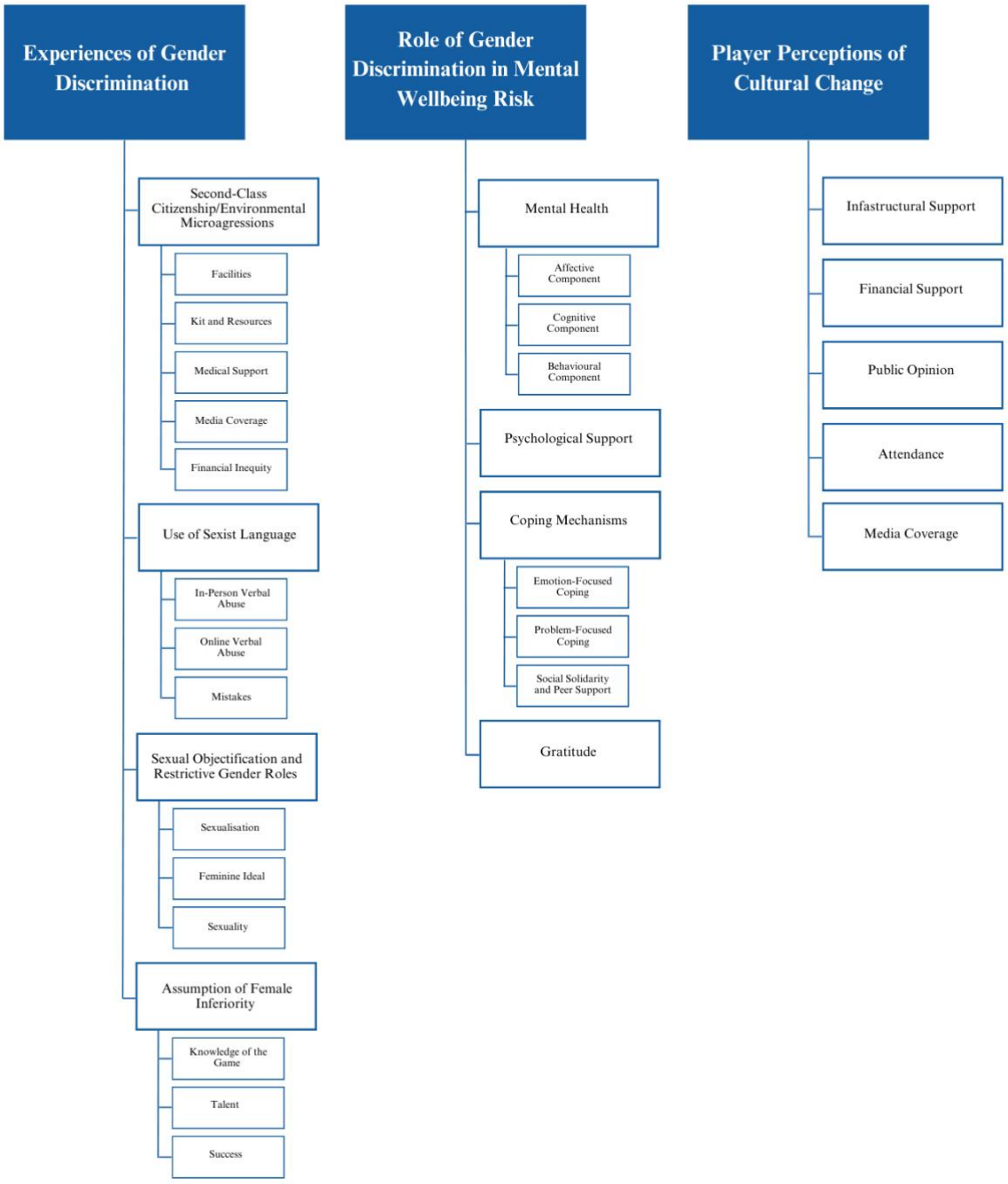

Figure 5. Thematic Flow Chart to demonstrate themes that emerged from the interview data.

4.2 Second-Class Citizenship/Environmental Microaggressions

4.2.1 Facilities

Numerous players vocalised the inequalities in the allocation and availability of facilities at their clubs, predominantly in terms of pitches, gym areas and changing rooms. Participant 2 stated: "we couldn't access the academy…we would train on frozen pitches", while Participant 1 disclosed: "we could see the training ground from where we were training…even the community team were training at the ground, and we weren't". Women's teams are regularly denied access to the 'men's' training grounds and must train elsewhere, often on old and poorly maintained artificial pitches, which are vastly different to the facilities that men are granted by comparison.

Poor access to quality pitches hosts a variety of negative consequences for players, with previous research on elite footballers finding that 91% of players believe that the type or condition of their playing surface increases injury risk [(93)]. Players perceived higher rates of fatigue and injury risk when playing on artificial turf and vocalised a preference for (quality) natural grass [(96)], which is uncommon in the female game. This perception is supported by research which shows that the rate of injury is higher for elite female footballers on artificial pitches than natural turf, thus this is a legitimate concern and worry for players. This concern is evident amongst both this research and the extant literature and is unsurprising given the insufficient medical support (see medical care subtheme) associated with women's football. Inadequate pitches and facilities increase risk of injury for these players and understandably affects their mental wellbeing through the associated worry and anxiety.

Even when women's teams are granted access into the 'man's space', they remain far from being on a level playing field in terms of pitch accessibility. Participant 1 complained about

"having to train late because the boys are on first" as did Participant 6, who stated: "women are always training at 10 o'clock at night". Participant 3 explained that "when covid hit, we were the team that got chucked to the side", further supporting the second-class citizen status female players feel even when they are welcomed into the space. Previous research by Coen et al. [97] supports this notion, explaining how female footballers' space is often constrained and invaded through a "series of microaggressions by men that literally crowd out or rush out the women" [p.34]. Participant 4 reinforces this further when she recalled how the men's academy coaches would "just come and start setting up on the pitch that we were on".

Inequalities were also felt in terms of changing rooms and gym facilities. Participant 3 stated: "everything we have is portable…there's no male players that are rocking up to portable changing rooms are there?" and shared that at her previous club, "the changing room had been around for donkey's years, and it was tiny, it was like an actual shoebox"; and this was at "arguably one of the top clubs". Participant 1 meanwhile disclosed that at some clubs, she "didn't have access to the changing rooms" at all, meaning players would have to turn up ready or get changed in the car. Changing rooms provide teams a place to unify and mentally prepare before a big game or training session, and wind down afterwards. They play a crucial role in not only optimising individual success, but also team success through team building opportunities and togetherness. Not only is a lack of changing space therefore degrading to female players and an indication of their (lack of) priority status within football, but it also has the potential to impact player performance and mental preparation.

With regard to gym facilities, Participant 4 referred to not being "allowed into the gym at all…like if the men have a day off and you're not allowed in the gym like…what's the reason?", while Participant 3 shared that "they've only just built a gym that's big enough…in

fact, we split normally because it still isn't big enough to hold the whole team". Access to gym facilities to perform pre- and re-habilitation, ongoing strength and conditioning, and recovery work is essential for athletes performing at the elite level.

Findings identified in a study by Welford [98] support the above sentiment and found that for women's teams who do not have their own facilities, they cannot achieve a priority status and will remain in the shadow of men's and boy's teams. Despite attempts to provide women with equal provision, the inferior status of women's football within society was found to automatically situate women's teams as lesser and prevented equal access from being achieved. As such, women were denied access to quality facilities and experienced many exclusionary practices, as found in this research also. This issue is less a case of male sacrifice, but more of a lack of accommodation; often pitches, changing rooms, and gyms are available, but not permitted for female player use. The solution therefore lies in clubs stepping up and allowing female access to available facilities and support, rather than treating them like second-class citizens. What you can provide for your men's teams, you should be able to provide for your women's teams.

4.2.2 Kit and Resources

Kit was mentioned by several participants, specifically with regard to shorts: "we have to wear men's shorts and it's the bane of my life because they're the most unflattering things" (3). Participant 4 claimed: "I feel terrible when I wear men's kit, it doesn't fit in the right way", while Participant 3 explained: "we have very different bodies to men, it's so simple to adjust it but teams and companies don't, and it winds me up". Alternatively, when women's shorts are provided, they are often perceived to be too short and exposing: "I've seen players literally walking on the pitch feeling uncomfortable because their shorts are barely covering

their arse" (1). This is supported by previous research, which describes how women footballers perceive their shorts to be sexualising [99].

Participant 3 stated: "I always say look good, feel good, play good" (3) and this was a common theme among almost all participants. While kit may be a small, insignificant thing to the outsider, for players it is not such a trivial issue and seems to cause psychological distress and anxiety for reasons related to body image, self-worth, and feelings of disregard from the companies producing them. No research has been previously identified on kit design for comfort, fit, or performance for female players and thus a clear gap remains in the field to better understand player desires.

4.2.3 Medical Support

Unsurprisingly, given how topical this issue is within the women's game [100], a lack of sufficient and quality medical support was noted by almost all participants. Participant 3 said "very few teams actually have good medical staff…it's arguably one of the top clubs and in the locker room there were still so many complaints". She said that at "dinners with lots of different girls from different teams, everyone complains about their medical staff because it's not good enough". She describes the physiotherapy staff to be like neophytes, making "mistakes constantly" and "so behind" (3) in terms of knowledge and experience. This was consistent across participants in all leagues, with participant 8 stating: "it's a high league but you're struggling to find a decent physio that can help players" because "there's not enough knowledge" and there's not "enough research" (3).

Injury prevention and management are consistent topics in football but while injuries in men's' football have been widely researched [101], there remains a dearth of research

exploring female players and their bodies. We cannot apply research on football injuries from the men's game to the women's as injury burden differs between male and female players [102-104]. Factors such as differences in anatomy and biomechanics of male and female athletes, and the influence of the "athlete's triad" (a set of psychophysiological responses to intense training including eating disorders, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis), act as female-biased conditions believed to impact injury risk [105, 106]. The type and severity of injuries for women are different than in men's football [107] and the rate of moderate and severe injuries appears higher in women than in men, with up to 20% more time lost due to injury [108,109].

A particularly topical issue in the women's game which epitomises this point, is the high incidence of anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) ruptures. Most studies report a timeline of 6-9 months for an athlete to return to sport after an ACL rupture/surgery [110] but this can often be longer. ACL tears are traumatic, expensive, can terminate athletic-careers, and often lead to permanent joint damage [111].

In January 2023, the current situation was termed an 'ACL injury crisis' [112] in the women's game, as 'dozens of top-flight footballers across Europe have been downed by an anterior-cruciate-ligament tear in the past calendar year- with [Beth] Mead and [Vivianne] Miedema making it 5 of the 20 nominees for the Women's Ballon d'Or sidelined with this injury' [113]. A recent twitter post gained traction after highlighting the sheer number of elite players across the world's top leagues who have suffered an ACL injury in the past year [114]; collation from the female footballing community produced a documented number of over 100 ruptures in elite players since the start of 2022 alone. Arguably an epidemic of the game, the rate at which ACL injuries are happening in the elite women's game right now is astounding; players' knees feel like ticking time bombs, wondering whose is going to go next.

Participant 8 explained: "women do their knees very easily and they [physiotherapists] don't know how to prevent it". She explained that the surgery costs "a lot of money, people can't fund that" and then "you need physio, you need rehab" (8). Participant 8 stressed how many players are left in an insurmountable financial position because clubs "don't support their players" enough: "if it happens to you, you're just another person that they know, not one of their players that they care about". She explains how players put their "bodies through hell" on a football pitch for their club, "but if it goes wrong, they [clubs] forget about them…it's just not acceptable" (8). Women are up to eight times more likely to rupture their ACL than their male counterparts [115], yet are placed under the very conditions that heighten this risk (i.e., poor playing surface, artificial turf, ill-fitting boots) and are not well-supported with the implications of obtaining such an injury.

While this is not the case at all teams in the top three tiers of women's football in England, this is the reality for many, especially those without the financial backing of a big 'men's club', with the subsequent burden falling on the players themselves to manage. At clubs tied to rich Premier League teams, the financial aspect for players may be less of an issue, but the high risk of serious injuries and lack of sufficient medical care remains. Participant 8 argued that clubs have the funding and the facilities but they just "don't want to give it to the women"; again, demonstrating a lack of prioritisation, accommodation, and care for female players.

Participant 5 stated that: "in England, you don't get support as much unless you're affiliated with a big club", with Participant 8 supporting this further, stating: "unless you're at a side in the top league or maybe the top 6 teams in the Championship, it's always going to be hard to

get treated well and get the stuff you need". But even for those participating in these teams, the provision and support discussed remains insufficient. The assumptions from players in tier 3 are not reflective of what players in the WSL and WC are sharing, showing that the grass is not always greener. While provision and funding are on a varied spectrum across the top three tiers, each team and its players all experience discrimination and lacking provision to different degrees. Players put their bodies through the equivalent demands and pressures as male players but are not provided with the equivalent care and provision across all levels. This was eloquently summarised in a recent UEFA interview by Leah Williamson, Arsenal and England captain [108]:

"I'm required to do the same job, and my body for my limits goes through the same as it does for my male counterpart and that's the main thing- if you came into the women's game, that's what we're asking for. Nobody is asking for equal salary right now, they're asking for equal access to facilities, to medical provision, all those different things that actually allow me to do my job because right now, the stress that I'm under in terms of my body… we're not looked after in the way we should be".

Since this interview, Leah Williamson herself has also suffered an ACL rupture.

4.2.4 Media Coverage

Women are severely underrepresented in the media for their sporting events [117]; they receive far less coverage and are presented as less interesting and of less value [118]. Female athletes have slowly gained more media coverage over the last couple of decades [119] but as recently as 2019, research showed coverage totalled only 5.4% of all airtime; a minimal improvement

in comparison to the 5% observed in 1989 [117]. Within the UK, women's sport was found to gain just 3-12% of annual print and televised coverage [120]. This inequality was felt and vocalised by many of the players interviewed. Participant 8 stated: "I don't feel like clubs promote the women enough", while participant 2 supported this further, expressing: "the media don't give us as much coverage and people don't even know that we're playing". Participant 5 also commented, saying how "a bit more recognition and advertisement from these teams" is needed, "say at men's games advertising the women's".

We have arguably entered a 'new age' of women's football, with the launch of the now fully professional Women's Super League [9], whereby football for women is now a full-time career opportunity, but low media visibility remains for women's teams and players. This low visibility has knock on effects in attracting sponsorship and slows the pace of infrastructural development [118], limiting the availability and accessibility of the sport to spectators. Recent work by Gebel et al. [121] referenced this reality of women being treated as 'second-class citizens' [122], as organisers of major sporting events tend to favour male sport by scheduling their fixtures at TV 'prime time' or at better venues [121]. Better TV coverage in professional sport helps to generate higher revenues, impacting salaries and team resources, and helps promote visibility through higher viewing figures [121]. This structural sexism of 'systematic inequalities in power and resources' [123] results in lower visibility for female athletes, therefore perpetuating a vicious cycle of less funding, resources, and opportunities. An increase in media coverage for women's sport represents, for some, a visible threat to male dominance and an attack on football as the 'last male preserve' [124]; thus, maintaining these gender gaps in media coverage functions to control, or limit, the growth of the women's game and further reinforces female inferiority [125].

4.2.5 Financial Inequality

Professional sport is often glamorised as a carefree occupation with high economic rewards and a celebrity lifestyle [126], but a career in elite women's football is increasingly complex and remains characterised by mass gendered precariousness [9]. Women face issues regarding unequal pay between themselves and male athletes, regardless of and despite their success [13], and it remains common knowledge that women in football are paid vastly less than their male counterparts; such a disparity that their wages are almost incomparable. Football finance expert Kieran Maguire states that the average salary in the Women's Super League (WSL) is around £25,000 to £27,000 a year, with salaries in the second tier (WC) coming in as low as £4,000 a year [127]. The average wage in the Premier League, comparatively, is £60,000 *a week*, with many earning well above and beyond this.

Financial troubles have appeared in recent discourse around women's sport more broadly as one of the biggest burdens for athletes, a concern that impacts all women involved in elite competitive sport, irrespective of their employment status [128]. Elite sportswomen operate in precarious financial conditions [3, 45, 129], and those not competing full time in sport have a balancing act of considerations, including sport, work, family and/or education [130]. Therefore, as expected, money was a highly discussed theme within the conducted interviews. The aforementioned pay gap is enormous and was widely recognised by players, as Participant 1 states: "there's obviously financially a huge difference between our game and the boys' [academy-age male players]… I don't want to know how many times more" they get paid than top WSL players. Participant 6 expressed: "if I was just a different gender, honestly I'd have it all", demonstrating players' awareness of how significantly their gender denies them financially. This is supported by previous literature, whereby players vocalised

how all avenues for financial gain, such as wage, sponsorship, prize money, contained a gendered dimension that inhibited their earning potential [128].

Despite this, players demonstrated an understanding of why this discrepancy exists: "our game doesn't bring in the kind of money that the men's game does so how can you justify giving us the same?" (7) and "we don't fill out stadiums…how can we expect to be paid loads of money if we're not bringing people in" (8). Participant 8 summarised: "football revolves around money…I'm in the third tier of women's football, why am I not full time? Because you can't get people in, you don't make any money". While not expecting or desiring equal pay, players did vocalise how they believe they deserve more than they are getting and that change needs to occur. Participant 3 disclosed: "I don't think the wage is anywhere near high enough for what we do" and shared that "the average in the WSL is very low…it's really a get by sort of wage". Participant 4 likewise summarised that in England, the wages are "not even close" to what they should be, while Participant 1 expressed: "there's more eyes on the game, there's more people coming…it does make you wonder why there are players still on 19 grand in the WSL".

Seemingly, the only element of financial equality in the game is the payment made to each player for an England appearance, with players both in the men's and women's teams being paid £2,000 each for an appearance. Unsurprisingly though, discrepancies remain within the national team setups, with the Lionesses each given £55,000 bonuses for winning the 2022 European Championships, while the men were set to earn a collective 12 million in bonuses should they have beaten Italy in the 2020 Euro final- equating to each player pocketing around £460,000 [131].

Many experiences of poor financial equity were provided by players. Participant 1 described: "we were literally paying £600 a month for me to just stay there, and I was watching the (equivalent) boys not having to pay for their accommodation, which was next to the ground, whereas we had to get on two or three trains and a bus to get to training from ours". Participant 5 stated: "we don't get paid much at all, the only payment we get is to cover expenses", and at her previous team "we even had to pay for our kit". She expressed: "you're training at this facility and that's treated as your reward when it shouldn't be like that" (5), supporting the aforementioned notion that women's football is not treated or viewed as a professional commodity, instead as something that women do for their own enjoyment. Any support or funding given to women is not seen as essential or necessary, but a bonus they are lucky to receive.

The low wages and mass financial inequities host numerous harmful and negative consequences for players, and for the game itself. For one, Participant 4 detailed the financial stress that exists because of the low wages in the game, stating: "it's always there and it doesn't go away". She shared that: "it's a constant stress…it can create anxiety and uncertainty", especially because of the "one-year contracts that a lot of clubs give". She questioned: "what happens if you don't return to that club in May and you don't get a team again until August…where's your money coming from if you haven't got savings?". She expressed how "they're asking a lot from female players…the price of living is massive, the financial stress is really difficult to deal with" and that "there's still a massive way to go in order for people to feel comfortable" (4).

If there is little prospect of improvement in wage, women's football runs the risk of its players being priced out of the game, with participants questioning their involvement

altogether. This prospect is further exacerbated by the current financial crisis facing the UK. Participant 2 stated: "why am I doing this…when the men get millions and we get peanuts…it's not a nice feeling", while Participant 4 stated: "it's such a significant difference [wage discrepancy] that it does impact people wanting to carry on playing". Participants spoke about having to find other sources of income alongside playing football: "obviously in the women's game you're not going to get paid loads like my teammates have to work…they have to find another way" (2); despite being full time and 'professional', they are not earning enough to survive. Participant 8 similarly stated: "you can't retire after…you have no money …you still have to get other jobs". Participant 1 disclosed: "it's a little bit sickening because at this age its livelihoods as well…" and stated: "as you grow up, you get other opportunities and eventually they'll be worth more than your football career…it's sad to see but that's the reality of it".

Because of the lack of funding and financial support in women's football, most female players cannot commit full-time to their sport, even those playing at the elite level. Football for women remains as an essentially glorified hobby, with a dual career necessary for most because of this broken system, exacerbated by the current cost of living crisis. A stable career option as a professional athlete is still a future dream for most within women's football and the dual career remains a current reality and harsh necessity. This is evidenced through a previous FIFPro study surveying 3295 elite female players on employment conditions, whereby concerns over economic remuneration, short contracts, absent childcare policy, and limited post-career playing options were highlighted [132].

On a more positive note, Participant 3 shared: "I do think women's players are getting paid more and more now...you hear about what certain players were asking for in the summer…

you can obviously push clubs and be like I know you have more money". However, as Participant 5 summarised: "it's a very slow progress, I don't think it should be this slow to get to where women's football wants to be", and as Participant 7 disclosed: "I hear that it's getting better but I don't see it. I feel like everyone's like the euros did this and it's getting better but in what way? I don't see it; I don't feel it". Perhaps for top players in the WSL, positive change is being felt and seen, but for the majority, vast inequities and financial injustice remain, along with the resulting negative ramifications.

4.2.6 Summary

In the conducted interviews, players spoke of precarious working conditions at their clubs, predominantly experienced in the form of inadequate support: poor access to facilities, resource allocation, medical care, and so on. Facilities and financial resources are routinely worse for women [133] and the lack of prioritisation, design, and delivery of organisational provision for female players is believed to constitute a form of institutional discrimination, since it results in unequal treatment on the basis of gender [118].

Historically, men's and women's teams within football have existed as separate entities, but more recently clubs have started to combine to share the costs of facilities and general club expenditure [134]. While this "may seem a good time to be a woman or girl in sport" [135, p.343] this merging has done little to 'disrupt' the status of men's football as the primary and premier activity within clubs [134]. Men's teams remain as the biggest priority with most women believing that clubs persist as male-dominated spaces that celebrate the dominant performances of masculinity, thereby relegating the importance of women [136]. Although women are "allowed" in the space, in a way that they had not been traditionally, little else has shifted in relation to the discourses and practices that are played out [135].

We can explain the above via the notion of tokenism; the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from under-represented groups, to give the appearance of equality within a workplace [137]. Tokenism leaves the minority group with only superficial indicators of inclusion and diversity, that which do not lead to any actual or real structural changes within society. This functions to give the impression of cultural change, without the majority i.e., men, having to succumb to it. In consequence, there is a new, modern idea that views gender discrimination as non-existent [138, 139, 140] and positions women as having now achieved equality. To men, equality has seemingly been achieved, as "women are here now, it's so inclusive and welcoming" [136] but to women, lots of inequity remains and the provision they receive remains insufficient.

4.3 Use of Sexist Language

4.3.1 In-Person Verbal Abuse

In face-to-face interactions, players recalled many experiences of verbal abuse that occurred due to being female in football. For most participants, this abuse began from the moment they entered the footballing domain, as some of their earliest memories in the game. Early memories of starting out in football were as the only girl in boy's teams. Participant 2 stated that growing up, "opponents could give you nasty comments such as "go tackle her" (2), insinuating that being female makes you inferior or an easy target. Participant 5 meanwhile shared how even her own teammates "would comment if things didn't go their way or if you did something better than they would" (5), suggesting that success and failure were both

viewed negatively by boys from either competing side, thereby reinforcing the unwelcome status of the girl/woman.

As players have gotten older, this abuse remains prevalent, with more recent examples given of comments made by men: "if I was a girl I'd easily be a professional footballer" (1) and "get back to the kitchen" (4). Participant 3 summarised: "there's that frustration…and it is tiring in the sense that you've always got to back yourself, or always have a point to prove". Participant 8 explained that "it's the older people you get judged by the most" but "there are still young people too" who have outdated, sexist views.

A survey conducted in 2016 on sexism in the workplace found 62% of women who work in English football had experienced sexist jokes, 38% had experienced derogatory comments about their gender, and 15% had experienced sexual harassment at work [141]. Our findings therefore correspond with the pre-existing literature on in-person sexist abuse, demonstrating how its prevalence remains.

4.3.2 Online Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse directed at women is not only well-documented in face-to-face interactions [142, 143], but has now evolved to infuse the virtual world also. In the interviews, Twitter was identified by multiple participants as the "number one" (2) social media platform where you see "a lot of this disrespect and abuse" (5), while Instagram and TikTok also received mentions. Participant 1 explained that "just having an opinion on football online, you know you're probably going to get something" and said that "99% if not 100%" of this abuse comes from men (1). Participant 5 supported this, stating: "there are a lot of people out there, mainly men…saying how women should be cleaning and cooking and not playing football

and not having a life. They're the one-liners you see every day". References to women being in the kitchen and fulfilling traditional female roles were highlighted by most participants and described as what they "most often see" (2). The notion of the kitchen is widely seen across sexism literature for all women in all occupations, continuing to highlight the reality of where men value women. Male criticism of women appears to start at the global level.

We have entered a new era of gender wars, marked by an alarming amount of vitriol and violence directed at women online; a phenomenon referred to as 'networked misogyny' [(32)]. This misogyny has risen significantly since 2011 [(144)]; becoming so normalised that it now seems acceptable to express even the most minor disagreements through the most offensive and affronting gendered venom [(145)]. The prevalence of it reveals the tireless way the rhetoric of misogyny and gendered violence continues rising, despite all attempts to put an end to the discourse and its disempowering extra-discursive effects [(146)]. Virtual spaces have created an optimal climate in which abuse can occur, having become spaces of presumed intimacy, freedom of speech and increasing influence [(146)]. Academic scholars are increasingly raising concern about the disproportionate levels of gender-based violence directed at women in virtual spaces, suggesting this to be a global pandemic in itself [(147)].

Online abuse is not so much diagnostic of a problem of a particular man with a particular woman, but of a broader social issue involving gender equity and misogyny [(145)]. Participant 5 explains: "you feel like you're that person, even if it's nothing to do with you, you still feel kind of hurt", showing how the abuse is not just felt by the receiving individual, but by the wider female football community. This occurs because the abuse contains a gendered element and therefore attacks the individual's group identity: "the abuse men get is not because they're male, but with women it's to do with gender 100%" (5). Participants 2 and 7 agreed

with the above sentiment, stating: "I don't know if people consciously realise that's why they're doing it, but I do think so (that gender is the reason)" (7). This sentiment is supported by previous research, which suggested that women are more than twice as likely to experience severe forms of violence and oppression online, with this often experienced by women *because of their gender* [148]. While players recognise that abuse is everywhere, and that male players also experience it in abundance, they feel that their abuse is gendered, whereas the abuse that men experience is not.

As Doyle [149] states: 'What matters is not which guys said it: what matters is that, when you put their statements side-by-side, they all sound like the exact same guy. And when you look at what they're saying, how similar these slurs and insults and threats we get actually are, they always sound like they're speaking to the exact same woman. When men are using the same insults and sentiments to shut down women… we know it's not about us; it's about gender'.

4.3.3 Mistakes

Nearly all participants identified mistakes as the go-to subject for abusers to derogate and disparage the women's game. Participant 6 stated: "men and boys will find any way to pick out faults in the women's game", but mistakes were highlighted as the easiest way to evidence the supposed inferiority of women in football. Participant 3 explained: "when you see someone make a mistake in women's football, you know that's gonna be all over Twitter", with Participant 6 likewise stating: "videos on TikTok will appear saying oh 'women want equal pay' and it's a clip of women messing up". Participant 5 explains that "it's always blown out of proportion compared to if a man had done the same" (5), while

Participant 4 expressed how abusers conclude that "women shouldn't play but then men do the same thing and it's like he's just having a bad game".

This can be explained through the ultimate attribution error. Building on attribution theory, Pettigrew [150] proposed a systematic patterning of intergroup misattributions shaped in part by prejudice. This refers to consistent underestimates of situational pressures and overestimations of actors' personal dispositions on their behaviour, that is Taylor and Koivumaki [151, p.408] explain "a person who is disliked or hated may well be viewed as responsible for bad behaviours and not responsible for good ones". In this instance, when outgroup members (i.e., female players) make mistakes or perform poorly, ingroup members (i.e., male players) attribute this to an internal locus of control such as lack of skill/ability. For the ingroup however, poor performances are attributed to an external locus of control i.e., bad luck, playing surface, weather, poor refereeing. The internal locus of control is deemed stable, placing the blame on the outgroup individual, whereas the external locus for the ingroup is temporary and externally blamed. The opposites are applied when positive performance occurs. This error in thought plays a large role in prejudice and other social biases; when the outgroup member is seen as performing a negative act consistent with the ingroup's negative view, the fundamental mental error of dispositional attributions will be enhanced, meaning the strength of this prejudice is reinforced. This attribution bias serves to protect male players self-esteem and priority status, while diminishing positive attitudes and success in female players.

Participant 3 disclosed that she "gets so frustrated" as "it's so easy to pick on women's football" and that it affects her a lot mentally after games. She shared: "if we're fortunate enough to get the slot on sky sports, after the game I will honestly analyse it in the sense of

was that good enough to be on TV?", questioning "is there a way that someone's gonna come out there and be like haha look at this?...I hate that my mind does that but that's just how it is in women's football". Other participants also spoke of ways their behaviour has changed because of the networked misogyny. Participant 2 mentioned how she doesn't use social media much "because people are there to comment on everything", while Participant 1 stated: "I don't really post anything to provoke that type of reaction [abuse] because I'm thinking about the future and potentially where I want to go". Participant 3 went on to explain that "you've definitely got to be way more aware" and "more reserved with what you want to say…because it will get scrutinised".

Female players are placed in a difficult position, whereby those who speak out are further targeted and "disciplined" [152, 153]. Participant 5 stated: "we should be able to speak out like if men are able to do it, what about women?" but previous research shows that gendered abuse and hate, especially online, spikes in response to feminist activism and perceived feminist gains [145]. Participant 6 referred to this point, elucidating: "you don't want to get sucked in…then you're sort of encouraging it". Pope et al.'s recent work [29] found similar antagonism, demonstrating Faludi's [154] anti-feminist 'backlash' in male football fans as women strive towards greater equity. Cole [153] proposes however that violent anti-feminist engagement on social media goes beyond that of backlash and functions as *disciplinary* rhetoric, suggesting an intensification of the backlash previously outlined by Faludi [154]. This discipline serves to single out and silence women engaging in feminist action, and it seems to be successful.

As per the above findings in this study, players appear to be employing self-censorship as a method of managing the toll that online abuse has on their mental wellbeing. This refers to

the censoring of what one says and does, out of fear and to avoid criticism. Ensuring that everyone can freely participate online and without fear of violence and abuse is crucial to guaranteeing that women can effectively exercise their right to freedom of expression, but 'Twitter's inadequate response to violence and abuse against women is leading women to self-censor what they post, limit or change their interactions online, or is driving women off the platform altogether' [155]. In an online poll about women's experiences of abuse on social media, 78% of women in the UK who experienced abuse or harassment made changes to the way they used social media platforms in consequence; increasing privacy and security settings, and making changes to the content they post, while 31% admitted to stopping posting content that expressed their opinions on certain issues altogether. This demonstrates how the abuse makes players become invisible or small in order to avoid further attacks, having the potential to reduce their visibility, the growth of player reputations and the women's game, and the opportunities for endorsements and sponsorships.

This abuse also affects players' mental wellbeing, causing major distress and damage for women because it reflects a reality that cannot be easily dismissed [156]. The men directing misogynistic hate towards women are not outliers, but instead reflect society in a way that is more direct, because the social structures that allow sexism in real life to be more subtle, haven't taken hold on the internet yet [156]. The explanations given for online abuse fail to acknowledge the structuring nature of it; attributing violence against women to insufficient legal systems, technological elements, anomalous individuals or other factors that detract from the deeply embedded misogyny that fuels these interactions [32]. Moloney and Love [152] state that it is not a problem of shadowy, genderless creatures airing their discontents, but a problem instead driven by the same misogynistic motivators that fuel in-person interactions.

By failing to correctly gender a gendered problem, we enable inequality and discrimination to flourish and the perpetrators to go unchecked [157].

Hate speech online often breaks criminal laws but goes unchallenged because it is now accepted as part of everyday virtual interactions [159, para 8]; as Gibson states: "you can't report every time someone says something derogatory as it's so commonplace". As a result, the networked misogyny remains very hard to fight and the consequences very much felt for players.

4.4 Sexual Objectification and Restrictive Gender Roles

4.4.1 Sexualisation

Sexualisation of players has been a long enduring issue within women's sport, with female athletes more likely to be evaluated on their physical appearance than their athletic ability within the media [160]. Commentators more frequently note an athlete's femininity rather than athletic expertise [161, 162] and women receive an abundance of sexist language regarding their bodies [13]. Men remind women that even if they are a top performer or athlete, their primary purpose is decorative [163], reflecting the stereotype that women's bodies are objects for other's desire, rather than being valued for their athletic capabilities [164]. This behaviour is harmful for women, serving as a reminder that even in environments where your body should be valued for what it can do, your body is still valued for how it looks.

The above notion was referred to by Participant 3, who stated: "in women's football, you can arguably do better if you are more attractive". She explained: "even if you're not a great player, if you're really attractive and you really flaunt that, then that can get you more places than a really good player who doesn't really do social media" (3). Participant 1 summarised:

"there's a favoured appearance subconsciously", with Participant 6 explaining: "men are supportive if they fancy a woman", like "everyone thinks Leah Williamson is fit". Players demonstrated an awareness of the continued focus on femininity and appearance for female athletes and of the 'perks' of being stereotypically attractive to the male eye.

Participant 3 went on to explain: "if you can show your appearance with a few photos on social media, that can engage more people than watching your games does because they're not readily available". This suggests that players have found a way of utilising their own sexuality to improve visibility for both themselves and subsequently for the women's game; for example, Participant 6 stated: 'I feel like Alisha Lehmann uses that [her sexuality] and gains attention". At the time of writing, Swiss professional Lehmann has in excess of 11.8 million followers Instagram, more than any other female footballer: despite not playing for a 'top team', not representing her nation at the 2022 European Championships, or winning any significant accolades. While this is not to diminish her football skill or to say she is not worthy of her following, this does corroborate the narrative that using social media to present your femininity and sexuality, arguably does more for your reputation and potentially your career than how successful a footballer you are. Previous literature supports this, stating that feminine women in sport reap benefits such as positive media attention, fan adoration and sponsorship [165-167]. These athletes garner respect for their ability to be successful in their sport while remaining 'true to their gender' [168].

4.4.2 Negative Ramifications

The persistent sexualisation and focus on appearance for female athletes continues to cause harm for other players. As some athletes are highlighted by the media and receive financial and political clout, they simultaneously reinforce the socially constructed expectations for

feminine behaviour and appearance for sportswomen. Participant 1 stated that players feel "uncomfortable" because of the sexualised comments and insults received, while Participant 6 expressed: "it makes me feel sick…you can acknowledge someone's pretty but focus on what they're there for". While participants acknowledged that male footballers also experience appearance-based abuse, Participant 7 stated: "I don't think it's the same with women, I think we get more of those comments" and for women: "there's a lot more judgement of the player off the pitch than there is on it, regardless of how they play" (1).

Participant 1 referred to there being "a lot of eating disorders" at her previous club and stated: "one of my best friends…had the worst anorexia I've seen…she's still suffering from it" and articulated that "she's definitely not the only one and won't be the only one because nothing has changed". More personally, Participant 1 expressed how she has felt "self-conscious that coaches would feel a certain way about me just based off the way I looked, without even seeing me kick a ball" and that "a lot of coaches will look at somebody slim and choose them over somebody who is bigger as a default, just because they link that to better fitness or because that's what they like". She explained that this "definitely puts a certain culture on the back foot [i.e., at a disadvantage]" (1). As if to confirm this bias, both aforementioned players (Leah Williamson and Alisha Lehmann) fit a similar mould of western beauty, that is, blonde, white, and of slim build.

4.4.3 Feminine Ideal

In the context of a Eurocentric society, western representations of the feminine ideal are represented by 'the Barbie doll' image, which fits the above description [169]. There is a longstanding history of western culture emphasising this feminine body ideal [168], that which appeals most to the man, and it seems that this version of idealised beauty remains at least to

some extent. Termed hegemonic femininity, and constructed within a white, heterosexual, and class-based structure [170], this contrasts the athletic ideal, meaning female athletes face a paradox between sporting culture and their larger social culture [168]. Sportswomen are expected to perform hegemonic femininity while distancing themselves from behaviour perceived as masculine, resulting in a multitude of effects on their body image, eating behaviour, self-presentation, and self-esteem.

These issues host many negative ramifications for all players, but perhaps even greater affect for players of non-white backgrounds. Participant 1 stated: "I took a screenshot of the recent England team…it was all white females, the same kind of player" (1). The inequalities in representation of race, ethnicity and social class are widely evident in the women's game, especially at the elite level, and appearance-related discrimination is therefore not only felt because of gender, but for many because of their race/ethnic background also.

Both the scrutiny over physical appearance and the tactical assertion that women like and welcome sexualised insults, remain as long-standing tools to discredit women who transgress traditional gender roles and challenge male authority, such as those women in football. Sexualised insults reflect attempts to put women in their place [163] and continue to cause harmful effects for these players.

4.4.4 Sexuality

Women footballers have often been categorised as masculine, mannish or butch and their sexuality is regularly questioned [172-178]. Participant 8 referred to the lesbian stereotype of female footballers, stating: "I would say that most women in football are gay like it is a fact, but it doesn't mean all of us are…you tell someone you play football and they automatically

think you are (gay)". She explained: "If I'm rocking up in a football kit…I'm automatically gay- it frustrates me so much" (8).

For women playing a sport so traditionally defined as masculine, players are seen to "transgress the boundaries of 'acceptable femininity'" [179, p.424], with Lenskyj [180 p.95] explaining: "femininity and heterosexuality (are) seen as incompatible with sporting excellence: either sport made women masculine or sportswomen were masculine from the outset". The masculinity associated with female footballers is what ties them to homosexuality and to the assumption and generalisation that all women in football are gay. Inversely, the stereotyping associated with the myth of the lesbian athlete also erases masculine gender expressions of heterosexual women and of femme bisexual or lesbian women [181]. This can cause problems for many players involved in the game, for example, Participant 3 referred to how "a lot of us didn't love how that (being manly) was the picture because that's not who we are and we didn't want that- 'oh you've got to be really masculine to play a boy's sport'". This stereotyping of a woman's appearance and presence within the footballing space means players can experience frustration and gender role conflicts regarding self-presentations of femininity and masculinity.

Additionally, this stereotyping can be seen to further encourage the sexualisation of female footballers and the negative feelings for players in consequence. Research by Cleland et al. [181] highlighted how the presence of lesbian and bisexual women players can act out an imaginary sexual fantasy for some men, with a participant in their study stating: "women continue to be sexualised" and "gay females stimulate the lesbian/bisexual fantasy" [181].

In women's football, a community of acceptance for LGBTQ+ players exists, whereby high numbers of female athletes can 'come out' and be open about their sexuality [125]. While this should only be praised and seen as exemplary for other sports to follow, the above discussed issues arise because of this very openness. It seems the openness encouraged within the women's game is at odds with the continued hostility from wider football-following society. As hegemonic ideals of femininity are constructed from a white, middle-class stereotype of heterosexual attractiveness, therein lies considerable ambiguities and tensions for footballers around lesbianism and homophobia from both outside and inside the game. Discrimination through stereotyping and sexualisation seems to occur at the intersection of gender and sexuality, hosting several issues for players and tainting the benefits awarded by the accepting and inclusive culture within the women's game.

4.5 Assumption of Female Inferiority

4.5.1 Knowledge of the Game

Respect, or lack thereof, hosted much discourse during the player interviews, with participants sharing that the negative opinions on women's football instigates feelings of disrespect most frequently: "from the outsider's perspective" there's still a judgement of women's football "in a negative way" (3). This negative expectation and opinion was vocalised as being apparent regarding women's knowledge and understanding of the game, with Participant 7 stating: "I get treated like I don't know the game, like I don't know how to play, like I don't see the game like a man would." She explained that: "we play the same game, we watch the same game…we understand the game the same way…but it's not viewed that way" (7) and expressed that this is demonstrated in the "way we get talked to", whether that be by "refs or coaches or managers.-Previous literature exploring female sports journalists in the workplace highlighted similar struggles, whereby 59% of respondents felt

they were held to the same standard of accuracy as male counterparts, but that their male colleagues expected women to know less of the background, history, and lore of sports [182]. Their participants referred to being talked down to and being shown a lack of respect, and explained a need to constantly prove themselves: 'If I make a mistake, it's proof that I shouldn't have the job'. Women in football appear to face assumptions of inferiority before they've even kicked a football or opened their mouths.

4.5.2 Talent

This lack of respect was also highlighted by participants with regard to their ability to play the game. Multiple participants referred to how "talent speaks" (8), and how they feel a pressure and need to be 'good' to earn any respect within football. Participant 8 summarised that an individual's experience of sexism within football "depends on how good you actually are…you always have to prove that you're worth their respect, especially with men". Likewise, Participant 6 stated: "women have to be perfect in their eyes" and if they're not, they think women "shouldn't be playing football" at all. Participant 3 explained that "men can get away with murder almost and still be respected on the football pitch" while Participant 8 vocalised that "if a woman turns up and she's bad at football, then all women are bad at football".

Participants felt that by default, women hold zero respect within the game until they show they have talent: "if I turn up and no one knows me and I say I play football, it's going to come to their head that she's not going to be any good" (8). Despite feeling like they "always have to prove it" (8) as women, participants also displayed an awareness and recognition that they "shouldn't really have to prove anything" (8), with Participant 1 imploring: "don't look at us as girls playing football, just look at us as footballers". Female players are trapped in a

battle for legitimacy within the football domain [9] and the consequent drive for perfection within women's football appears to be a very real pressure faced by players. The contradictory treatment of men and women within football may leave some questioning why men are welcomed into footballing spaces, regardless of ability, while women are only admitted once they demonstrate sufficient talent.

Whilst women in sports have become more visible, female footballers still feel they need to work harder to prove themselves as valuable contributing members of the sports industry, in order to challenge existing sexist attitudes and biases that pervade it [164]. Participant 3 stated: "I hate that I have to do these extras", using words such as "frustration", "exhausting", and "tiring" (3), whilst Participant 5 described the situation as "upsetting". Participant 1 explained: "if you want to be a good female footballer with respect on your name, you have to be good in every single aspect of the game".

By contrast, Participant 8 referred to the benefits of being naturally talented: "[because] our whole lives we were good, it made it easier for us" and that being a good footballer "saves me from getting all the agg [aggravation]". Other players shared similar experiences to those expressed by Participant 8, stating that everyone was supportive growing up because they were "naturally good at sports" (7). Considering the elite sample selected and interviewed in this research and the findings that have come to light, it provides a concerning precedent for what life is like in football for the non-elite female population. If elite players have found it so difficult to gain respect and acceptance within the footballing space, only achieving this once they have shown they are sufficiently 'good', then what is this dynamic like for those who are new to the sport, or who naturally have less talent?

The perfectionist nature inferred from the interviews also sets a concerning precedent. Socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) was introduced in 1991 by Hewitt and Flett [183] and was defined as "…people's belief or perception that significant others have unrealistic standards for them, evaluate them stringently, and exert pressure on them to be perfect" [183, p.457]. People with these prescribed pressures can become infused with an ever-present sense of duty and obligation, resulting in feelings of entrapment. The person may feel a constant pressure to never make mistakes and to perform at an exceptional level, as described above by the participants in this study. With the perceived perfectionism holding such a significant weighting over the potential progress for women in football, it is likely that this pressure and its consequent impacts for players is only exacerbated.

The extant literature finds the impacts of SPP to be detrimental to an individual's mental wellbeing. SPP has been found to account for unique variance in the prediction of depression symptoms in psychiatric patients over and above other personality variables such as sociotropy and autonomy [184, 185]. SPP is recognised as a maladaptive form of perfectionism associated with negative characteristics, processes, and outcomes, such as positive correlations with neuroticism and negative affect (e.g. [183, 184]) and with psychopathological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, somatization, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms [183]. The SPP seemingly apparent in players, stemming from deep-rooted sexism, therefore holds significant detrimental potential to affect the mental wellbeing of female footballers.

4.5.3 Success

Similar to the theme of talent, success was also raised as an essential for gaining respect (and therefore acceptance) in the female game. This is supported by Culvin et al.'s [9] work, who found feelings of stress among players associated with the pressure to be successful: "without

success, we're invisible". Participant 4 claimed: "the women had to win the Euros for anything to be taken seriously", while participant 8 stated that clubs "won't get any support really until they prove that they are successful". For example, upon promotion to the WSL, Participant 3 described her club's approach as "we're in the WSL now so we're [the club] going to put some more money in", demonstrating how success can initiate improved support and funding. By contrast, Participant 7 indicated that at her club: "the women have been promoted and yet...it still feels like it's more about the men". This is supported by prior work by Bowes et al. [120] whereby players vocalised how they feel support for women's sport, in the form of media coverage, is dependent upon success.

If success is necessary for women in football to be respected and to be granted more funding and support, but that success does not guarantee these very things, then female players may be left to question the systemic structures that control football. Women are seemingly left at this "little halfway house" (3), a paradoxical position whereby they need success in order to be taken seriously but not so much success that it initiates resistance.

Discussion about the Lionesses success at the 2022 Euros underlines these contradictions inherent with the game. Participant 5 explained that "their success has been a massive drive" and "you have men that give you respect now", while Participant 7 likewise claimed: "winning the Euros…I think that was massive…everyone's like wow someone finally did it and it was the women". Participant 5 meanwhile expressed a more cynical view: "if the men had been successful since the world cup where we won all those years ago… it wouldn't have had as much of an effect as it has". This view suggests that the public only endorsed the women's success because the men, their ideal source of triumph, have been unsuccessful for so long. Other participants also tied fragility to the respect gained from the Euros, stating:

"people will still find an excuse to turn us down- it was a fluke, we got lucky, it was because we were at home" (6); and "no matter what they've done in the past, if they (the Lionesses) had a run of 10 games losing, I think they would lose a lot of support" (5). This refers to the aforementioned theory of the attribution error, whereby outgroup (i.e., female players) success is deemed temporary.

Participant 1 stated: "I feel like it would be a kind of release for these male fans" if the women lose, as she feels a lot of people "didn't want to express the success of the Lionesses". This supports previous work surrounding resistance to the growth of women's sport. "Feminism is inherently controversial" because of the challenge that it poses to both established politics and power relations [187] and backlash has been defined as the "cultural counterreaction" to said feminism [188]. Backlash is therefore to be expected in the face of prospective social change [189-192], as in the case of women's football, with the Lionesses bringing 'football home again' for the first time in 56 years; ironically, women were not permitted to play the sport the last time the men were successful in it. While the past cannot be changed and the Lionesses cannot unwin the 2022 European Championships, men can choose to not rejoice in this success and to downplay this accomplishment, in order to limit the cultural change it has the potential to create.

The contradictory position surrounding success for these female players is suggested to become a personal problem for them, whereby they almost forgive the institutional and sociocultural challenges faced and take personal ownership for discriminatory practice [128] i.e., I must achieve more/be more successful in order to earn greater support and respect. This has the potential to create perfectionism in players, which has previously been linked to negative outcomes such as characterological feelings of failure, guilt, indecisiveness,

procrastination, shame and low self-esteem [193-197], as well as more serious forms of psychopathology such as alcoholism, anorexia, depression, and personality disorders [e.g. 195, 198]. These are believed to arise from the perfectionist's tendency to engage in setting and striving to reach unrealistic standards, alongside a tendency toward all-or-none thinking whereby only total success or total failure exist as outcomes [193-195, 199]. With even those who achieve the greatest of successes, such as winning a European Championship, not being granted the respect they deserve, it is not far-fetched to imagine the above thought patterns and tendencies arising. This is a cause of concern for players due to the potential detrimental effect on mental wellbeing.

4.6 Gender Microaggression Taxonomy

The discussed experiences and aforementioned themes of discrimination correspond closely with the themes identified in the gender microaggression taxonomy [200] of 'second-class citizen'; 'environmental microaggressions'; 'use of sexist language'; 'sexual objectification'; 'assumptions of traditional gender roles'; and 'assumptions of inferiority'.

When a member of a certain group is treated in a different manner to those members of the dominant group, then they are regarded as second-class citizens [200]. This differentiated treatment can convey to a woman that she does not deserve the same opportunities, benefits, or privileges that are afforded to men. This is exemplified through the previously discussed topics of facilities, resources, kit, and medical care. These second-class citizen microaggressions are closely linked to environmental microaggressions, which occur on a systemic and environmental level e.g., the gender pay-gap [200], and are illustrated through the financial inequalities and poor support discussed by participants.

The microaggression category of 'use of sexist language' refers to sexist language that is directed at women and was demonstrated through the face-to-face and online verbal abuse experienced by participants. The category of 'sexual objectification', which refers to behaviours and verbal and nonverbal indicators that reduce a woman to her physical appearance and/or sexuality, is very common within female sport and female footballers offered examples from their own and other player's experiences. These sexist categories are closely linked to another form of microaggression, namely, 'assumptions of traditional gender roles'. These are implicit or explicit messages that women should occupy traditional gender roles such as being "soft and feminine" and caregiving, not using profanity or drinking, and being "domestic" [200]. These categories are exemplified through the participant's discussions of sexualisation, meeting the feminine ideal and assumptions of sexuality. Lastly, the 'assumptions of inferiority' category describes incidents whereby men assume women to be less capable, both physically and mentally [200]. This is illustrated through the discussions of respect and the need for female demonstrations of success and talent.

Many suggest that these microaggressions cause more harm than overt forms of discrimination [201-204] because their subtlety means they are often dismissed, ignored, invalidated, or viewed as innocuous. The lack of acknowledgement of the seriousness of microaggressions mean the victim may feel paranoid, devalued, hypersensitive, or isolated. Women may feel less able to turn to others for support, may struggle to label the acts as discriminatory, and may not have the opportunity to externalise any negative feelings. Previous investigations summarise how these microaggressions pervade women's daily lives and experiences [138, 205-207], with this clearly demonstrated by the experiences detailed within this study.

Chapter 5: What Role Does Gender Discrimination Play in Creating Risk for Poor Mental Wellbeing in Elite Female Footballers in England?

5.1 Mental Health

5.1.1 Summary

Previous literature summarises that women are susceptible to an array of mental health risks because of gender discrimination that their male counterparts may not experience.
For example, Nadal et al. [202] reported that women experience emotions such as anger, sadness, frustration, guilt, humiliation, or discomfort in response to gender discrimination and tend to react to aggression and discrimination by remaining passive, walking away, or acting in ways that make them less susceptible to experiencing microaggressions e.g., self-censorship. Women are also impacted cognitively, where they may learn to accept sexism as part of everyday life.

5.1.2 The Emotional Depletion of Involvement: Affective Component

Multiple participants made direct reference to the negative emotional effects that gender discrimination has on their mental wellbeing. Participant 1 disclosed: "my mental wellbeing was in the bin…I would actually describe it as crippling at times", while Participant 5 explained that: "when you're passionate about something and you want to do well, if you don't have the support and backing…then it does take a massive mental effect on you". Participant 8 shared: "it frustrates me because it just occurs a lot", while Participant 3 also expressed "frustration" and described it as "exhausting" and "tiring in the sense that you've always got to back yourself or always have a point to prove". Participant 5 shared that it's "upsetting and disappointing because you work just as hard [as men]", while Participant 7 acknowledged that it's "definitely something I've been dealing with a lot recently" (7).

These quotes detail and demonstrate the wide array of emotional consequences that gender discrimination has on players. The empirical literature supports these findings, stating that

microaggressions often lead to an array of emotional reactions from the receiving individuals, including anger, sadness, belittlement, frustration, and alienation. The cumulative nature of these dismissed, ignored, invalidated or innocuous microaggressions means the individual can feel depleted and if left unresolved, has the potential to cause mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and trauma [203]. Additionally, depletion or exhaustion is one of three predisposing factors for psychological burnout in sport competitors [208], the others being sport devaluation and reduced athletic accomplishment.

Direct references to feelings of anxiety were also made by participants. Participant 3 shared: "I'll get nervous and anxious before a game…and I like that I get nerves, that's good, but God I do this every week, is that really great for my mental health?", while Participant 1 disclosed: "I was literally waiting until the last minute to get out of the car, I was anxious, I was getting headaches before training because of it, I literally would barely speak a word" (1).

Previous literature explains the direct references to anxiety, stating that women may develop anxiety or shame about their appearance as they internalise objectifying images or statements in the media [205], and that women can develop low self-esteem in response to sexism [209]. Participant 3 stated: "to be a popular women's football player… you've got to look good", while Participant 1 disclosed: "I was feeling self-conscious that coaches would feel a certain way about me just based off the way I looked without even seeing me kick a ball", suggesting that appearance-related pressures and objectification may contribute to the disclosed anxiety for these players.

5.1.3 Devaluation within Sport and Society: Cognitive Component

The participants acknowledged the effects of discrimination on their perceived value or self-worth as a player. Participant 4 stated: "when you've given a lot, you feel like the club values you…but it's like you're just a number to them". Similarly, Participant 3 stated: "just knowing what the clubs have [financially] it's kind of like 'oh right, okay'". These views suggest that players may see financial inequities within their sport i.e., insufficient wages and lack of funding at clubs, to be representative of their lack of perceived worth to their clubs as a player and an employee. Given the sense of team identity and loyalty implicit within sports such as football, this lack of value to the very organisation they sign with, would seem a particularly painful betrayal.

Almost all participants stated that they believe the discrimination affects their self-worth even more as a person than it does a player, demonstrating a 'take your work home spill' [(210)], which refers to an inability to switch off and leave work in the workplace, often resulting in ill-being [(211)]. This is an unsurprising finding given the all-encompassing nature of being an elite athlete; their work does not end when a training session or game does, instead it continues in their day-to-day lives and habits. Furthermore, the discrimination itself does not only exist within the workplace, rather it is omnipresent within society. The microaggressions and discrimination experienced by players can and do happen at any time, and within any environment, meaning they are hard to evade. The discrimination occurs not because they are footballers, but because they are *women* in football; an immutable characteristic and component of one's personal identity and which can understandably affect the self-worth of these women as people and therefore their own mental wellbeing.

5.1.4 Devaluation Has Consequences: Behavioural Component

As a consequence of the above emotional and cognitive effects, participants expressed numerous resulting behavioural consequences. Participants 2 and 5 both stated that the discrimination "affects you in your performance as a player" (2), as did Participant 1, who disclosed: "it definitely affected how I was playing, even the way I was approaching training". The existing literature supports this sentiment, stating that targets of microaggressions must expend large amounts of cognitive resources trying to determine whether or not they have been discriminated against [(203)]. Microaggressions are associated with decreased working memory capacity, which in turn can lead to sub-par performance and can distort women's self-concept and their self-esteem [(212)]. Furthermore, objectification theory suggests women who are objectified may struggle to maintain peak motivational states and concentration [(205).]. Thus, the potential for negative affect on performance as a result of microaggressions seems widely supported and recognised.

Other behavioural effects were vocalised and discussed in prior themes, such as: players giving up the sport; self-censorship; repeatedly watching back and scrutinising their performance following games; eating disorders; promoting oneself in the desired way on social media, etc. These behaviours are common themes in the sport literature on mental health and general literature on burnout [(208)], perfectionism [(2013))] and rumination [(214)].

5.2 Psychological Support

Participant 3 articulated that "there's always a stigma around therapy and psychologists" but that she would definitely utilise that support "if it was more available… because I think

there's so many benefits to have from those chats". Participant 2 agreed with the above, stating: "having that welfare person you can go speak to whenever you want, that's a good thing to have at a club". Most of the participants seemed to have positive attitudes towards psychological support: "imagine where my game could go if I did really have that behind me" (3) and demonstrated a frustration towards this support not being so accessible for women: "you're in more high-pressured situations and there's a lack of psychologists to help you in those environments" (3) and "we don't have psychologists" (6) but "men and boys have it all the way growing up" (3). This supports findings in prior work by Perry et al. [53] where 90% of participants believed that receiving psychological support would have helped them during their football career, while 86% indicated that they wanted or needed psychotherapeutic support at some point during their career. These findings also interestingly oppose previous literature [215-217], suggesting that cultural stigma is less of an issue here and there is willingness from players to use support but it is not available to them.

A couple of players however did suggest a greater focus on informal, social support as opposed to more formal provision. Participant 5 explained: "you're a team, you should really be there for each other" while Participant 6 disclosed: "I think as a team we've pretty much got each other and we're all older as it's a women's team". While social support is crucial, especially within team sports [218], this does not negate the need and benefit of accessible and available psychological provision. As for being older, issues related to mental wellbeing are not idiosyncratic to young people and can be experienced at any age and any level of experience within the game [89]. Participant 3 stated: "I'm 23, I should be like life sorted but that's just not the case", again supporting this inherent expectation that by a certain age, players should not need support for their mental wellbeing. Previous research suggests that the transition to adulthood is a critical juncture in the course of psychopathology and mental health, with young people facing a variety of new challenges and stressors during this time

period [219]. These challenges include the need to establish an independent identity, which may explain why players feel that they should not require assistance for their mental wellbeing once they have transitioned to adulthood.

Participant 1 expressed that if you do share how you feel with members of staff i.e., a coach or manager, and seek support, "they'll see it as weakness and your game time will go down…you always want to be making sure that even if you're not feeling that way [okay], that you're presenting like you are". This demonstrates the need for direct access to a psychological support member within clubs, so that the fear of a negative response from coaching staff can be annulled, or perhaps that the mental health literacy of players and coaches needs targeting and improving. Furthermore, it is necessary that *quality* psychological staff are appointed. Participant 3 stated: "a club might have one [a sports psychologist] but they could be absolutely awful, again because it's probably their first job" (3), referring to the aforementioned notion of the employment of neophytes in elite women's football. Previous research supports the need for quality staff, by highlighting how the experience and expertise of the sport psychology consultant are important factors in the effectiveness of the consulting [220]. This review found that athletes were more likely to report positive outcomes when working with experienced and well-trained consultants, who had advanced knowledge, extensive experience working with athletes, and/or specialised training in relevant areas.

5.3 Coping Mechanisms

5.3.1 The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Outlaw [221] proposed that the often-cited model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman [222] should be applied to experiences of perceived discrimination. This model suggests that stress is a product of situational (i.e., external demands, resources) and personal elements (i.e., goals, values, personality type) and that individuals will evaluate whether the situation is a threat to their well-being (primary appraisal), as well as to their ability and resources to cope with it (secondary appraisal) [222, 223]. Coping therefore depends on the "continuous appraisals and reappraisals of the shifting person-environment relationship" and is a dynamic and ever-changing process [224, p.142]. The situation can be deemed as benign-positive (exerts a positive effect on wellbeing), irrelevant (not significant to wellbeing), or stressful (event is threatening to wellbeing) [224, 225]. Benign-positive and irrelevant appraisals are not believed to evoke negative emotion or the subsequent need for coping actions, whereas stressful appraisals have the potential to provoke negative emotion [226].

5.3.2 Appraisals of Gender Discrimination

Regarding gender discrimination, there has been disagreement within social psychology as to how different appraisals affect psychological outcomes. Some research argues that appraisals of negative events as being due to discrimination (versus being caused by an alternative external event), allows self-esteem and wellbeing to be protected, because the victims of the discrimination can discount their own role and instead blame the prejudiced perpetrator [227-229]. Alternatively, research by Branscombe et al. [230] found that when discrimination is appraised as pervasive across time and contexts, it is more difficult to blame a particular individual at a particular time, and as such has been associated with negative psychological consequences, including decreased life satisfaction, lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and depression [231-236]. Appraisal of a discriminatory event as pervasive can also promote an acceptance of discrimination, whereby victims become so overwhelmed by the oppression

that they accept it as 'the way things are' [237-239]. A number of participants made reference to this sentiment, stating: "you just get used to it, you don't know anything where it's not like this…it's the norm" (5) and "I'm kind of over it" (6). Players seem to be worn down, with an almost disdain for change and advocacy, as Participant 6 stated: "I don't care, at least I can go and run around a football pitch for 90 minutes". Basic learning theory states that if a behaviour has positive consequences, it will be repeated, while a behaviour followed by negative consequence will be avoided [240]. The low levels of activism among those who suffer disadvantage are understandable - if action hurts the first time, why bother again? If taking action worsens mood or is unsuccessful, then active strategies will be avoided and players may revert to a place of forbearance, especially if the discrimination is perceived as pervasive.

5.3.3 Emotion-Focused Coping

Forbearance is characterised by acceptance and non-reactance and has been found previously to diminish the strength of a positive relationship between perceived discrimination and depression [241]. Inactive coping strategies i.e., doing nothing, are logical for an event appraised as isolated, but for an event evaluated as pervasive, doing nothing is too inconsistent with the appraisal that discrimination is everywhere. Therefore, rather than protecting mental wellbeing, this can cause issues longer-term, as the non-isolated incident is repeated and not addressed. Participant 7 acknowledged this, stating that while "there's some things you could ignore maybe for a while, if they continue, they need to be addressed". Participant 2 supported this point further, stating: "you have to acknowledge some things because if it keeps on going all the time…it gets frustrating and quite draining mentally…it will get worse". This is supported by previous research regarding the negative consequences of emotional containment [242]. Inactive coping strategies (such as acceptance and avoidance)

appear to grow in negative consequence over time, undermining mood, self-esteem, and physical health [237, 238] and indirectly contributing to the individual's own disadvantage [243-246]. Research tentatively suggests that passive acceptance of discrimination against oneself may intensify women's psychological distress related to experiences of perceived sexism in the past year and is consistent with other literature [247-248].

Participant 1 explained that removing herself from the football environment entirely was her only successful coping strategy after ignoring her thoughts and feelings for too long, stating: "taking a step back from football has helped me get back on track". She explained that she is "only just coming to terms with it [her maltreatment and oppression] all personally" and that "football makes you do this…put what you're feeling aside and get on with it because you feel helpless to change the situation" (1). Participant 1's actions demonstrate the deleterious consequences of ignoring discrimination through ineffective coping strategies. If players feel unable to change the situation, then the only way they can cope and deal with it is to reframe the way they perceive or think about their circumstances. Potential resolution can be achieved through active emotion-focused coping strategies (EFC; [224]) so that removal from the sport entirely does not become necessary.

Positive self-talk was one of a few active emotion-focused coping strategies cited by players; a method that develops internal sources of validation to decrease the psychological distress of discrimination [250] and to regulate one's emotional response. Participant 6 stated: "I tell myself they're jealous which always makes me feel better" (6), while Participant 8 said: "I know I could turn up to any game, men's or women's, and think 'I'm the best player here' because that's just how you have to look at it" (8). With the discrimination so systemic and engrained within society and footballing culture, athletes cannot immediately change the

system, thus emotion-focused strategies are effective and necessary in acute moments of difficulty or crisis [224].

5.3.4 Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused strategies however can also be utilised concurrently with emotion-focused ones, helping to initiate change and confront gender discrimination on a longer-term basis. For direct, in-person abuse, almost all participants disclosed that they would be inclined to stand up to it. Participant 6 explained that it is easier to stand up to discrimination in-person "because you know who it's aimed at, you know what they're implying, you know what they're suggesting and who they want to impact". Participant 5 likewise said she feels doing so "has more of an effect" in person and that you can "get your point across" more easily. Participants 2 and 5 divulged that they would take an informative approach to directly challenging the abuser, trying to "educate them [the abuser] on why it's not right" (5) as they believe the issue stems from "people not being well-educated" (2). By contrast, Participant 4 disclosed that "it depends on how it's said as to how I would address it…if they were being aggressive, I would probably get aggressive back". She clarified: "when someone says, 'get back to the kitchen'…it's like how many times have we been told that?" and stated: "you've had it your whole life…you get sick of it and it hits a nerve and it's not just based on that one instance". This suggests that when the discrimination is viewed as more pervasive, players become more motivated and the need for active responses for change becomes more strongly supported [e.g., 241] i.e., if players perceive discrimination to be enduring, they may feel more driven to actively fight it.

Other players indicated that they would be less confrontational. Participant 8 shared that she would not stand up to the discrimination, stating: "you would probably just walk away…I

wouldn't argue back because it's pointless" and explained that it just "wouldn't make any difference". This forbearance and cynicism was also expressed by Participant 6 who said: "you can't really do much except sort of fight your fight and just hope that someone will listen to you". Similarly, Participant 3 disclosed that she doesn't feel that she has "the voice" to stand up to abuse or to make a positive difference. Concerningly, existing research in social psychology shows that passive reactions to discrimination can have significant negative effects on mental wellbeing, such as anger and depression [see, 252].

Direct discrimination through social media channels appeared to provide different challenges for footballers. Participants agreed that on social media, "you're wasting your time" in trying to stand up to direct abuse (5), with Participant 5 explaining that "it's harder to get your point across" online as the message often just "goes in one ear and out the other". Participant 6 agreed that "online is trickier" and explained that engaging with the abuse gives the abuser the "attention" they desire and "then you're sort of encouraging it". Participant 3 expanded on this further, stating: "it's so different on social media because it can just get messy…I just think it would maybe do more harm than good". Consequently, these participants concluded that they would not stand up to abuse online for these reasons. Participant 6 stated that: "it's easier to report it and let the people who own the company [i.e., Twitter] sort it out", while Participant 3 stated: "I don't have the voice…I do think other players out there do though and they do it in a really positive way". This suggests that while players want to engage in active problem-focused strategies, they don't feel able to, and instead would rather this agency of change be placed elsewhere. This notion is supported by prior research by Swim et al. [138] which found that women who experience everyday sexism were more likely to want men to take responsibility for changing sexist attitudes and behaviours, rather than taking on this burden themselves. Female footballers may feel that because they already bear the burden of

discrimination and oppression, that it is unfair to ask them to take on the additional burden of effecting change. Additionally, they may believe that individuals with greater power and privilege are better positioned to create systemic change than they are themselves [138].

Similar sentiments were also shared when discussing indirect forms of discrimination i.e., infrastructural inequities in provision and support, and financial inequities. Participant 3 disclosed that issues of discrimination are "normally quite discussed topics…everyone says the same thing" i.e., players recognise and are unsatisfied with the inequities but are unsure on how to address them. Participant 3 stated that: "I'm at the stage where it's more the people ahead of me [leadership groups at clubs] that have a voice to help with that - I'm happy to go to them" but these issues are not something she would stand up to individually, therein highlighting the importance of social support if players are to engage in problem-focused strategies.

5.3.4 Social Solidarity and Peer Support

The positive impact of peer support and player togetherness was exemplified by Participant 2, who referred to an experience where indirect discrimination was successfully challenged. She stated: "3 years ago with the national team we weren't getting paid but the men were. We just came together and said we're not playing if you're not going to pay us…we just took a stand and that obviously worked". Similar notions of solidarity are currently being observed in other countries in women's football, with rising numbers of players in dispute with their federations [133]. Spain have just completed their third consecutive international camp without 15 of their leading senior players, all of whom resigned in September over impacts of the current regime (i.e., management and coaches, training methods, and support) on their 'mental wellbeing'. The Canadian team meanwhile have threatened to boycott international

fixtures if disputes regarding pay inequality and funding cuts are not adequately addressed, despite the team winning Olympic gold just 18 months ago. Most recently, arguably France's three best players announced they were stepping back from the national team, stating that they won't represent France until necessary changes are implemented, to preserve their mental health. The French federation responded by pointing out that "no individual is above the institution of the French team" [253], showing the need for group solidarity, as opposed to individual demonstrations of resistance. While this stance is not going to work in every situation of unjust practice or inequity, the above demonstrate the importance of social solidarity, and the positive affect it can achieve. As Cunningham states: "justice and equality in sport will only be realised through our collective actions- not our silence" [254, p.3].

The notion of social support and solidarity is supported by existing literature that highlights a number of benefits, including buffering the negative effects of discrimination on mental health by providing emotional support; increasing resilience; building a sense of community; and providing a platform for activism [138, 255, 256]. The research suggests that social support and solidarity can be powerful tools in the fight against gender discrimination, helping to provide players with the emotional, social, and practical resources required to challenge gender discrimination in women's football.

5.3.5 Perceived Consequences

Players vocalised concerns and fears over the perceived consequences of taking action against discrimination, and how this may deter them or other players from taking action. Participant 2 summarised: "I think some people feel scared because they don't know what the consequences are going to be", with Participant 1 disclosing: "I definitely want to speak out about everything but I feel that if I did that right now, it could affect a lot of opportunities for

me in the future". She explained: "if we speak out even to trusted people, that will affect us, so that's why you learn to consume it" (1). Participant 7 likewise stated: "I want to do what I think is right but at the same time I want to play and I want to be a part of this club and how might that be affected? Or what might they think of me and then how will that affect my position?". People are unlikely to voice their opinion and speak out if their environment discourages such communication [257] and/or it is likely to be damaging to their career progression; both can be considered to exist within elite football clubs [238]. Recent work on whistleblowing ("the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations who may be able to effect action") [259, p.4] in male professional football [260] highlighted how footballers are often reluctant to report bullying behaviour and may not see the value in doing so. Fear of retaliation from numerous parties i.e., coaches, management, fellow players, was identified as a major barrier to reporting, as was the perceived likelihood of the behaviour (e.g., discrimination) escalating; both factors are consistent with the above findings in our study.

Fears over the negative consequences of reporting discrimination were not the only deterrents to taking action. One participant displayed notions of personal denial of discrimination: "I just hate how *women* are treated and how *they* feel when *they're* playing" (6). Despite being a woman in football, she distances herself from this classification and refers only to group, and not personal, discrimination. If an individual has such an attribution, then self-evaluation i.e., how I feel about me, and negative affect are less likely to occur. By contrast, Participant 6 was the only participant seemingly unbothered by the widespread discrimination that occurs around her. While this is positive in that the negative affect on mental wellbeing is limited, if other footballers adopted this stance, then change would be even less likely. Crosby's [261]

pioneering work on women's denial of discrimination and personal disadvantage implores that "it does not suffice to recognise the disadvantage only in the aggregate, but that we must make the quantum leap from saying 'women here are not well enough treated' to saying 'I am not well enough treated'' [261, p.383]. If any woman anywhere experiences discrimination because she is a woman, then women everywhere must come to terms with their own victimisation.

5.3.6 Summary

The coping mechanisms adopted that prevent athletes from engaging in problem-focused strategies i.e., standing up to discrimination, are understandable given that it is challenging and often ends in frustration [262]. Players have developed learned helplessness; a state produced by exposure to unpleasant situations from which there is no possibility of escape or avoidance [263, 264]. When faced with an outcome that is independent of your response, you *learn* that the outcome is independent of your response. As displayed by our participants, this produces a passive acceptance of conditions, and which concerningly has been widely associated with depression [265]. Therefore, it is important that players try and are encouraged to engage in problem-focused coping whereby they directly contest inequities, as it can help them to feel empowered, and can help buffer the negative effects of discrimination even more than emotion-focused methods [252].

5.4 Gratitude

Despite participants expressing their awareness of the gender discrimination they experience, they also demonstrated an underlying theme of gratitude for the support that they do receive. Participant 4 stated: "I've been paid to play football, I've lived all over the world, I've got an education through it…when you look at the bigger picture, I've had a lot from football",

while Participant 2 shared: "I'm grateful for getting a chance to play here [in England]…because obviously I won't get that at home [her home country] as they're not full time…but I get the opportunity to do it professionally here".

Participant 5, having torn her ACL last year, expressed how she "was lucky enough to have private healthcare" to cover her surgery and "lucky enough to, in this case, have the support from the chairman at the club", who paid for "physio every week". While expressing this gratitude for the positive support that she received during injury rehabilitation, the use of the word lucky demonstrates her awareness of how this level of support is not typical for the female player. She stressed that "if you play women's football, no matter what, you should have private healthcare, because you don't get the backing from your team" (5). Medical care within elite men's football however, has seen substantial improvements in the qualifications and experience both of club doctors and physiotherapists over the last decade or two [(266)], while medical care for female footballers is lacking in number, qualification, and experience. Regardless, the participants seemed to express gratitude for this minimal provision.

Participant 1 shared: "it could be something as little as toilets in the changing room, you just find yourself like wow this is great and it's so basic" and explained that "when you look at the bigger picture your mindset really shouldn't have to be like that" (1). Participant 8 also recalled that the day after she injured her ankle, "a boot [protective walker boot cast] got sent to my home" by the club. She explained that this is "the first time I've had that quick sort of response to an injury" despite having been involved in the game for almost 20 years. She stated: "wow a boot getting sent to my house I'm like so happy for that but it's something that you should be getting…I just didn't expect it" (8).

Socio-culturally, many people still perceive women's football to be a grassroots sport where players participate because they love the game, rather than it being a legitimate professional spectacle. With players being very accustomed to this misperception and to many years of unpaid and unrewarded hard work, it is unsurprising that they have developed little understanding of what they deserve and therefore feel an immense sense of gratitude for the little support and financial reward they receive. Participant 6 demonstrated this point, stating: "in my eyes, money is great but football is why I'm there…the money is just a bonus and I can work around it" and "I think I'd rather win than get paid £500 a week, it just feels better". This seems curious in the context of elite sport, as it raises the question- why can you not do both? Arguably, for some players, they have been so conditioned to receiving little to no financial support that they seem to no longer even desire it; wages are perceived as a reward or gifted opportunity, rather than fair remuneration for their involvement and therefore something they have legitimately earned. Participant 6 expresses gratitude for being able to play football and fails to acknowledge what she rightfully deserves in return. This is supported by findings in prior research by Culvin et al. [9], where a participant stated: "People put this whole stigma on us that we should be grateful. Grateful we're professional. Grateful we're getting money, any money at all." [p. 8-9]

The concept of gratitude and associated behaviours are explained in the literature as acting from a sense of duty [267] and an obligation [268]. Gratitude is said to involve a willingness to remain indebted and to acknowledge dependency on the benefactor; something we "owe" to others when we are profoundly dependent upon them for our wellbeing [269, 270]. Women footballers' sense of gratitude for unsatisfactory treatment can be likened to this notion in that most women's teams are not yet at a point of financial independence [9], and therefore rely on

support from the men's teams, at least to some extent. Therefore, expressions of gratitude for the support received seem necessary, as players may feel indebted to their 'benefactor'.

The above issue is harmful for players and for the women's game because it has the potential to inhibit future change from occurring. Often in the case of gender inequity, the agency falls on women to instigate and demand change through feminist action [271], but if female players are unaware of what they deserve or are 'grateful' for and tolerate insufficient working conditions, change may be slower or less likely to transpire. For example, Participant 3 discussed how in hindsight, she felt she was "taken advantage of" when signing her first professional contract because of this "lack of knowledge of what you deserve". She disclosed that she was told, "this is your first one, it will be your worst one…like, can it be my worst one but still be good?" (3).

Both attribution theory [272] and the learned helplessness theory suggest that wellbeing arises from how people interpret the events in their lives. At the dispositional level, gratitude is part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive and good in the world. Such interpretations mean grateful people tend to have better wellbeing; presenting as less angry, hostile, depressed, emotionally vulnerable, and experience positive emotions more frequently [273]. Twelve prior studies have further supported this link between gratitude and wellbeing (for review, see [273]) meaning that in theory, gratitude should reduce the risk of poor mental wellbeing in female players. However, work on the dark side of gratitude [274] unveiled ways in which gratitude can be harmful within the context of an objectively abusive relationship; arguably, such is the case in the relationship between women and society, and especially for women in football. Within such an abusive relationship, gratitude is believed to

perhaps bring more harm than good, as it motivates the person to remain within the relationship and to continue tolerating the abuser, rather than taking action. An abuser provides low levels of provision, so much so, that any improved act [still unreasonable and unworthy of gratitude], can attract substantial gratitude as it is deemed relatively higher than what is normally given; transactional gratitude is not determined by the act itself, but rather how that act ranks amongst what the person is used to receiving (273; see also 275). Because until recently, female players experienced relative subordination in football, it is plausible to agree with Agergaard and Unhuge (276), who argue that workers, in this case elite female footballers, accept work in precarious conditions as it allows them to pursue their dreams. And not only this, but the increase of provision has stirred significant gratitude amongst players despite this provision remaining far from satisfactory in comparison to general standards of care given to other elite athletes (male and female) from a range of sports. In the UK, sports such as athletics, swimming, and cycling receive support and care through the Sports Councils; by contrast, football is self-governing.

It is important to note that players know they deserve better and thus, this gratitude does not occur through ignorance:

> 'There's so much pressure on us because people put this whole stigma on us that we should be grateful. Grateful we're professional. Grateful we're getting money, any money at all. Part of me is grateful I was part-time and now I'm fulltime, but that doesn't mean I can be shit on. People are just running on empty cos we train, train and no-one cared to monitor us or take care of us' (9, p.8-9)

The dilemma for players in their new realities is clear: players appear willing to accept unsatisfactory working conditions and in turn are expected to be grateful for the opportunity

[9]. For some players, it feels an opportunity gifted to them, rather than something that has been earned, thus, they express gratitude in exchange for sub-optimal treatment. For others, who display greater awareness, it can be difficult to criticize current working conditions as they are objectively greater than they have ever been. As highlighted by Pavlidis [129] and Taylor et al. [130], the cultures of sport create women who are grateful for any advance, and thus they do not often challenge gender inequity.

This is not only damaging for players mental wellbeing, but it is also damaging with regard to driving forward future change, and perhaps demonstrates how meaningful change within the sport cannot be solely the responsibility of players.

Chapter 6: How Do Players Believe Cultural Change Within Elite Women's Football Can Be Successfully Implemented?

6.1 Culture

Players demonstrated an awareness of the influence of footballing culture on their experiences in the game and the discrimination that they receive in consequence. Participant 1 referred to Graham Souness (a Scottish pundit and male ex-footballer) "saying that 'football is a man's game'", questioning: "what does that even mean, like why does this only happen in football? You don't see it in rugby, you don't see it in athletics, like why are women's performances [in football] being compared to men's? It doesn't make any sense". She continued to say that "everybody would celebrate Jessica Ennis winning something, or Dina Asher-Smith, so why isn't that the case in football?".

Sexism appears to be so pervasive in football culture, that even when women are successful in the sport, it is not supported or appreciated and is unfairly compared to the success of their male counterparts. In the football context, there exists a conflicting relationship between understandings of sameness and difference between men and women [(28)]. Expressions of gender difference are combined with the desire of the players to be taken seriously in the same way that men and boys are [(28)]. It appears that society picks and chooses when men and women are the same and when they are not, to best evidence male superiority. For example, when women are successful, women's football is a different sport entirely to men's and therefore the achievements cannot be respected nor given validity. Meanwhile, when a direct comparison favours the men, women's football is the same, i.e., 'you always see people coming in about Arsenal losing to an under 15 [boys] team…it's just got no relevancy' (1). Participant 1 summarised: "physically we're inferior but that doesn't mean that when women are put on a level playing field, that the game is inferior".

Participant 8 stated: "every single team concentrates on their men's team and not their women's" and that she believes the "opportunities will never be the same" (8). She expressed that she would always choose to watch Arsenal men's team over the women, explaining: "men's football comes first...you were brought up to think that." Even for women who play the game, and at a high level, they too are conditioned to see men as the priority, demonstrating how footballing culture seems to remain outdated and laced with hegemonic masculinity. Most women's teams, leagues, and tournaments even reflect as an afterthought in the names themselves, i.e., the World Cup is the men's competition, only the women's requires a gender clarification. The governing bodies of football such as FIFA and the FA, which have subsections for the women's game, are not only dominated by men numerically, but are also premised upon the cultural and social primacy of the men's game and continue to establish men and masculinity as the norm [277].

Players also expressed how they feel the abuse they receive is gendered. Participant 5 stated: "the abuse men get is not just because they're male, but with women it's to do with gender 100%". Participants 2 and 7 agreed with the above sentiment, stating: "I don't know if people consciously realise that's why they're doing it, but I do think so [that gender is the reason]" (7). Academic scholars are increasingly (and globally) concerned about the disproportionate amounts of gender-based violence experienced online by women in virtual spaces [278, 279] which our findings seem to support. Previous work highlighted the role of social media in providing a space for unregulated gender-based abuse, targeting female athletes in a way that hasn't occurred traditionally [280]. The female athletes in their study experienced hate surrounding job role and performance, with the directed abuse serving to sexualise, marginalise, and demean the athletes and their sporting performances. Whilst we, and the participants in the study, recognise that anyone engaging with online platforms puts

themselves at risk of receiving abuse, our findings support prior work in highlighting how women and girls are the primary targets of oppression online and that this abuse therefore contains gendered elements [152].

6.2 Player Perspective: Current Change and Future Advisories

6.2.1 Summary and Current Position

FIFA has identified women's football as the single biggest opportunity for growth in the game [281], with elite women's football demonstrating recent growth in popularity [282]. This is especially the case within England, with the Lionesses winning their first ever major trophy in 2022, and England's first since the men's World Cup in 1966. The post-tournament flash impact report stated that it was the most watched women's Euro ever, with a projected global live viewership of 365 million, across 195 territories [283]. The record breaking final hosted 87,192 attendees and over 416,000 new opportunities have been created across schools, clubs, and the community to engage women and girls in football [283]. There has been a 289% increase in media rights values since the previous women's Euro and 84% of spectators shared that the tournament has improved their perception of women's football [283]. Participant 4 stated that winning the Euro's was "emotional for everybody because despite everything, they've [the Lionesses] done it" i.e., despite the long history of discrimination, unequal opportunity and lack of support for female footballers, they managed to overcome this and still triumph.

Past achievements are central to football culture and fandom [284] but due to the 50-year ban from 1921-1971, and lack of media interest, women's football has fewer legacies, past heroic narratives and lived experiences that connect people to the game. This demonstrates why the Lionesses Euros success has been so important in England, in creating these much-needed

memories and legacy to drive the game forward. Still, the FIFPro report indicated the need for more investment and support if the women's game is to grow and develop to its full potential [285]. Women's football seems to hold a complex position with both opportunities and challenges on the horizon [99], with this vocalised by participants across a variety of topics and issues including infrastructural support, financial support, public opinion, attendances, and media coverage.

6.2.2 Infrastructural Support

Participants noted positive changes in infrastructural support for female players in the game in terms of strength and conditioning, activity monitoring, accessibility of games etc., summarising that "things have improved in lots of ways" (4). Participant 1 explained how "being full time athletes, the standard has gone up over the past couple years" and with "the performances that England were putting in, people were starting to realise 'oh actually I could enjoy this'". Improvements in support i.e., in finances, facilities, resources, and coaching, help produce better conditions for growth and success and in consequence, produce better 'quality product'. Better support produces better standard, and likewise better standard encourages better support. Participant 1 expressed the need for "getting better coaches in" to "keep increasing this standard" of training and of players being produced.

Participant 3 expressed however that "it's not just about the money you receive that's on your contract, it's the facilities, the staff, the medical, and like I said, the psychological support or lack of that needs to get better". While acknowledging some of the positive infrastructural elements that are improving, she explained that "there's so many added things that women's football needs to be better at" (3). Other participants similarly stated: "we're lacking in all areas, there's not one thing that tops it" (5) and that there needs to be "a lot more attention to

detail and care" (1). The enduring infrastructural inequalities in support not only inhibit the capacity for players to develop and reach their potential, but it negatively affects players' physical wellbeing, mental health, and self-worth, and it is therefore crucial that this support continues to improve.

6.2.3 Financial Support

A couple of participants acknowledged how they feel "budgets at clubs" (2) are improving and how "there's been a lot more sponsorship" (6) for players. However, as expressed in the prior theme of financial inequality, the wages across the top three tiers continue to be very low; unliveable even for those in the WSL. This creates significant financial stress and worry for elite players in the game, forcing them to work and balance multiple jobs, or to consider early career termination. Recent study by FIFPro on employment conditions supports this narrative, highlighting player concerns over absent childcare policy, economic remuneration, short contracts, and limited post-career playing options [(283)]. Careers remain far more uncertain and precarious for female footballers than for their male counterparts [(9)].

Participants expressed that "the FA have a lot to answer for" (4) and that they need to give "more funding to clubs" (2). Participant 4 stated: "maybe they have implemented things at grassroots level but what about the players that are professional that aren't at the Man Citys, the Man Uniteds, the Arsenals…the gap is massive". Participant 1 expressed however that not all onus is on the FA, but on clubs too: "all of the Premier League teams that have women's teams…[should] inject a bit of money" into them. Participant 1 also suggested: "load the Championship, load the WSL, get more clubs in there and get more eyes on them. More sponsorship should come from that".

Participants also referred to the FA Cup prize money, stating: "it's not great but they are trying to put more money into it" (7). In 2022, the FA announced a significant increase from £400,000 to £3million in the prize fund for the Women's FA Cup, following criticism of the disparity between the then current figures and those for the men's competition. However, a recent open letter written by WC club Lewes, highlights the continued disparity, stating: "we've earned £45,000 for the club but if we were the men, we would have earned £450,000" [(286)]. While the prize money did increase 7-fold last year, the men's prize pot also received an uplift from £15.9m to £19.8m, with multiple participants highlighting concerns over this widening gap.

6.2.4 Public Opinion

Participant 2 expressed that "things are now getting more acknowledged, and people are getting more educated", while Participant 3 summarised that "in terms of the general public who maybe didn't get behind women's football before, there's now more of a backing". Multiple participants spoke of how "there's lots more girls teams now" (3) and how "the number of girls playing is definitely going to dramatically increase" (3). Participant 3 also stated: "if you're a young girl now and you want to play, I just think it's so much more available and accepted", showing how women's football is becoming more of a social norm.

Despite this, participants also referred to how much public opinion still needs to change. Participants 3 and 6 agreed: "from the outsiders' perspective…I still think there's a judgement of it [women's football] in a negative way" (3) and expressed that "people are so easily ready to hop on the bad things you do, rather than rewarding the positive things that come in women's football" (3). This suggests that public opinion may be changing in regard to girls and women playing football more generally, in that this is more socially acceptable,

while opinions and judgments regarding the elite and professional game remain more enduring.

6.2.5 Attendance

Many players spoke of improving attendances following England's summer success: "off the back of the Euros, I've seen a massive change with attendances at games" (1). Participant 8 shared that "big teams are getting more people watching" while Participant 1 stated that clubs are "moving into bigger stadiums, playing in the men's stadiums more often". Statistics from the Women's Sport Trust [287] support this, showing a 200% average attendance increase this season for WSL fixtures and an 85% increase for the WC. A new WSL attendance record was also set, of 47,367 for Arsenal vs Spurs at the Emirates Stadium. Not only is it the number of people coming to watch and support women's games, but also the diversity of the spectators that is changing. Participant 1 shared: "I see more men at games and appreciating the women's game", while Participant 4 said: "10 years ago you probably wouldn't have seen a dad taking his son [to a women's game], or a man with Fran Kirby [printed] on his back".

Participant 8 however emphasised that more still needs to be done. She shared: "more and more people need to watch women's football, but it's not watching women's football as in *England* women, it's watching *local* football". Attendance changes are happening in the WSL but not so much the WC and WNL, or further down the football pyramid. Participant 8 expressed that "women need stadiums", as these same attendance figures will not be brought to their current home grounds. She stated that stadiums make games "more exciting" and questioned "when do we talk about women getting their own stadiums?".

Similar discourse surrounding stadiums and pitches occurred recently on Twitter and was highlighted in a Telegraph article titled: 'Stop treating the WSL like a second-class league' [288]. In one weekend, three WSL fixtures were postponed due to frozen pitches at their home stadiums, while the 'men's' stadiums remained unused. The article stated: "if clubs want to truly show their women's teams that they care about them as much as their male counterparts, then doing everything possible to ensure they can play their matches is the first basic fundamental" [288].

6.2.6 Media Coverage

Participants spoke about the visibility of female footballers improving, with Participant 7 stating: "I'm seeing more women on the television commentating, analysing, giving their opinions" and Participant 1 acknowledging how "it's normal to see them on the TV with the men". This was the only positive change acknowledged by participants, however. Participant 2 stated: "they don't give us much coverage, sometimes people don't even know that we're playing", while Participant 5 expressed how "more recognition and advertisement from teams" is needed i.e., "at men's games advertising the women's games".

In recent research by the Women's Sport Trust, exposure was found to be a key reason for watching women's sport for more than 80% of fans [289]. Fans increasingly rely on the media to access sport but reporting on women's sport has typically been low, often receiving as little as 2 to 4% of total global sports coverage [see 289, 290]. This coverage doesn't correspond to the interest in women's sport- when it is afforded greater visibility, more suitable broadcasting hours and free-to-air coverage, viewers tune in to watch. For example, research published in early 2023 from the Women's Sport Trust reported the WSL to be the main driver of a 131% increase in average time viewing per person for women's sport on TV in the UK, with 16m

unique viewers during 2022. Despite the progress that has been made in terms of visibility, women's sport still accounts for less than a seventh of sports coverage hours on key UK TV channels and much more needs to be done to address this disparity.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Study Aims

The aim of the present study was to document the lived realities of elite, female footballers in relation to gender discrimination experienced within and outwith their sport. This study is the first to take such a socio-cultural perspective on mental wellbeing risk in active elite female footballers in England and has made several contributions to the literature. The findings address the absence of research regarding gender discrimination and mental wellbeing in elite female football. We were interested in understanding and unveiling the conditions for women currently involved in the top three tiers in England, and selected methods to chart the levels of discrimination and poor mental wellbeing as well as providing players with the opportunity to share their experiences; the voices of women athletes have been largely absent from the literature on elite sport to date [130].

Signs are encouraging and there is a general discourse of progress and change surrounding women's football in England, but this 'potentially constrains the possibilities for gender equality' [291, p20] by concealing the structural inequalities and discrimination that continue to exist. By failing to acknowledge and tackle this enduring discrimination, we also fail to consider the effects that it may have on players, such as on their mental wellbeing. Therefore, as per previous recommendations [53], our research sought to explore sociocultural factors that contribute to poor mental wellbeing in this population.

Our study hypothesised that:

- Elite female footballers who perceive greater past year discrimination (SSE past year) will present with poorer mental wellbeing (WEMWBS).

- Elite female footballers who perceive greater lifetime discrimination (SSE lifetime) will report experiences of poor mental health during their lifetime (mental health screening item).
- There will be differences in player mental health, mental wellbeing, and perceived discrimination between professional statuses.

It also looked to answer the following questions:

- How do elite female footballers in England experience gender discrimination?
- What role does gender discrimination play in creating risk for poor mental wellbeing within this population?
- How do players believe cultural change within elite women's football can be successfully implemented?

7.2 Key findings

The results from the quantitative data analysis of 66 survey responses revealed over half the participants to report having suffered with poor mental health during their lifetime. Those who reported 'yes' to having suffered with poor mental health on average scored significantly higher on the lifetime perceived discrimination (SSE) questionnaire scale than those who reported 'no' they haven't suffered from poor mental health. Therefore, those who have suffered with poor mental health were more likely to perceive greater lifetime discrimination (adapted SSE-framework); or alternatively, those who perceived greater discrimination were more likely to have suffered from poor mental health. The results also showed that higher perceived discrimination in the past year was correlated with lower mental wellbeing, measured using the WEMWBS scale.

These findings demonstrate the detrimental psychological impact of gender discrimination for players on both an acute and chronic basis and support the first two research hypotheses: 'elite female footballers who perceive greater past year discrimination (SSE past year) will present with poorer mental wellbeing (WEMWBS)' and 'elite female footballers who perceive greater lifetime discrimination (SSE lifetime) will report experiencing poor mental health during their lifetime (mental health screening item)'.

The average mental wellbeing score for the survey participants (measured using WEMWBS) was lower than that of men and women within the adult female general population in England and similar to results from prior research exploring elite female athletes in other sports. This supports the extant evidence showing that elite female athletes report poorer mental wellbeing than the general population. The results also found differences in mental wellbeing scores between professional status, with semi-professional players and players who receive some financial remuneration reporting with the lowest mental wellbeing scores. This supports part of the final research hypothesis, which stated that there will be differences in player mental wellbeing between players of different professional status.

The qualitative data analysis meanwhile offered a more detailed, unique, and novel insight into player experiences of the discrimination itself. Momentum appears to be shifting and signs are encouraging in terms of increasing opportunities, finances, and public opinion, but parity with the men's game remains a distant goal and there is little evidence of any cultural shift towards a more inclusive sport. The sentiment of 'it's never been better but there's a long way to go' [120, 283] remains apparent and mirrors that of prior work, with feminist academics arguing similar controversy over the years.

The qualitative analysis revealed 4 themes for the first research question, covering experiences of gender discrimination in these athletes. These were themes of second-class citizenship, use of sexist language, sexual objectification and restrictive gender roles, and assumptions of female inferiority. Analysis of the second research questioning, regarding the links between these experiences of gender discrimination and mental wellbeing, then unveiled 4 themes of mental health, psychological support, coping mechanisms, and gratitude. Lastly, the final research questions exploring player perceptions of how to achieve cultural change found themes of: infrastructural support, financial support, public opinion, attendances, and media coverage.

In the theme of *Second-Class Citizenship*, findings on infrastructural support aligned with previous work (9), showing precarious working conditions for female players at their clubs, including poor access to medical care and (quality) staff, psychological support, resources, and facilities i.e., pitches, gyms, changing rooms etc. Players put their bodies through the equivalent demands and pressures as male players but are not provided with the equivalent care and provision, reinforcing their perspective of being treated like second-class citizens. Financially, the evidence showed that vast inequities and injustice also remain. Financial insecurity led to stress and anxiety for players as they often agreed to short-term contracts and low wages in order to play. Many needed to subsidise their football income with multiple jobs while others reconsider their involvement in the sport altogether.

In the theme *Use of Sexist Language*, the research established a significant presence of gendered abuse online, supporting prior research by Pope et al. [37], who found the majority of online abuse came from men presenting overtly misogynistic views. The findings of the current study suggests that the consequences of the abuse are felt more widely than just the

receiving individual, since the attacks target group identity (being female). The findings in the theme of *sexual objectification and restrictive gender roles* also showed the persistence of commentary concerning appearance and sexualisation, with footballers expressing the pressures to look a certain way, feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and eating disorders noted as consequences of online abuse.

Lastly, in the theme of *assumptions of female inferiority,* footballers discussed a lack of respect in terms of the public assuming they have inferior knowledge and ability because of their gender. Players highlighted an absence of respect until talent is demonstrated, creating a pressure for them to constantly prove themselves and that they have a right to play. Success in the game was also highlighted as a pre-requisite for respect, while too much success was found to initiate further backlash from abusers.

This was indicative of a number of double binds that were present throughout the emergent themes. Double binds are situations in which a person is met with two irreconcilable demands or choices, of which there is no solution or positive outcome. They are symbolic of oppression and exist in many areas of women's lives [(292)]. Female footballers are given precarious and sub-par working conditions, yet they are expected to be grateful for what little they do get. If women do not confront the abuser, then the discriminatory events remain invisible, yet if they do, they are perceived as irrational, angry, or hysterical [(203)]. Women who embody cultural ideals of femininity are valued over those who do not, yet masculine presentations and attributes are essential for acceptance within male-dominated spaces; women are expected to be soft, sensitive and emotional, but if too emotional in football, women are subject to ridicule as they are seen as unable to handle the pressures associated with the sport. Research therefore continues to highlight both competing discourses of growth

versus constraint, progress versus inequality, with the lack of resolution leaving female players in paradoxical double-bind positions. Understandably, these experiences of discrimination were found to be at the detriment of players' mental wellbeing, primarily via emotional depletion and cognitive devaluation. In behavioural consequence, players vocalised negative performance affect, early career termination, self-censorship, and eating disorders.

All categories within the gender microaggression taxonomy [200] were evidenced and experienced by participants, demonstrating how discrimination is subtle, complex, and pervasive within football. To cope with this discrimination, players demonstrated strategies such as forbearance, denial, and gratitude, against a backdrop of learned helplessness. These mechanisms are harmful to mental wellbeing and to the prospect of change, with players feeling unable and reluctant to stand up to and challenge their oppression.

In response to the third research question, players highlighted 5 main themes as significant components of creating cultural change in women's football. Key suggestions included improved access to medical care, quality facilities and resources, psychological support, and coaching; improved financial backing from both the FA and clubs, in order to reduce financial stress and prevent players being priced out of the sport; continued work targeting improvements in public opinion; access to stadiums for women's teams to encourage larger attendances; and increased media coverage to facilitate viewership and growth of the game.

7.3 Implications and Practical Applications

7.3.1 Overview

As above, the study found both quantitative and qualitative results showing that gender discrimination is highly prevalent for elite female footballers in England, presenting in numerous forms. This gender discrimination detrimentally impacts players' mental wellbeing in a variety of ways and puts players at risk of developing significant chronic mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, as well as eating disorders, e.g., anorexia.

Recent systematic reviews [53, 293] highlight a dearth of research exploring female footballers and their mental health, with Burke highlighting the need to retrieve the stories of players in ways that "foreground the women's voices and experiences of marginalisation, rather than a repackaged mediatised puff piece that applauds the current backing from the men's leagues" [86]. Our research has provided this platform for player's stories and has started to fill this void in the literature. Our results support prior research in surrounding areas [9, 13, 29, 34, 53, 128, 158, 292], linking and drawing together previous conclusions from work on gender discrimination, mental health, and elite female footballers, which had not previously been linked or explored. This research brings multiple disciplines together to provide a more comprehensive framework than each individual discipline had offered before.

In consequence, our findings highlight the need to offer interventions at two levels: the personal level and the group (societal) level [295, 296]. Developing personal level coping means a focus on helping athletes build their own personal coping resources, while development on the group level involves a focus on ways society can increase their literacy and thereby reduce discrimination so that future female players do not have to cope with these very issues in the first place. Interventions on both levels are both necessary and required.

7.3.2 Personal Level

Personal level coping is crucial to help athletes respond to stressors in the short-term. Players cannot change the situation immediately because systemic gender discrimination is engrained in our society and in footballing culture. With the situation out of their control, this will provide players with the coping resources and psychological support to best manage their mental wellbeing through self-care techniques. Players should be taught emotion-focused strategies [224] such as imagery, arousal regulation, and positive self-talk [297, p.242] to help buffer against the effects of discrimination. Training could be offered directly from accredited Sport and Exercise Psychologists. To improve their practitioner effectiveness, psychologists must ensure that they are aware and informed of the historical, current, systemic, and relational ways in which female footballers have, and continue, to be discriminated against and marginalised [e.g., 298]. If practitioners can educate themselves about the cultural sensitivities of the sport, they can minimise the likelihood of becoming another source of minority stress [299].

Additionally, players should be taught problem-focused strategies [224, 252], such as active coping i.e., reporting and confronting the discrimination. Players must be encouraged to stand up to and oppose their discrimination, rather than denying the issues or accepting the status quo. In the case of football, one of the most common forms of resistance to gender inequity is the denial of privilege; the rejection of the claim that women are disadvantaged, and men are privileged, or to even counterclaim that things are now the other way round. Men are far less likely to detect discrimination and recognise its severity, especially when the sexism is more subtle [300] as privilege is often not visible to those that have it. As previously mentioned, denial of personal discrimination by the aggressed individual is also a significant issue [261]. Crosby stated: "let us neither deny the present harm nor dwell on its origins; let us, instead,

set about to correct it" [p.14]. If women do not push the inequality agenda, the fear is that nobody else will. It is important for women to complain, compare, and question [301]: complaining may be difficult, as it "goes against our national grain to identify problems without proffering immediate solutions" [p. 383] but it is essential to make grievances heard. Comparing one's situation with that of other women and men breaks taboos and builds an important database up in one's mind of what experiences should and shouldn't look like; and by raising questions, authorities and organisations can become (further) alerted to practices that have discriminatory consequences.

While it is important for women to become aware of their own personal disadvantage, this does not mean that Crosby suggests to endorse only individual response to injustice [261]. Collective action requires awareness at both the aggregate and individual level and the focus needs to remain on solutions. It is crucial that, when possible, players unite in solidarity to tackle their oppression, rather than fighting battles on their own; "justice and equality in sport will only be realised through our collective actions- not our silence" [254, p.3]. Critical Mass Theory is defined as the critical number of personnel needed to affect policy and make a change, not as the token but as an influential body [302], and has been placed at 30% before women are able to make a substantial difference in politics [303, 304]. It is therefore crucial that women push from within and in solidarity.

7.3.3 Societal Level

Personal level coping strategies should be used in conjunction with societal level interventions to prevent unfairly placing the blame and the responsibility of a cultural problem onto the players [295, 296, 299]. These interventions are more systemic, longer-term initiatives that focus on cultural change directly. As per the work on ecological systems [305],

it is not feasible nor fair to place sole responsibility and agency on the centre of the circle (i.e., the players) to change global discourse surrounding women's football; the arrows need to go both ways.

Society must be held accountable for reducing the stressors that women in football face [295], however we cannot direct the focus of blame entirely on society or life in general, as this presents football as blameless or neutral in the maintenance of ongoing gender inequalities. Football must take some responsibility for the status quo and we must work with its stakeholders to critique tacit gendered organisational processes to develop viable interventions. We must now begin to move away from merely 'admiring the problem' and towards the discovery of changes that positively transform sporting organisations. Instead of 'doing gender', we must try to 'undo gender' [306].

'Her Game Too" for example, is a campaign that aims to promote gender equality in football. It was launched in 2019 [307] and seeks to tackle discrimination in football by promoting awareness and understanding of gender issues, building support for gender equality, and developing practical strategies and solutions to promote a more inclusive environment. There have been some notable outcomes associated with the campaign, including increased visibility and media coverage of women's football, changes in policy and initiatives targeting gender equality i.e., FA's launch of a new strategy to double the number of women and girls in football by 2024 [308], and increased awareness of gender issues and barriers faced by female footballers [307]. Advocacy groups, like 'Her Game Too' can mobilise public support for anti-discrimination efforts, hold institutions accountable for discriminatory practices and policies, provide support and resources for the affected, and can facilitate dialogue and collaboration between different stakeholders to build and identify effective strategies for

change [309]. Such campaigns therefore have the potential to play a powerful role in helping players to advocate and drive changes forward to reduce gender discrimination in the elite women's game.

7.4 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

One limitation of this study was the sample size for the quantitative analysis. Compared to similar previous studies (115 participants in Perry [53]), the sample size was small and thus ethnic diversity was not achieved, meaning we cannot fully trust the representativeness of the sample. Previous research [310] has highlighted that women of colour report higher volumes of sexism than Caucasian women. Given that the current study had a predominantly Caucasian sample, it is conceivable that the discrimination reported is an underestimation of the severity of discrimination in the game. Therefore, further research needs to consider the psychological effects on ethnically marginalised female players, since they concurrently tackle others forms of discrimination.

Diversity was also lacking in terms of location/league, with the majority of participants from WNL South, meaning that geographical variations may not be well-accounted for. Despite using personal contacts, participants at the most elite level remained notoriously hard to reach and meant our sample lacked representation of the higher end of the elite spectrum. The level of competition and professionalism also varied significantly amongst participants due to definitional inconsistencies as to what an elite female footballer looks like. Gatekeepers such as coaches, directors and general managers, club social media staff etc., were used to reach potential participants and therefore, potential selection bias may exist within the findings. Authors are also aware of volunteer motives that may influence the findings, whereby

footballers with a particular interest in issues surrounding gender discrimination and/or mental health, may have been more willing to participate.

The initial mental health screening item also had some limitations, where participants were asked: "Have you ever struggled with poor mental health?". With no definition provided in the survey of what poor mental health is or means and a lack of consistent terminology used, there was potential for subjectivity between responses. There may have been varying interpretations of the terminology used as a result, due to differing understandings of it i.e., academic background vs layperson. Therefore, future research should ensure that consistent terminology is used throughout and that definitions should be provided when appropriate. Pre-existing and validated measures could also be used, as opposed to simply asking closed self-report questions.

By choosing to adopt a mixed methods design, we aimed to address the limitations of self-report measures, which rely on participants being both self-aware and honest [311]. Participants may over- and underreport, with judgements representing overestimates or underestimates of the amount of discrimination experienced [85, 261]. With the research exploring measures of *perceived* discrimination and distress, the data was based on retrospective and subjective self-reports, rather than objective fact. These measures communicate explicit attitudes and behaviours, which shape deliberate, well-considered responses, for which people have both the motivation and opportunity to weigh the costs and benefits of various courses of action. Alternatively, implicit attitudes - evaluations and behaviours automatically activated by the presence of the attitude object and that commonly function without a person's full awareness or control [312] – are less considered within this piece of research.

Lastly, one's mental wellbeing and health is complex and determined by a variety of factors. This study cannot definitively state that the poor mental wellbeing and health indicated by participants were directly caused by their reported discrimination. The participants may also be experiencing other stressors which contribute to a poor mental state. Therefore, while our findings highlight discrimination as a risk factor for poor mental wellbeing, future research should explore this relationship more directly to further establish causality. For example, research through longitudinal diary studies [138, 313] would help better establish the order in which events occur, links between life circumstances and later outcomes, and facilitate the consideration of all contributing factors to player mental wellbeing.

Building upon findings from this research, future work should also look to take a multi-sectoral view on gender discrimination within women's football. The systemic nature of discrimination faced by footballers, indicate that it encompasses many organisational layers and therefore the perceptions, opinions, and input from the actors within each of these layers holds immense value to future work. Researchers should explore the perceptions of other stakeholders, such as coaches and other support staff i.e., physiotherapists and psychologists; club directors and general managers; parents and partners; agents; referees and officials; FA representatives; as well as opinions of football fans within the general public. One such topic to address is the positively toxic nature of gratitude and the double binds players experience, which were found to be significant issues within this study that players regarded as outside of their control. The technique of vignettes or short stories have been used in research to elicit perspective taking and thinking about complex situations [314, 315].

7.5 Conclusion

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature and has answered several recent recommendations made in research on elite women's football and mental health. It is the first study to investigate experiences of gender discrimination in the top three tiers of women's football in England and to explore its impact on mental wellbeing. The findings thereby extend existing literature by exploring cultural factors that contribute to risk of poor mental wellbeing, drawing together previous work from different disciplines on discrimination, mental health, and women's football.

In summary, this study revealed the numerous ways in which elite female footballers experience widespread gender discrimination and highlighted that this discrimination is not reducing, but instead becoming more subtle over time, presenting primarily in the form of microaggressions. The discrimination has a significant negative effect on mental wellbeing emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally, and has the potential to produce long-term outcomes such as mental illness i.e., depression, anxiety, and could result in prematurely terminating successful football careers.

Players adopted various maladaptive coping mechanisms, heightening the negative impact of the discrimination on mental wellbeing, and limiting players' perceived ability to stand up and fight for change. Organisational and systemic change is necessary but creating this change is difficult for players themselves, as they battle the psychological double-bind surrounding gratitude, whereby conditions remain sub-par yet better than they have ever been. Players recognise their role in change, for both themselves and for future generations. This is a heavy mantle for players to bear therefore, they need support to see meaningful and lasting change. Individual coping strategies and psychological support are necessary to aid

player's ability to manage the effects of discrimination on their mental wellbeing, while long-term organisational and systemic interventions are also required from those in positions of power. Change needs to be pushed from the inside out, but also from the outside in; the individuals must support the system as much as the system must support the individuals. Future research should look to establish greater causality between discrimination and mental ill-being; explore notions of gratitude and the double binds players face; consider the perceptions of other stakeholders and organisational layers; and implement and test interventions on both the personal and societal levels. The problem has been made clear; the challenge now is how can we fix it?

Chapter 8: References

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Chapter 9: Appendices

9.1 Recruitment Materials

9.1.1 Appendix 1a – Social Media Blurb

'I am studying for a postgraduate degree at the University of Essex and I am conducting research looking at experiences of gender discrimination and its links to mental wellbeing in elite women's football. If you are aged between 18 and 35 and play in the top three tiers of women's football in England, I would really appreciate your participation.

The study involves an online anonymous survey that will take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you can choose whether you would be willing to volunteer to participate in a follow-up interview at a later arranged date in the second stage of the study. If you are interested, please click the link below and read the information sheet for more details. Thank you for your time. [Insert link to the survey].'

9.1.2 Appendix 1b – Email Blurb

'Dear (insert name/club),

My name is Georgie Morton and I am a postgraduate student at the University of Essex. I am conducting research looking at experiences of gender discrimination and its links to mental wellbeing in elite women's football. In order to meet the inclusion criteria of the study, participants must be between 18 and 35 and be current players in the top three tiers of women's football in England (WSL, WC, WNL southern/northern). I am contacting you as your club, and therefore your players, meet this criterion, and hope you could share this study and encourage their participation.

The study involves an online anonymous survey that will take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, players will be asked to share their email address if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview for the second stage of the study.
I have attached an information sheet providing further details and a link below to the survey itself. If you have any questions or would like to discuss the study further prior to sharing with your players, I am happy to arrange a Zoom meeting with you.

Thank you for your time. Your support will be greatly appreciated.

Kind regards,
Georgie Morton'

9.1.3 Appendix 1c- Survey Materials

Project Title: Mental Wellbeing Risk in Women's Football: A Cultural and Gendered Problem

Researchers: Georgina Morton, Dr Ruth Lowry, Dr Alice Harkness-Armstrong

1. **I confirm that I** have read and understand the Information Sheet for the above study and I have had the opportunity to consider the information.	Select Option Yes / No
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty.	Select Option Yes / No
3. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.	Select Option Yes / No
4. I understand that data collected in this project might be shared as appropriate and for publication of findings.	Select Option Yes / No
5. I agree to take part in the above study.	Select Option Yes / No

[if they have selected yes to all questions above the following will appear]

To proceed to the survey please click the proceed link.

[if they have selected no to any of the questions above the following will appear]

Thank you for considering involvement and please close the web browser window to exit the survey.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (survey)

Mental Wellbeing Risk in Women's Football: A Cultural and Gendered Problem?

My name is Georgie Morton and I am a Sport and Exercise Psychology Master's student at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide where or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

I am carrying out research on the influence of gender and culture on mental wellbeing of elite female footballers. Female players experience various forms of discrimination within their sport, which have the potential to influence mental wellbeing and sporting performance. To date, there has been a lack of literature to examine this link within women's football.

What will I be asked to do?

This stage of the study is an online survey. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to provide some initial demographic detail, general playing information, and history of psychological health. You will then be asked to complete a number of validated

questionnaires that require your rating of agreement with statements. These questionnaires will explore perceived discrimination and mental wellbeing.

How long will the study take?

This stage of the research should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

Are there any risks or disadvantages of participating?

It is not anticipated that completion of this survey will cause any disadvantages or risk. There is small risk that some of the questions surrounding mental well-being and psychological history may prompt further thoughts. At the end of the survey, you will find information on resources and professional agencies who can assist you if this is the case.

What are the benefits to participation?

Benefits from taking part include contributing to furthering our understanding within this research area, which we hope can lead towards informing future change. Upon request, I will be happy to provide a copy of the final study write up once the research is complete.

Do I have to take part, and can I change my mind once I have signed up?

You do not have to take part in this study if you do not want to. If you do decide to take part, you may withdraw at any time, without having to provide a reason. If you choose to withdraw during the study, then close the web browser window and the data will not be stored. As this is an anonymous survey, it is not possible to withdraw data that has been submitted.

What personal information will be collected?

You will be asked to provide some demographic information such as your age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity. For these questions, you will be able to select a 'prefer not to say' option if you do not feel comfortable disclosing this information.
Unfortunately, if you are not comfortable disclosing your gender then the survey will automatically end as this information is necessary in determining whether you meet the inclusion criteria of the study. It is your decision whether you feel happy and comfortable disclosing this information and whether you therefore participate in the study.
At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you are willing to be involved in a follow up interview. If you are, then you will be asked to supply an email address to make contact- this is the only identifiable information that will be requested.

Will my information be kept private?

Data is stored on the survey platform Qualtrics until the survey closes (one month after it opens/becomes public), after which point the data will be downloaded into a data file that will be password protected and deleted from the Qualtrics database. Those supplying their email address to participate in a follow-up interview will have this address separated and stored separately from data files that will be analysed. This data file will only be shared between myself and my two supervisors. This project may be written up for publication or used in presentations at conferences but only anonymised data will be used.

What is involved in the follow-up study?

As a follow-up to the survey, we would like to invite a smaller group of people to individual interviews. Participation in the interview is optional, and not a requirement for the data you have provided in the survey to be included in this study. If you choose not to participate in

the interview, your survey data will still be used to inform the themes explored in the interviews. The purpose of the interviews is to gain a more detailed understanding of the findings gained from the survey.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

As a student of the University of Essex, I will be using the information you provide to undertake this study. By providing your informed consent, you are handing over your data to be processed by myself and my supervisors. The University of Essex will act as the data controller for this study, meaning they will be responsible for looking after the information that you provide and for using it properly. The University of Essex will keep the information you provide for 10 years (until 2032), after which it will be deleted. The University's Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dpo@essex.ac.uk.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will be used as part of the dissertation which will be held in the University of Essex library. We intend to also publish a journal article which will be available to the public. If you would like a copy of the final dissertation, please contact me at gm19957@essex.ac.uk.

Who has reviewed the study?

The University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee 2 has reviewed and approved this application for ethical approval.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact myself as the principal investigator using the contact details below. If you are still concerned and you feel you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the School of Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Sciences' director of research at r.lowry@essex.ac.uk. If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (email sarahm@essex.ac.uk). Please include the following ERAMS reference (ETH2223-0065).

Who should I contact if I have questions?

If you would like to discuss any aspect of the research with myself or one of my supervisors, you can contact us by email as stated below.

Name of the researcher/team members

Georgie Morton (gm19957@essex.ac.uk)

Dr Ruth Lowry (r.lowry@essex.ac.uk)

Dr Alice Harkness-Armstrong (a.harkness-armstrong@essex.ac.uk)

9.1.4 Appendix 1d- Interview Materials

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Mental Wellbeing Risk in Women's Football: A Cultural and Gendered Problem

Researchers: Georgina Morton, Dr Ruth Lowry, Dr Alice Harkness-Armstrong

	Please tick box
1. **I confirm that I** have read and understand the Information Sheet dated 02/09/2022 for the above study and I have had the opportunity to consider the information.	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty.	☐
3. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.	☐
4. I understand that data collected in this project might be shared as appropriate and for publication of findings, in which case data will remain completely anonymous.	☐
5. I understand that the interview will be recorded via Zoom and then transcribed, with the original recording destroyed	☐

after the transcription is agreed to be correct. I understand that an anonymised transcription will be retained along with the survey data.

6. I agree to take part in the above study.

If you consent to participating in the interview stage of the study, please return this completed form via email to gm19957@essex.ac.uk. You will then be contacted to arrange a date and time for the interview.

If you do not wish to be involved, please let me know by return email and you will not receive further communication on the project.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (interview)

Mental Wellbeing Risk in Women's Football: A Cultural and Gendered Problem

My name is Georgie Morton and I am a Sport and Exercise Psychology Master's student at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide where or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

I am carrying out research on the influence of gender and culture on the mental wellbeing of elite female footballers. Female players experience various forms of discrimination within their sport which have the potential to influence mental wellbeing and sporting performance.

To date, there has been a lack of literature to examine this link within women's football. This study is a follow-up to the survey you have completed and will provide greater detail on the experiences, feelings and thoughts of women playing elite football in England.

What will I be asked to do?

This stage of the study will involve an interview with me carried out over zoom. If you decide to take part, you will first provide written consent before the interview can take place. The interview will last no longer than 60-90 minutes and will begin with questions about your footballing biography. We will then discuss gender discrimination within football and relate this to your experiences throughout your footballing career; discuss the consequent psychological effects of discrimination (specifically with links to wellbeing); and end with considering ways in which cultural change can be implemented.

Are there any risks or disadvantages of participating?

There may be some psychological risk in participating in the interview, as the discussion surrounding sensitive topics of discrimination and mental health may raise lingering thoughts and feelings. Resources on where to seek help or support for your mental wellbeing and health is available to you in the debrief sheet (i.e. directed to Mind, Samaritans, the PFA) following completion of the study.

What are the benefits to participation?

The benefits of taking part include contributing to furthering our understanding within this research area, which we hope can lead towards informing future change. Upon request, I will be happy to provide a copy of the final study write up once the research is complete.

Interviewees will also have the chance to win one of two £10 Amazon gift cards, selected via a prize draw.

Do I have to take part, and can I change my mind once I have signed up?

You do not have to take part in this study if you do not want to. If you do decide to take part, you may withdraw at any time, without having to provide a reason. If you choose to withdraw your data after the study has finished, you are entitled to do so up to the 1st November. To withdraw your data, please email me at gm19957@essex.ac.uk.

What personal information will be collected?

You will be asked to discuss your own personal experiences of discrimination and the effects that this discrimination has had on you, namely on your mental wellbeing.

Will my information be kept private?

The zoom interview will be recorded and no one except myself and my two supervisors will be able to watch this recording back. A verbatim, text transcript will be created of the interview and shared with you to check for accuracy and completeness. Once you have agreed the transcript is accurate, the recording of the interview will be deleted. The transcript will be in a password protected file. A pseudonym will be chosen so that the information you provide remains anonymous and completely confidential. This project may be written up for publication or used in presentations at conferences. In this case, your involvement in the study will not be made at all apparent as the data will be fully anonymised.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

As a student of the University of Essex, I will be using the information you provide to undertake this study. By providing your informed consent, you are handing over your data to be processed by myself and my supervisors. The University of Essex will therefore act as the data controller for this study. This means that the University will be responsible for looking after the information that you provide and for using it properly. The University of Essex will keep the information you provide for 10 years (until 2032), after which it will be deleted. The University's Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dpo@essex.ac.uk.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will be used as part of the dissertation which will be held in the University of Essex library. We intend to also publish a journal article which will be available to the public. If you would like a copy of the final dissertation, please contact me at gm19957@essex.ac.uk.

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Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (email sarahm@essex.ac.uk).

Please include the following ERAMS reference (ETH2223-0065).

Who should I contact if I have questions?

If you would like to discuss any aspect of the research with myself or one of my supervisors, you can contact us by email as stated below.

Name of the researcher/team members

Georgie Morton (gm19957@essex.ac.uk)

Dr Ruth Lowry (r.lowry@essex.ac.uk)

Dr Alice Harkness-Armstrong (a.harkness-armstrong@essex.ac.uk)

9.2 Research Methodology Materials

9.2.1 Appendix 2a- Demographic Questions

The survey will include the following demographic multiple-choice questions:

- How old are you?
- What gender do you identify as? [female, male, non-binary/third gender, other, prefer not to say]
- How would you describe your sexuality? [straight/heterosexual, gay/lesbian/homosexual, bisexual/pansexual, other, prefer not to say]
- What best describes your ethnicity? [White, Black/African/Caribbean, Asian, mixed two or more ethnic groups, other, prefer not to say]
- What is your current playing level? [WSL, WC, WNL Southern, WNL Northern]
- How many years' experience of first team football do you have? [less than 1 year, 1-5 years, more than 5 years]
- How would you describe your current professional status? [Professional, Semi-professional, receive some financial remuneration, amateur]
- Have you ever struggled with poor mental health? [yes, no, I don't know / I'm not sure]
- Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition? If yes, please specify [yes, no]

9.2.2 Appendix 2b- SSE Framework

This was followed by a series of questions regarding perceived discrimination, which have been produced using the SSE framework (43) but adapted to be football-specific. The questions were answered on a scale of 1-6, with 1 being 'this never happens' and 6 being 'this almost always happens'.

how many times have…. because you are a woman in football

in your life:

1. you been verbally abused online
2. you been verbally abused in person
3. you been denied equal opportunity
4. you been denied the financial reward/compensation that you deserve
5. people commented on your appearance
6. people failed to give you the respect you deserve
7. you wanted to tell someone off for being sexist
8. you stood up for yourself or someone else about something sexist that was done or said

in the past year:

1. you been verbally abused online
2. you been verbally abused in person
3. you been denied equal opportunity
4. you been denied the financial reward/compensation that you deserve
5. people commented on your appearance
6. people failed to give you the respect you deserve
7. you wanted to tell someone off for being sexist
8. you stood up for yourself or someone else about something sexist that was done or said

9.2.3 Appendix 2c- WEMWBS

The following statements about feelings and thoughts from the WEMWBS were used:

- I've been feeling optimistic about the future
- I've been feeling useful
- I've been feeling relaxed
- I've been feeling interested in other people
- I've had energy to spare
- I've been dealing with problems well
- I've been thinking clearly
- I've been feeling good about myself
- I've been feeling close to other people
- I've been feeling confident
- I've been able to make up my own mind about things
- I've been feeling loved

- I've been interested in new things
- I've been feeling cheerful

9.2.4 Appendix 2d- Psychometric history

"Have you ever struggled with poor mental health?" (=yes/no/I don't know or am not sure)

"Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition? If yes, please specify.

(yes/no plus option to provide diagnosis if answered yes).

9.3 Appendix 3- Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me about how you first got into football? What age, who influenced this, who you played for?
2. In what ways do you feel that you have been denied equal opportunity during your football career to date?
3. What's your access to facilities, coaching, physio, etc been like at the clubs you've been at? Are there any specific experiences, positive or negative, that particularly stand out to you?
4. How do you feel about the financial compensation/wages that you have received throughout your career? Do you feel like what you are paid/given is what you deserve and why?
5. How can the pay gap be reduced? What needs to be done to increase female player wages?
6. As a woman in football, in what ways do you feel the most disrespected?

7. Do you think that girls/women have to go about things differently to boys/men in order to earn that respect within football? If so, how?
8. How do you think the success of a women's team/club impacts the opportunity and equality that they receive?
9. Does knowing that this abuse is quite prevalent online make you change the way you behave in the online space?
10. Have you experienced directly or seen abuse directed at other female players or women's football generally in the online space?
11. How does it make you feel when you read or see these things? What kind of thoughts does it provoke?
12. In what ways have you experienced abuse in person? How does this abuse make you feel?
13. Could you talk about your experiences of receiving appearance-related abuse/comments?
14. Does it impact the way you think about yourself? If yes, how so?
15. Do you feel capable of standing up when you experience **direct** forms of abuse/discrimination?
16. What does standing up to it mean to you? How would you enact this?
17. In terms of more indirect forms of discrimination ie opportunity, resources, access, money etc, how do you feel/how would you go about standing up to these things? Have you ever?
18. Do you think it's easier to stand up to indirect discrimination or direct discrimination and why? Or is it more of a case of going about things differently?
19. How do you think all these different forms of gender discrimination affect your mental wellbeing?

20. How do you deal with these things on a daily basis? Ignore vs acknowledge?
21. Do you think it affects how you value yourself as a person or as a player? Do you think it affects how you value yourself as a person or a player more?
22. In what ways do you think football has positively contributed to your mental wellbeing? In what ways do you think it has negatively affected it?
23. In what ways do you think things still need to change the most?
24. How do you think the success the lionesses had in the euros has affected the culture surrounding women's football in England?
25. What things do you feel are changing?
26. How can we spark further change, what needs to happen and from where/who?